

Holy and Beloved

One of the beautiful aspects of pursuing the Christian life is the balance God brings to our thoughts, actions, decisions, and relationships. Left to our own personalities and life influences we tend to lean heavily in one direction or another. But God brings balance through His Holy Spirit living inside us, the power of His written Word to transform us, and the community of saints who share deeply in our Christian experience.

In politics, sides take extreme positions in hopes of moving the dial of public policy in their direction. The Sierra Club opposes all oil and gas drilling around the world in hopes of limiting it somewhere. Oil and gas companies oppose all regulation in hopes of eliminating the most onerous of government regulation. We go to extremes even when seeking common ground would do. After all, common ground seekers are traitors to the cause or at least will find their generosity taken advantage of by the other side. This is just the way human nature works.

Could church politics, ministry philosophy, and teaching methods also fall victim to this pendulum mentality? With understandable concern, many believers see the current church landscape and worry that our Biblical preaching has “gone soft”. Where is the meat? Expository preaching appears to have given way to topical subjects loosely identified as transformational teaching. While teaching with an eye for application can be just as Biblically sound as expository analysis, there seems to be a sense that this type of preaching is too customer-friendly, too much of a topic looking for a Bible verse rather than allowing the application to come out of our context-driven teaching of large passages of Scripture. After all, we expositors do not see much cultural sensitivity in our favorite quote from II Timothy 4, “Preach the Word!!!”

However, in our reaction to the perceived self-help psychology of today’s Sunday morning sermons are we allowing poor theology to influence our “preach the Word, come hell or high water, who cares if they like it” message? I say this because of my recent experience in expository preaching settings, a setting of my upbringing and one in which I am actually quite comfortable.

On more than one recent occasion, I have sat in an audience and been referred to as a “poor, wretched sinner”. I immediately looked around and wondered who among us the minister was referring to. I knew it could not be my wife or I since we were just visiting and the preacher knew nothing about us. I felt uneasy as I sensed this label was targeted at believers as well as the lost. I believe this blanket condemnation of the parishioners is based on a misguided interpretation of the total depravity of man. I would like to pass it off as the effort of a young and overly zealous preacher but this seems to be a prevalent attitude among a certain group of Bible expositors.

The Bible clearly affirms that man is sinful by nature and born with a propensity to sin. Man is a slave to sin and cannot escape this slavery without God’s gracious intervention. Prior to our conversion, sin is the Great Dane in our life that bowls us over and flattens us every time we come home. However, after our conversion, the Godhead takes up residence in our lives through the indwelling Holy Spirit and the sin nature is relegated to small potatoes. Our sin is now a Chihuahua that we can kick to the side when it nips at our heels. (Sorry to all you dog lovers, but this picture helps me visualize the struggle with sin and what changed at our conversion).

For reasons I don’t fully understand, it looks like some modern expositors want to take the total depravity doctrine and somehow bring it across the conversion line to have application to the believer. While the believer has a capacity to sin in our conflict with the flesh, the world, and the devil, sin is the anomaly, not the norm! Capacity does not equal propensity!

When we apply labels to people, we imply this is their normal behavior. For the Christian, sin is not our normal course. Throughout the New Testament, the prevalent message for believers is: Sin tastes funny to the follower of Christ, spit it out (I John). Sin does not “fit” you anymore, take it off and throw it away (Colossians 3). You know that old shirt you still have from high school. It doesn’t fit, throw it away. Walk in a manner worthy of who God says you are: a saint (Ephesians 4). And, by the way, you can do it. (Romans 6).

Allow me to expand on this label idea by looking at one prominent passage in the New Testament, Colossians chapter 3. Beginning at verse 1, with the text in red. ¹If (or since) **you have been raised up with Christ**, (our new position) **keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.** ²**Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.** ³**For you have died** (who died? Our flesh, our sin nature, our old man.) **and your life is hidden with Christ in God.** (you are now indwelt by Christ through the Holy Spirit. With your life hidden in Christ, you are literally a “little Christ”. I can’t imagine a “little Christ” being called a sinner.) ⁴**When Christ who is our life**, (Again our life is hidden in Christ, like the inner dolls of a Matryoshka nesting doll set.) **is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.** (When the nesting doll set is opened, we will be revealed as glorious just as Christ is already glorious.)

⁵**Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead** (who died? The members of our earthly body, our flesh, our sin nature, our old man. *Consider*, i.e. relegate your sin nature to the category of dead) **to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.** ⁶**For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience.** (Who is the wrath of God reserved for? The sons of disobedience who practice these things as their normal course because they are unconverted slaves to their sin nature. We have gone from “sons of wrath” to “sons of God”. Ephesians 2:3. The phrases wrath of God and child of God are incompatible. They don’t belong together.) ⁷**and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them.** (“Once walked”, past tense, prior to conversion, *living in them* was your pre-conversion life.)

⁸**But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth.** ⁹**Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside** (past tense) **the old self** (now dead) **with its evil practices** (not your current practice), ¹⁰**and have put on the new self** (your current position) **who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the one who created him** (the “little Christs” are growing up through a renewed mind) ¹¹**— a renewal in which there is not distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all** (Christ indwells the “little Christs).

¹²**And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved**, (our new name, our new label!) **put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience;** (all attributes of Jesus Christ. At various times throughout Scripture, Jesus was described by all of these attributes. As “little Christs”, these should be our attributes as well.) ¹³**bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.** (Again, believers model Jesus Christ. That is what believers do.) ¹⁴**And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.** (The phrase “beyond all these things” harkens to I Corinthians 13 where love is explained as the greatest gift.)

The passage closes with the practice of love as our highest calling. And I guess this gets to the heart of what troubles me about ministers calling saints “poor wretched sinners”. It is not the phrase that bothers me, it is the attitude it represents. It comes across as judgmental. It comes across as a lack of love. Is it possible that our hard

charging sermons which claim to stem from a fidelity to Scripture are really just a cover for a judgmental spirit that sees the worst in our congregants rather than seeing our brothers and sisters as *holy and beloved*, a label I did not make up but only borrowed from the apostle Paul? As leaders, is it our goal to know our members well enough to love them or do we view our members as what we need them to be to fit our theological constructions, rather than who they really are?

I used to think that the ultimate goal of the Christian life was to develop a set of personal qualities much like the lists from Colossians 3, Galatians 5, and elsewhere. And I still believe pursuing these qualities and demonstrating the fruits of the Spirit are our responsibilities. But they are not the ultimate goal. What is the ultimate goal of the Christian life? It is to love as God loves. I could lay out the 4th chapter of I John in the same format as above and would end on this point. The very essence of God is love. And as a child of God, loving as God loves is the essence of what I should be about as well.

How does this “loving as God loves” manifest itself in this topic of a judgmental spirit? Think about it this way. I have a tendency to say when someone fails, “Aha, this is the real you. That good behavior you demonstrated the past ten years was just a smokescreen, just a mask, just a façade. This mistake shows the real you.” How demented and how totally unloving is this? But I’m afraid seeing people at their worst and thinking this is the true them is a more common than we may want to admit and shows our own failure at loving as God loves. Wouldn’t it be better to see people at their most noble, most sacrificial, most generous and say, “Hey, this is the real you, holy and beloved. The mistakes are the anomaly, the unusual.”

Loving as God loves means seeing God’s people as God sees them. God sees His people as covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. God sees His people through the tender and compassionate eyes of a lovesick Father. God sees His people as holy and beloved. Should we see them as anything less?

Your friend,

Jay