



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 16 Issue 39

October 15, 2017

Manifesto on Church Membership, Part 5

When it comes to fulfilling our call to care for the body of Christ, I have found two verses to be indispensable.

Isaiah 50:4, "The Lord God has given Me the tongue of disciples, that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word [that is what pastoral care/being a 'watchman' is all about. Now how do we do that?]. He awakens *Me* morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple."

Effective pastoral care requires listening! If we are going to be effective, we have to be more about helping others than about speaking or spouting off our opinion.

So often we sabotage ministry because we think it is about sharing with people what we know and what God has taught us; and so we are quick to speak, slow to listen, and so fail oft-times to discover the struggle of those around us. Think of it: if you went to the doctor and rather than listening to you describe your symptoms, he prescribed a medication and then left, you'd feel frustrated and unheard. A significantly large part of pastoral care is listening.

A second passage that is indispensable when it comes to "sustaining the weary one with a word" is Ecclesiastes 1:9.

Ecclesiastes 1:9a, "That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done..."

When it comes to pastoral care, this tells us that sinners typically sin in the same way. Accordingly, to be effective, you don't need to know how to respond to every psychosis or sin problem. There are universals when it comes to the problems of a sinner. Discover these universals, and you will be able to minister to the clear majority of the people you come in contact with.

That is where our Ezekiel 33 comes in. It represents three of the most common problems we will encounter in caring for a brother or sister in the Lord. Recall, Ezekiel was taken to Babylon in 597 BC during the second exile at the age of 26. As we have seen and discussed, God intended that Ezekiel be an example to the exiles of what it means to live as an alien and stranger in a foreign land. Accordingly, while there most certainly are unique responsibilities given to Ezekiel in this prophecy, nevertheless much of the experiences and instruction that Ezekiel received was intended to be representative of how God's people ought to live as exiles.

Ezekiel 33-37, was written at the time of the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. In this regard, what was the first message God gave His newly arriving people to Babylon through Ezekiel?

Ezekiel 33:7a, "Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel"

That is, I have appointed you a pastor/shepherd of God's people. As we have seen, this not only was Ezekiel's call, but the call and so responsibility that rests on all of us in Christ!

Yet practically speaking, what does this mean, to be "a watchman"? The call sounds rather confrontational.

Ezekiel 33:7-8, "Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth, and give them warning from Me. When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you shall surely die,' and you do not

“speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require from your hand.”

This sounds pretty strong such that we might assume that pastoral care/being “a watchman” involves hitting God’s people over the head with the Bible! Yet in reality it is just the opposite. For as we have seen, in vv. 10-20 God gives a practicum on pastoral care and so what amounts to three of the most common pastoral needs of the body AND how we ought to meet them.

Thus far we have seen what caring for the body looks like when it comes to”

- The One who Believes that God is against them on account of their Sin, vv. 10-11.
- The One Made Confident on account of their “Moral Superiority,” vv. 12-16.

A third, rather common problem that you and I will face in our attempt at helping a brother or sister in their walk with Christ is found when it comes to the one who misunderstands God’s grace. Vv. 17-20 In response specifically to v. 12, we read of Ezekiel’s contemporaries.

Ezekiel 33:17, “Yet your fellow citizens say, ‘The way of the Lord is not right,’ when it is their own way that is not right.”

The choice of words here is masterful. The word for “right” (תָּקַן [tākan]) is NOT the typical word for “just” or “righteous” in scripture; that would be יָשָׁר (yāšār). YET God NOT “being just”/“right” clearly is the nuance here when it came to their accusation.

In Ezekiel’s day, the word used here for “right” was a commercial term used in the context of weighing of items on a scale. In the negative, the verb means literally “is not adjusted to the right standard” and so speaks of perverted justice, of scales that were deliberately altered in order to take advantage of the unwitting customer. That was the accusation raised against God at this time.

Now what specifically was in mind here is initially difficult to discern from the text. Yet throughout the course of Redemptive History, this accusation has been leveled against God time and time again involving at least two elements.

- (1) God’s grace is unfair and
- (2) It amounts to a perversion of justice.

Let’s consider both and then I will hope to show you that this clearly was the struggle of God’s people at this time. As to God’s grace being unfair, the parable of the vineyard laborers gives us insight. During harvest time, a land owner/wine merchant went to the market to secure day laborers to work in his vineyard.

Matthew 20:2, “And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day,

he sent them into his vineyard.”

A “denarius for the day” when it came to day-laborers was quite generous. This was the pay of a Roman soldier, NOT that of a day laborer. Yet here, the landowner is generous such that the workers would have thought that they had won the lottery. As the day progressed, it became obvious that there was more work than workers. Accordingly, the land owner went out and hired more day laborers at 9:00 AM, then at noon, then at 3:00 PM, and then finally at 5:00 PM. At the end of the work day (6:00 PM), the owner had the hired men line up to be paid in the reverse order that they were hired. The first to be paid, the 5:00 laborers, received a denarius for 1 hour of work. Likewise the 3:00 laborers and so forth.

The day laborers who had worked all day began to assume that they would make far more than a denarius since they worked 12 hours and those who worked one hour got a denarius. Accordingly, when the 12-hour workers received a denarius, they complained bitterly against the land owner.

Matthew 20:11-12, “And when they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, ‘These last men have worked *only* one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.’”

In other words, “*Unfair! We worked so hard for you and you only gave us 1 denarius!*” Yet what was the land owner’s response?

Matthew 20:13-15, “But he answered and said to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? [recall at the time they would have thought they won the lottery] Take what is yours and go your way, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?’”

When Ezekiel came preaching the gospel of grace and forgiveness, many of his contemporaries had a serious problem with the message! They claimed that it was a miscarriage of justice, “The way of the Lord was NOT right!”

Recall, they left Israel in chains to the jeers of God’s people who remained. Now that these men and women were in exile, it was their turn to condemn! And that message that God forgave them most definitely would have offended their sense of fairness!

Clearly, the system which drives the moralist is antithetical to the system of grace! The two cannot co-exist! The old wineskin of legalism cannot hold the new wine of the gospel!

Yet there is another response typically given to the gospel which moralists throughout Redemptive History have mouthed, and it amounted to a perversion of justice! This was the response of many of Paul’s countrymen to the gospel. After establishing that both the religious and irreligious stand condemned before God (Romans 1-2), Paul addressed objections that the Jews raised to the Gospel (Romans 3:1-8). His treatment climaxed with, “And why

not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say [this is the response]), 'Let us do evil that good may come?'" (Romans 3:8a0.

This passage gives us insight into the response that many in Judaism gave to the message of grace. They thought that it amounted to a free ticket to sinning.

"If a person could live their entire life indulging in some of the most egregious sin, and then say 'God, I'm sorry!', they most certainly could NOT be forgiven! A life of sinning most certainly can NOT be washed away with a simple appeal to God's grace! There must be some sort of recompense made- some sort of duty required! If not, then the gospel amounts to a free pass to sinning!"

While it is difficult to demonstrate that this was the response of God's people to Ezekiel, we do know that this was the response of God's people throughout the intertestamental era from 586 BC down unto Christ's day. Recall, in the exile the question that plagued God's people was, "Why did God forsake His people?" What was the answer given (in Chronicles and elsewhere)? It was NOT God who forsook His people, BUT His people who forsook God. As a result, God's people during this era became people of the book! The law of God was understood to be that which kept God's people from sinning. Accordingly, they could NOT think of God's people being saved apart from law-keeping!

In the case of a child, there are bumper pads in a bowling alley that are placed in the gutters to keep the ball in the lane. That was the law of God to the Jew (the pins represent heaven). Accordingly, the Jew could not imagine that any of the pins could be knocked down without the bumper pads of the law. For them heaven and the law were synonymous!

Therefore, to say that salvation/forgiveness can be had without law, was to suggest that a child could bowl a strike on a bowling lane a thousand miles wide, the length of a lifetime, and yet the width of the eye of a needle! In the mind of the Jew, it couldn't be done!

That is always the response of the moralist to grace. The moralist thinks that it is the commands of Scripture which keep the Christian from sinning. Accordingly, salvation cannot be had apart from conformity to the law of God! If we say that conformity to the law is NOT required when it comes to salvation, then we have just removed that which restrains the sinner from sinning!

That is why Christ was rejected as a prophet by the Pharisees. When Christ did NOT :

- (1) Rebuke the prostitute who was washing His feet with her tears and then
- (2) Tell her first to clean up her life before coming for forgiveness,
- (3) The Pharisee concluded that Christ could NOT have been a prophet for He if He were He would have known the type of person He was dealing with here!

Now, there was a massive assumption here which you must see. A man of God would never tell

a sinner, as Christ did here, that they could be forgiven without first telling them to clean up their life! In the Jew's mind, forgiveness could only come after a man first sought to help himself!

Yet this is what makes grace so amazing! Christian! Listen, God forgives us while we are in our sin! He heals us in our sickness! Christ has gone in our stead and bowled a perfect strike! Yet sadly to the moralist, this sounds like a free ticket to sinning!

With this we see a third example of what it means to be a "watchman" in the body of Christ. It is being mindful that on a week to week basis, there will be brothers and sisters here who will have lapsed into moralism in their thinking about Christ and His Kingdom. While they may NOT say that they believe that grace is perfected by their obedience, NEVERTHELESS they will profess it in their actions and their responses.

Look for it! For example:

- Christian, why have you settled in your walk for average? Because I feel like a liar. I've confessed the same sin over and over again. How can God keep forgiving me?
- Christian, why didn't you attend church this past week? Because I had a really bad week of sin and so felt it would have been hypocritical to come and worship.
- Christian, why are you so depressed? Because no matter how hard I try, I can't break free from a besetting sin! If I am embarrassed about my sin, how could God not be?
- Christian, why do you want accountability? So that when I fail there will be someone there to beat me up verbally as recompense for my sin.

Brothers and sisters, listen to the message that God would have us give to these and all moralists:

Ezekiel 33:18-19, "When the righteous [the morally upright] turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity [In other words, he has given up on serving the Lord and now has run headlong into sin], then he shall die in it [the "death" referenced here EITHER is to hell (in the case of the non-Christian moralist) OR to a life of misery (in the case of the believing moralist)! The latter was the case for most of Ezekiel's contemporaries]. But when the wicked turns from his wickedness and practices justice and righteousness [that is, demonstrates a living faith (we talked about this last time)], he will live by them." - what is our pastoral response to the moralist in our midst? It is to hold to the standard that God gives in His word and so preach the gospel!

When it comes to the wicked (the Christian who at some point gave himself to a particular sin), if that child of God turns from his sin (no matter how bad it was), our message is that God is "faithful and righteous to forgive their sin and cleanse them from unrighteousness"!

You say, "But my sin is so bad!"

Listen! When you come to the point in your walk where you believe that God could NOT forgive you, YOU have just discovered the nature of unconditional grace!

Yet to the moralist in the body, listen! If you return to a system of works, then you have returned to a living that can NOT endure one violation of the law (cf. Galatians 3:10)!

That means

- If you must clean up your life before you come to worship
- If you must conquer your sin before you come to the Savior in prayer...
- If you must be verbally abused before you can feel forgiven...

Then you have fallen from the beauty, glory, and simplicity of grace in your life- and must now strive unto perfection in your living! That is exactly what Paul said in Galatians.

Galatians 5:4, "You have been severed from Christ [not positionally, but practically], you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace."

In the context this does NOT mean that the Christian who has lapsed into works-righteousness has lost his salvation. RATHER, it means that grace will be of no practical benefit to him if he lives by law! In fact, that is the context of Paul's statement here.

Galatians 5:2, "Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision [if you return again to a life of works-righteousness], Christ will be of no benefit to you."

Now IF such a message is shared and understood by one who has fallen back into moralism AND YET is rejected, THEN there is only one conclusion.

Ezekiel 33:20, "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways."

This is one and the same as Paul's response in Romans.

Romans 3:8, "And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say), 'Let us do evil that good may come'? Their condemnation is just."

In other words, it is self-evident; we don't even have to explain it. If after hearing the gospel, posing an objection, then having their objection answered; yet if the moralist persists in unbelief, then we conclude that that moralist does NOT know Christ! Pastorally this means we need to share the gospel with them rather than to endeavor to help them in their depression!

Yet as there always are tares amongst the wheat. Don't be surprised if one day you speak with a professing Christian who argues with you about the nature of salvation and what therefore is required for a person to be forgiven. If they are good at arguing and you are not, you may be left thinking that maybe you have become an antinomian! In this case, re-examine

what you are saying, and if it is sound then hold your ground when it comes to the gospel!
Don't give up even an inch! I love how D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it:

The true preaching of the gospel of salvation by grace alone always leads to the possibility of this charge [antinomianism] being brought against it. There is no better test as to whether a man is really preaching the New Testament gospel of salvation than this, that some people might misunderstand it and misinterpret it to mean that it really amounts to this, that because you are saved by grace alone it does not matter at all what you do; you can go on sinning as much as you like because it will redound all the more to the glory of grace. If my preaching and presentation of the gospel of salvation does not expose it to that misunderstanding, then it is not the gospel. (Lloyd-Jones, 1972, pp. 8-9)

So, as there is nothing new under the sun, understand what the ministry of a watchman is. It is caring for the weak and needy in the body as well as rebuking the deceived and enslaved. What will this look like? On a regular basis, come to church expecting to minister to one or more of the following:

- To the One who Believes that God is Against Them on account of their Sin (vv. 10-11)... the response of the watchman is to say, "God takes no pleasure in the death/suffering/pain of the rebellious Christian. Rather, they must turn back to God in brokenness and repentance!" If they do that, they once again will enjoy the life given to them in Christ!
- To the One Made Confident on account of their "Moral Superiority" (vv. 12-16), they will fall. And when they do, our calling as a watchman is to take a large amount of the balm of Gilead and spread it generously into their troubled soul.
- To the One who Misunderstands God's Grace (vv. 17-20), our call is to hold the ground of grace and so point them back to the cross. It is reassure the struggling saint that as great as their sin may be, God's grace is greater still!

Such is our responsibility when it comes to being Members of a Body of Christ!