

November 18, 2012
Galatians 5:16-26 / Colossians 3:1-8 / Ephesians 4:17-24
Called From a Life of Ungodliness to a Life of Holiness

As a pastor, I'm called by God to love the Church that He loves. And part of that calling to love and care for the Church involves contemplating the condition of the Church -- not just THIS church but THE Church -- and then strive to do what I sense would make her more healthy, vibrant and alive.

For instance: In the 1970's (even though I was yet to become a Christian) I sensed that what the Church needed (maybe because it's also what I needed) was a very real and extraordinary experience of the Holy Spirit. In fact, it was precisely that which led to my conversion in 1980.

Then, in the 1980's I sensed it was a needed balance between that very real experience with God / and good solid biblical doctrine. Because I soon learned that an experience with the Holy Spirit that is not followed up with exposure to good solid doctrinal truth / and the error-restraining wisdom it provides / can lead to some very strange practices, excesses, oddities and even outright heresy.

The Church is ALWAYS in need of the fire of the Spirit's presence. But even true spiritual fire when its allowed to run wild and out of control (as we've seen in recent years in our national parks) -- uncontrolled burns instead of the healthy controlled burns that are purposely lit -- can do great damage to the Church.

As I've mentioned before, most "CULTS" do not come out of lukewarm times of apathy in the church. They are almost always spawned during times of true revival -- when God is truly moving in mighty ways. Yet that true work of God is hijacked by individuals who believe they're more spiritual than everyone else / or closer to God than everyone else / or alone able to truly hear His voice, and run with that flame into heresy.

That's what Satan loves to do. Take what is good / and heaven-sent and distort it or turn it into strange fires or wild fires kindled by misguided people and kept burning by the evil one.

Then, in the 1990's the need of the hour (even moreso in Honduras) was the need to combat legalism with the grace of the Gospel. Because many sectors of the Church had succumbed to the ever-present temptation to substitute conservative morality / and conservative politics / and rigid rule keeping as an alternative to Jesus and the Gospel of His grace.

It was a trend that many Churches adopted without even realizing it. Because they were so focused on society's progressive assault on nearly every value and ideal held by Christians / that they went into a retreat mode, adopting the "fortress mentality" where people retreated behind religious walls built up to protect them from evil influences of a hostile society and create for them a safe Christian subculture.

But you know what happens when people run into a fortress for protection? Once they are inside, they turn their gaze upon each other to make sure no, "wolves in sheep's clothing" managed to slip in as the doors to the outside world were closing.

And they did that by developing a "legalistic standard" to weed out any individuals who didn't measure up -- morally, spiritually and politically. A trend that gained more momentum as Y2K approached, where people hunkered down and prepared for all the disasters that were supposed to come the moment the clocks struck midnight. Some may remember that.

And then when the year 2000 came with barely a blip on the screen / and people realized we'd likely be around for a good while longer / there was the push for the Church to adopt -- almost wholesale -- the methods, policies, strategies and practices of successful secular businesses.

The idea had gained popularity in the 90's and reached a climax around 2000. And thus churches began to adopt the "corporate paradigm" / where the pastor was no longer seen as a "shepherd," but a "visionary CEO" or Administrator / and people were seen as customers, consumers or stock-holders.

The purpose of the church was simply to grow by catering to whatever special interest or felt-need could be used to get the most people into the pews, even if it meant watering down the message so as not to offend any.

Business savvy -- or running the Church like a corporation -- was the call of the day. After all, as many pointed out, if businesses grew by catering to people's personal desires and felt-needs of their select target group / and a church can be run like a business / those same principles should be used.

One of my DMin professors even justified that very approach by saying: "Like the Israelites when they left Egypt, we need to steal from the Egyptians." / To which I responded: "Yes, certain things they do are just common sense. But if you steal too much from the Egyptians, pretty soon you start looking more like an Egyptian than a Christian."

It was a problem addressed by Os Guinness in his superb book, "Dining with the Devil" -- written to warn people of the inherent dangers of such an approach to ministry. An approach that often watered down or by-passed Scriptural truth to get people into the church / and then continued to by-pass it or keep it diluted to keep them there -- organizing the worship service to appeal to the likes and dislikes of unbelievers / rather than the spiritual needs of believers.

Which brings us to the present decade which began in 2010. And in looking around at the Church in America for the past couple years, I feel the greatest need for this present era in Church history, is a return to the biblical call to Holiness. / The Church needs to reclaim, and preach the biblical call to holy living which has been all but lost in our present day.

Why did we lose it? Partly due to the postmodern belief that there is no absolute truth / and no universally valid moral or ethical norms / leaving everyone to live as they want. / But it's also due to a wrong understanding of the grace the Church has preached to counter legalism -- making Jude's warning true for our day where he says that "many have turned the grace of God into a license (or excuse) for immorality or sin."

Which brings us to our **FIRST** point. In the pastoral attempt to combat legalism with the message of grace (which desperately needed to be done) that message has frequently been interpreted as a message proclaiming that God is permissive, has no standards and makes no demands.

It's come to be seen (in many circles) as what Dietrich Bonhoeffer once called, "**cheap grace**," "**counterfeit grace**," and "**the deadly enemy of the Church**."

If LEGALISM is the mercenary selling of God's favor for a price, CHEAP GRACE is the dispensing of God's favor with no boundaries, no limits, no expectations and no obligations whatsoever. / No call to ongoing discipleship or involvement in a fellowship or commitment to a life of ongoing obedience. No call to service for Christ or submission to His Lordship or surrender to His will. No call to turn from sin and forsake all and follow Him regardless of the cost.

Cheap grace is forgiveness for all and pardon for all and heaven for all with no true conversion required, and no living faith in Christ as a prerequisite. For with cheap grace -- no change is sought, no change is asked for, and no change is expected. It's the promise of salvation while everything in a person's life goes on exactly as it had before.

Or put more simply, we could say: "Cheap grace is forgiveness without faith pardon without contrition church membership without conversion and heaven without holiness. It is church-attenders who live so much like the world they were called to leave behind, that they are nearly indistinguishable from their unbelieving counterparts who reject Christ and choose to remain a part of it."

That's why it comes as no surprise to hear recent polls and studies reveal that: Divorce among born-again Christians is actually higher than among non-born again church-attenders -- 27% as opposed to 23% (with Baptists being the worst)! / That's why we can read that more non-Christians gave more money to the homeless than born-again Christians -- 34% to 24%.

Or that while 8% of non-Christians took drugs, their born-again counter-parts only lagged behind by 1% less, at 7%. And while 16% of non-Christians had watched an x-rated movie in the last 3 months, with Christians it was 9%. And whereas 43% of non-Christians admitted to stealing supplies at work, Christians were only a mere 6% behind, at 37%.

And in terms of sexual intercourse among young unmarried singles (age 18 to 29) 88% of unbelievers had indulged / while with evangelicals of the same age group it was only slightly less at slightly over 80%.

Although in all fairness, Scot McKnight (professor over at Biblical Seminary) is right when he points out that young, modern-day single Christians do face a degree of temptation that their biblical counterparts didn't face.

"Sociologically speaking," he says, **"the one big difference – and it is monstrous – between the biblical teaching [and biblical times] as opposed to our culture, is the arranged marriages of very young people. If you get married when you're 13 [as most people did in biblical times, the majority between 13-15, as would have been true of Mary] you don't have 15 years of temptation."** That is true. Our cultures tendency to wait longer to get married does mean greater temptation.

And I don't say that to excuse those high figures -- since abstinence until marriage IS the biblical norm regardless of what culture says or does. But it does help us to see the greater struggle facing the youth of today. Especially when you consider that our present-day world (unlike theirs) is saturated with sensual images nearly everywhere you look, or both mild and lewd pornographic content in a way unequalled at any other time in history.

A fact that should give us more compassion for those who fall without causing us to jettison the biblical call to sexual purity & chastity. Because the command still stands as God's stated will - regardless of how acceptable sexual indulgence becomes in our hedonistic culture.

You see, its those statistics (and many others) that show the dire need for the Church to place a renewed emphasis on holiness or holy living -- as Paul begins to do in today's passage. In his summary statement in vv. 23-24 he says the truth we were taught in Jesus involves this: **"We are to put off the old self corrupted as it is by sinful or deceitful desires, and put on the new self created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."**

That's what Paul launches into in this section: A biblical description of the righteousness or holiness God's people are to seek to be clothed in. And what he does in vv. 25-32 which follow, is give us a lengthy description of what he means by the word "holiness." He does not use it and then leave us wondering what it is or what the "new self" we are to clothe ourselves in, looks like.

And here, before I go any further, let me ask you: ***Are you putting on that divinely created new self by pursuing holiness? Do you rise up each morning intent to, "put off the old self and put on the new self"? Are you regularly seeking or consciously pausing to consider the need to clothe yourself, by the grace of God, in true righteousness and holiness? Do you even know what it is?***

Because THAT IS the stated purpose and will of God for your life. And it's not just a suggestion that you can think about if you want or ignore if it doesn't fit your fancy. Because in this regard Paul says, ***"So I tell you this, and INSIST upon it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do" -- or we could say, "as you once did."***

We are to leave our former lifestyle behind (the lifestyle of living for self and always pursuing more and more sensual pleasure) and as God's dearly loved and graciously chosen people, pursue more and more, each and every day, "to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." We are to ***"be holy as He is holy,"*** says Peter.

And because few things in the Bible are stated more clearly, the refusal to pursue holiness or righteous living can be called little other than sin. The Christian who does not continually seek to live a life of true righteousness and holiness, is living in a state of ongoing sin and rebellion against God's stated will -- plain and simple.

Because "grace," rightly understood, is NOT given to us as an excuse to continue living an immoral lifestyle, or living in sin, it is given to us to enable us to live a holy lifestyle! God never intended that His grace should be used as an excuse to sin (as it often is). For as Jude tells us, it's the ploy of the ungodly that seeks to turn the wonderful grace of Jesus, ***"into a license (or an excuse) for immorality."***

God gave us His grace to make us ABLE to resist the sin we couldn't resist before we came to Christ! Before we received it we could only fake holiness or go through the outward motions. But as the actual recipients of grace, we can now pursue it, and should actually want to!

That's why Paul can say in verse 17: **"So I tell you this, AND INSIST ON IT IN THE LORD, that you MUST NO LONGER live as the Gentiles do, in the futility (literally, "the vanity") of their thinking."**

It's Paul's way of saying that all that grace that he's spent the last 3 1/2 chapters telling us about wasn't given to us so we could go on living as did before! It was given to us to make us different! It was given to us to change our hearts and enlighten our minds and wash our souls and transform our attitudes. It's given to liberate us from the dominion of sin and give us not only the desire, but the ability to pursue holiness!

In fact, you can't receive the grace of God and remain the same! That's why Paul calls us to be different! Because God's grace has made us different! In fact, that's why Paul can *INSIST* on it in the Lord! Because as redeemed people God has changed us and thus we can and must stop living like we used to, and become what He's already made us, by His grace, to be!

Then **SECONDLY**, in speaking of worldly unbelievers in v. 18, Paul says, ***"They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts"*** (and he means the hardening of their hearts that happens when people justify sin and refuse to turn from it or leave it behind). Whenever anyone justifies continuing in sin it hardens their heart and numbs their conscience against God and His truth.

According to v. 19 it causes them to: ***"lose all sensitivity"*** [and he means sensitivity to God or His law written upon their hearts by virtue of being created in the divine image]. They ***"give themselves over to sensuality (literally, "lewdness") so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more."*** And of course, "impurity" or "uncleanness" is the opposite of holiness.

When we were unbelievers we did what the world does and indulged in unholy living. / But as believers (and Paul insists on this) we are to stop living as we did, resist the sinful urge for impure pleasure, and pursue holiness.

And since I'm going to be speaking for the next five weeks on exactly what true holiness is (That's right -- 5 weeks on holiness, taking 2 or 3 elements each week from what Paul gives us in vv. 25-32 -- since there is so much confusion in regard to exactly what holiness is) all I'm going to do today is finish up with the two short admonitions he gives us in vv. 20-24.

- 1.) How one comes to know Christ. 2.) How they go about pursuing or clothing ourselves in His holiness once they come.

So **THIRD**, how does one come to know Christ? Paul tells us in v. 20 (where after speaking of the unbelieving Gentiles who are vain in their thinking and have given themselves over to pursuing every kind of lewd sensuality with a continual lust for more) he says: ***"You, however, did not come to know Christ that way."***

That is, NO PERSON ever came to "know" Christ (or be saved) by giving into their desires for sinful sensual pleasure. People don't come to know Christ by continuing to indulge in every kind of impurity or by pursuing lewd and forbidden things, with a continual lust for more! Doesn't happen!

Rather, as Paul says in v. 22: ***"You were taught with regard to your former way of life, to put off the old self (that is, the lewd, sensual, self-seeking, pleasure-seeking self) which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires, and [instead] be made new in the attitude of your minds."***

It's Paul's way of saying that a person comes to know Christ when they realize that the way they are / is not the way they should be. It happens when one sees the need to be different or changed. In fact, it's questionable if a person who has no desire to change can ever come to know Christ at all, since coming to know Him (as Paul points out) involves, ***"Putting off the old sin-corrupted self, and putting on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."***

That's what they were taught (as Paul says in v. 22). And if we were taught correctly, that's what we should have been taught and should always teach others as well.

And, YES, it IS true -- the old familiar song is right -- I did come, "Just as I am" -
 - sin and all. And so did you. For as Horatius Bonar rightly pointed out, **"How
 do we come to Christ? We come with our sin, because we have nothing
 else to bring which we can truly call our own."** I come, "just as I am,"
 because I have no other option, since I can't cleanse myself of sin!

But listen: I would never come to know Him so long as I sought to come with no
 intention whatsoever of ever changing! The words repentance and conversion
 both signify a change or alteration to one's thoughts, attitudes, ethics, life-
 direction or inner being!

And, thus, though I may come to Christ "just as I am" (since I can do no other)
 it is still true all the same that when I do come I must come with an earnest
 desire to be done with sin or delivered from my sin or be different or I will likely
 never come at all. For Christ never receives anyone who comes having no
 intention whatsoever of EVER being different than they are, or EVER turning
 from sin or immorality.

For as I have mentioned many times before, salvation IS salvation from sin and
 its consequences. It is being "saved" from the controlling power of sin and the
 awful penalty of sin. And therefore, anyone who has no desire to be saved from
 sin / as the controlling principle of their lives, nor God's wrath against it, doesn't
 really desire to be saved (biblically speaking). They can't be saved because
 they're not really looking to be saved.

People don't come to know Christ that way, says Paul. It's only when we realize
 there is a problem with us as we are, or that the way we are is not the way we
 should be, or that to be as we need be we need to be delivered from our slavery
 to sin, that we seek Him to save us.

And LAST, Paul says, we were taught to **"put off the old self, or our former
 way of life, corrupted as it is... and put on the new self, created to be like
 God in true righteousness and holiness."** Which means, that not only at our
 conversion, but on an ongoing daily basis, we must regularly choose which
 "self" we will put on or wear each day! Because it's not just a one-time decision!

When Paul tells the Ephesians to "put off your old self" and "be made new in the attitude of your minds," he put it in the ongoing present tense. They did it, as they were taught, but they also needed to keep on doing it in an ongoing way.

It's not a once done, always done, thing! The old self is always seeking to be restored to the position of prominence that it once held in our lives, and thus, on a regular basis, we must put him in his place -- *in the trash* -- like an old-out-of-style set of clothes we no longer want to wear!

That's what I leave you with. To become holy we must consciously and habitually be putting OFF the old corrupted self / and be putting ON the new and glorious self, "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

And LISTEN: Whether or not that happens, does (in large measure) depend on you. It depends on which self you put on each morning, noon, or night, or in any given situation. Which one you clothe yourself with -- the radiant robe of Christ's righteousness or the old rags of your former life?

Yet I should say, that according to Paul, for the true Christian there really is no choice. For as he says, "***I INSIST on it in the Lord***" that "***you MUST no longer live as the Gentiles do...***" (or as you formerly did), but put off the old self and put on the new -- every single day -- or every single time sin beckons.