

Beloved

The Weekly Pastoral Letter of Dr. T.J. Gentry – July 20, A.D. 2008 – Evangelism VII

Grace to you and peace, beloved. May the Lord be with you!

As we evangelize we will not only feel and act differently toward those outside of Christ, we will also begin to view ourselves differently. This may take one of several forms in our life. We may begin to have an overwhelming sense of our own unworthiness; an acute sense of our own sinfulness to the end that we regularly see the lost and conclude, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” Within reasonable limitations, this can be a good thing. It can be a very good thing. The more we understand our own need of salvation, our own sinful and wicked self, the more we will not only thank the Savior for His work on our behalf, we will also long to see that same work in the lives of others. It’s truly amazing what happens when we realize that our only contribution to the entire salvation picture is our need of it. When we realize, to paraphrase Luther, that the only thing we contribute to work of salvation is our own sin.

The Apostle Paul’s experience demonstrates this. Consider his words in I Timothy 1:12-13, 15 (NKJV), “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man...This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.” From these words we may conclude that Paul knew two things. Jesus came to save sinners, and he was one of the worst. Paul never understated his own sin (nor did he build a ministry of talking about the depths of it, either). No, Paul simply knew his own place in the grand scheme of things. He knew that he was a sinner and needed a Savior. He knew that he was, in many instances, far worse in his wicked capacity than those who heard his preaching. In one sense, Paul never put his past behind him. He always remembered who he once was. He never forgot from where Christ brought him. Such awareness served to spur Paul’s gratitude toward God and humility toward others.

This is a lesson we must learn and relearn. Just as our sin left marks on the Savior’s body that we will behold for all eternity, so it leaves marks on us that, in the context of God’s redeeming love, become causes of grateful praise and brokenness. God powerfully redeems even our sin scars. Nothing is left untouched by His grace. Nothing. This is good news because I know that I, personally, have much to regret in my life before Christ and, sadly, in my life since conversion. Many times in sharing the gospel I am painfully aware of my own limitations and,

humanly speaking, of the “moral superiority” of my hearers. Such awareness could serve to paralyze me if I’m not careful to remember that in Christ I am a new creation. My identity and my calling come from His worth, not my unworthiness. Those past sins serve only to draw me closer to Him who is my all in all. As my friend and colleague Rev. Matt Brown often reminds me, those past sins are guide posts, not hitching posts. And he’s right; they guide me back to the cross and forward to glory. Never, and I mean never, will they separate me from the love of Christ.

This is a powerful perspective, and one that is certainly rooted in Scripture (see Romans 8:28-39). As we begin to share the gospel in light of it, our demeanor toward the lost must change. As I said already, evangelism will change us. Interestingly, as we begin to experience this change in viewing ourselves as truly unworthy, we begin to lose the sharp distinctions we may have made between “us and them.” I’m not saying we minimize the sins of the lost or downplay their need of salvation. That would be unbiblical and just, well, silly. Rather, what I mean is we start to see their need of salvation rather than their cause of damnation. We start to see them as ourselves in terms of needing the work that only God can do. Ultimately, this will lead us to desire their salvation from a position of near angst on their behalf. We will begin to truly hurt for them.

In this context there is, to be sure, a real danger that we will begin to focus more on their immediate, felt needs and overlook the root of their problem. Balance is the solution. There is nothing wrong with focusing on felt needs; nothing at all. Jesus did it on more than one occasion (e.g. feeding the multitudes, healing the diseased), and He never got off track with the ultimate purpose for which He came, either. He kept the balance and so must we. We must hurt for the lost, seeing ourselves in them. We must look into their sinful, undone lives and recognize our own situations and failings, lest we become detached and more methodical than personal. Having done this, however, we must share the only hope there is. We must share Jesus. And we must keep sharing Him. Many times the message will go to the same audience without noticeable impact. There is, however, something happening. At the very least, seeds are being planted and watered. When God finally gives the increase we will know it was all of His grace and for His glory; and we will be glad. We will rejoice that one so very much like us has come to the same Savior. We will recall what we are saved from as we see their salvation. We will feel, once again, our sin scars and we will rejoice. – T.J.