

Stronger Than We Think

Wayne Waibel – 02/25/2024

Too many churches have become preoccupied with membership - when they should be focused on discipleship. The world needs us to be disciples of Jesus Christ more than it needs us to be members of the Presbyterian Church.

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Most biblical scholars agree that only seven of the Epistles were actually written by Paul, and that of these, Romans was the last. This is significant in that Paul's theology had reached a fairly mature level by this time, and the decree by Emperor Claudius expelling all Jews from Rome had recently been lifted.

The Gentile Christians in Rome had become prominent as a result of the Jewish expulsion, so ethnic discord ensued upon their return. It was into this tumultuous setting that Paul wrote what many consider to be his magnum opus. The primary focus of Romans was to put each group – Gentile Christians and Jewish members – on the equal footing of a single foundation: faith.

Paul used Abraham to illustrate his point for many reasons. Aside from the fact that all three major monotheistic religions (Christian, Muslim, Jewish) considered Abraham to be the exalted father of many nations (note the plural), what he embodied was righteousness through faith. And that is the great equalizer.

Abraham's righteousness is reckoned to him prior to the enactment of any law, and therefore cannot come from obedience to the law. This explicit association of righteousness with faith rather than the law serves to eliminate all claims by any one nation to exclusivity.

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Though we are obligated to live out our life in faithfulness, we must also recognize that we are always on the receiving end of God's love. His movement in our lives is absolute and perpetual. He is our God, and we are His people. Even if we forget or deny or even defy our obligation – God does not – ever.

There was much persecution in first century Palestine for the early Christians to endure. Our lives are not subjected to the brutality they experienced. We do not have the roads to our home lined with crosses displaying what happens when you rebel against empire.

Our persecution is more in the form of the dominant expressions of Christian faith that prize success and effectiveness in corporate life, personal fulfillment, and deliverance from pain for adherents. How can the theology of the cross compete with that? Who is going to choose a path that declares the church is not Christendom, faith is not certainty, hope is not optimism, and love is not painless?

The way to salvation is through faithful endurance of persecution, not avoidance of it. Our right relationship with God cannot be earned through obedience to the law. We must live in confident trust that we are forgiven, and we are given yet another chance to be obedient.

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When Peter rebukes Jesus for suggesting that “the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again,” he has said the wrong thing, to the wrong guy, at the wrong time.

Jesus is on His way to the cross. And He knows precisely what that means. He was six or seven years old when the Romans hung two thousand Jewish insurrectionists on crosses lining the Galilean countryside to remind people of what comes from revolting against empire. He knew.

Christ's rebuke of Peter was swift and included all of the disciples deliberately. It then turned to the challenge for not only the disciples, but all the followers who would be disciples. Yes – that includes us.

"Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." God willingly binds himself to a people who, like us, persist in turning away from grace.

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"Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself." Self has been the problem since the Garden of Eden. We may desire to come after Him. We may endeavor to pick up our cross and follow Him. But first we must deny our "self."

God is found in uncertainty, danger, and suffering – precisely where human wisdom perceives God's absence. God is not conformed to human expectations or desires. "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself."

Faith in the promise is God's primary expectation of humanity. If it is God who creates faith, faith can have no human custodians. "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him first deny himself."

We inherit the righteousness of faith from God, who is first faithful to us. Our "weak" faith is actually stronger than we think: Jesus said "a mustard seed" of faith is enough. God can make all things – and all faith – new. But first things first – let us first – deny our self. Amen.