

Pastor's Corner: 3-7-2020 – Love, Grace, Fear, and Guilt

I like to think of myself as a grace focused, love-of-God centric, kind of preacher. I believe that love tends to be a far more effective motivator than either fear or guilt (though both have been used by religionists for centuries). However, as much as I like preaching about God's love and acceptance, I occasionally must be reminded that Jesus presented a balanced picture of God. Yes, he spoke of the Father's love, but he also spoke about the requirements and even demands that God makes of us. In today's Pastor's Corner I want to highlight a few of the passages where Jesus illustrates the high demands that God places upon his followers. Warning: This might induce fear or guilt.

While preaching the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his audience, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." Are you a part of the many or of the few? According to Jesus the road to heaven isn't a broad super-highway jam packed with travelers. It's more of a narrow North Dakota gravel farm road where you see a car once every three or four days. I'm not sure where we get the idea that living a life of faith is easy-breezy. It sure didn't come from Jesus.

Perhaps we should consider the cost of following Jesus (this passage is cleverly titled "the cost of following Jesus" in my Bible)? Here Jesus is approached by a couple of people who want to become his disciples. He essentially shoo's both of them away. To the first guy Jesus says, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." In other words, if you follow me, you'll have to give up your creature comforts. The price was too steep, so the guy left. In the second instance a disciple approached Jesus and said, "I'd like to follow you, but first I have to go bury my father." Jesus replied by saying, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

That's a little harsh isn't it, Jesus? Where's the grace? The compassion and understanding?

What about the parable of the unmerciful servant? In this case the servant was forgiven a large sum by his master. The servant, in turn, refused to forgive another servant a small amount. The master threw the unmerciful servant in prison. The moral of the story: If you don't practice mercy you have no place in God's kingdom. Ouch.

Then there's the living parable of the fig tree. One morning Jesus was walking towards Jerusalem and he realized he was hungry. He saw a fig tree off in the distance and when he got there, he saw that there was no fruit on the tree. Unbelievable! Jesus cursed the tree right on the spot saying, "may you never bear fruit again!" Oh, and it wasn't even the time of season for figs! What's the take-away? Bear (bare?) fruit, or bear God's curse.

Not long after, Jesus tells the parable of the wedding banquet. In this story a king prepares a great banquet for his son and invites all his servants to attend the feast. What a generous master! But the servants weren't interested and flaked out on the banquet. It's kind of like when the conference calls for a week of fasting and prayer and the church organizes a daily prayer meeting and only 5 people show up. Anyhoo....

Once the king realizes that his invited guests aren't going to show, he expands the invitation. He tells his party planners, "go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find!" So, they went out and brought in a rag tag group, good people and bad people. Since they were all so grimy the wedding planners gave everyone a special wedding garment to wear. Sometime later the king is rubbing shoulders with his new guests and he finds someone who isn't wearing the wedding garment. "Friend," he asks, "how did you get in here without wedding clothes?"

The man has no answer, so the king tossed him out on his ear. And this is no casual expulsion. The poor guy is tossed out hand and foot into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!

Jesus finishes the parable by saying, “for many are invited, but few are chosen.”

There’s more that we could add to this list, but I think this brief survey illustrates the point. God demands a certain level of commitment from his followers. Jesus didn’t preach a message of, “love God and do whatever you want.” He sets the bar high, very high. Narrow is the path, few are chosen, love God more than you love parents or family. Be willing to take a lunch break and volunteer at the elementary school our church has adopted. This is the part of the gospel we don’t like to talk much about because it brings up feelings of fear or guilt. And yet, it’s just as much a part of Jesus’ message as “God is love.”

So, what’s your commitment level looking like these days? Are you living for God first or for yourself first? Are you on the straight and narrow of self-denial or have you been cruising down the super-highway of self-gratification? What are your priorities and what is your commitment level?

I can’t judge your spiritual vitality from my birds-eye view at the pulpit. But I can report that a bare handful of people came out to pray this week. I can also point out that only a very few volunteered to be a part of the Myhre outreach activities. I can also observe that nobody has stepped up to lead our youth Sabbath School program, we don’t have a children’s leader for the upcoming prophecy series, and in general, volunteer positions are always filled by the same handful of people. Too me, it looks like our commitment is a bit anemic. But yeah, I can’t judge, just observe.

May we all be fully committed disciples of Jesus. If you are convicted that it’s time to re-prioritize and you’re willing to be involved at Myhre, help with Youth or Junior Sabbath School, or participate in creating a children’s program for the prophecy series, please let me know.

Happy Sabbath
Pastor Tyler