



## Gospel / life

### Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

#### **Study 26: The Burnt Offering & Life In God's World (4)—Witness**

The whole point of a life devoted to God is that God Himself be glorified, honoured and loved. The life devoted to God is one that flows out of an all-claiming experience of His own holy love and mercy. It is the outcome of the most wonderful discovery possible to a human being—that when we were lost in our sins, under wrath and judgment, destined only for eternal damnation, estranged from God and without hope in this world, at that very time God, in His great love for us, acting through Jesus Christ, forgave the guilt of our sins, no longer counted our iniquity against us, took our sins from us as far as the east is from the west, cast them into depths deeper than any sea, reconciled us to Himself, and united us to the future of His Son Jesus Christ. When the Holy Spirit brings this home to us as revelation, then, in the light of the mercies of God, it is our desire and our drive to “present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1).”

#### **The Priestly Service of Christian Life**

Peter uses the language of sacrifice to talk about our lives as God's people in chapter 2 of his first letter. He says,

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... [Y]ou are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. (1Pet. 2:4-5, 9-12)

Peter here (with Paul in Romans 12:1) sees our Christian lives as a kind of priestly sacrifice, and this is then with a view to making known and proclaiming the excellencies of Him who has rescued us from darkness into the marvels of the light of His reign. The grace of God in Jesus Christ has made us entirely the people of God. As we live as His people, and as we turn away from living as people of this age and this world, our actions bear witness to the truth of God and His glory. On *the day of visitation*<sup>1</sup> this will be undeniably obvious to those who now mock that lifestyle, or even think it to be evil and dangerous.

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<sup>1</sup> *The day of visitation* could refer either (and perhaps most likely) to the day of judgment at the end of history, or it could be the day in which the grace of God breaks in on them, turning them from haters of God to lovers of Him, and thus granting them a new view of what they had previously despised and dishonoured.

The obedient lives of God's people give proclamation to the world of the greatness of God. In the holiness of life that we are called to in Jesus Christ, a human picture is given of the holiness and goodness of God. Whilst not all are called or gifted to be evangelists, all of us personally and corporately are called in this way to be the image of God in His world. The impact of this is not really calculable, but it has enormous effect. Peter says:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, *always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.* For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. (1Pet. 3:13-17)

Clearly Peter's expectation is that our holy lives, persisted in even in the face of suffering for them, will draw people to enquire about what motivates us. It is then that we speak about the hope that has come to us in Jesus Christ.

A story from John Dickson about the writer Tim Winton:

[Tim Winton's father], a policeman had been in a terrible accident in the mid-60s, knocked off his motorcycle by a drunk driver. After weeks in a coma he was allowed home. Winton says he remembers thinking, "He was like an earlier version of my father, a sort of augmented version of my father. He was sort of recognisable, but not really my dad, you know? Everything was busted up and they put him in the chair, and, you know, 'Here's your dad.' And I was horrified."

Winton's father was a big man and Mrs Winton had great difficulty bathing him each day. There was nothing that Tim, five years old at the time, could do to help. News of the family's situation got out into the local community and shortly afterwards, Winton recalls, his mother got a knock at the door. "Oh, g'day. My name's Len," said a stranger to Mrs Winton. "I heard your hubby's a bit crook. Anything I can do?"

Len Thomas was from the local church... This man had heard about the Winton's difficulties and wanted to help. "He just showed up," continued Winton, "and he used to carry my dad from bed and put him in the bath and he used to bathe him, which in the 60s in Perth in the suburbs was not the sort of thing you saw every day."

According to Winton, this simple act of kindness from a single Christian had a powerful effect: "it really touched me in that, regardless of theology of anything else, watching a grown man bother, for nothing, to show up and wash a sick man—you know, it really affected me." This *strangely sacrificial act*, as he described it, was the doorway into the Christian faith for the whole Winton family.<sup>2</sup>

In Titus 2:1-10, Paul gives instructions to men and women, old and young, about how they are to conduct themselves in their daily lives. There are a number of purpose clauses in that section—the behaviour is intended to have a certain effect. These three stated purposes are all basically the same:

...that the word of God may not be reviled (v. 5)

...so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us (v. 8)

...so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour (v. 10)

These acts of kindness, mercy, obedience and holiness are all part of the life devoted to God, all part of the way in which we desire that the excellency of God in every way—His mercy, kindness, holiness, and love—be seen and known in the creation.

### **The Priestly Service of Prayer**

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<sup>2</sup> From *Promoting The Gospel*, John Dickson, p. 98, Blue Bottle Books: Sydney, 2005

However, having said that, it is clear from the New Testament that until the Spirit grants seeing, neither the excellency of God nor even the goodness of the actions is rightly interpretable just from seeing the action. All of us interpret what we see by a complex of “interpretative criteria”. What the New Testament shows is that one of these “interpretative criteria” for those outside of Christ is antagonism to the truth of God. Romans 1:18ff tells us that sinful humanity, even though confronted with the truth of God daily, denies the truth suppresses the truth with wicked deeds. Further, sinful humanity has then developed a “wisdom” (=interpretative criteria) by which we evaluate the world, but because of our refusing of the truth of God this wisdom is darkened.

What is needed then, alongside our actions, is the break-through of the revealing work of the Holy Spirit. This will then involve the people of God in earnest prayer to Him to grant a merciful seeing and hearing to blind and deaf hearts. The hidden mission of God’s people is the heartfelt prayers offered for those who have not yet repented and believed in the gospel.

John Dickson tells the story of his own conversion, and the place of faithful prayers in that:

I have two ‘spiritual’ memories of my pre-Christian days. The first is of the lovely elderly lady who lived up the road and who babysat my brothers and I when we were kids. Her name was Elsie. I remember she gave me a sticker one day, when I was about nine, which reads: ‘Love never fails.’ I had no idea this a quote from 1Corinthians 13:8 but I stuck it on my bedhead knowing it had something to do with Elsie’s God. The words were strangely special to me as I gazed up at them each night over the years.

The other memory is of the Lord’s Prayer. Somehow I knew it off by heart and used to recite when I was in trouble (not infrequently)... I was perplexed, especially after becoming a Christian, as to how I had known a prayer Jesus taught when I had never been to church or Sunday School.

The mystery was solved about ten years later. I was back in my home suburb working as a trainee minister in the local Anglican church. This was the church Elsie attended... It was not until I mentioned in a sermon one morning the mystery of my knowing the Lord’s Prayer as a youngster that she informed me: “John, I taught you the Lord’s Prayer when you were nine. Don’t you remember?” The stickers I remembered; learning the Lord’s Prayer I did not.

It turns out Elsie, a widow, had been praying for my mum and her three boys ever since my father died when I was nine. Regularly and earnestly she had asked the Lord somehow to bring those Dicksons into his kingdom. Humanly speaking she had little reason to expect that any of us would embrace Christ. Ours was a stable and loving family but, as I said, one devoid of Christian conversations, practices or even friends and relatives. Elsie prayed anyway...

...I can now see that Elsie’s prayers were being answered in small and hidden ways long before I ended up hearing the gospel as a 15 year old... Through her prayers God was preparing me to meet the Lord of that prayer I had recited so many times, the one who embodied those strangely appealing words, ‘Love never fails.’...

Prayer is the hidden part of our mission. No one but the Lord knew of Elsie’s prayers and of the stirring in my heart (I certainly told no one!). But prayer is also the most basic part of our mission. Observing this reminds us that ultimately the mission is not ours but God’s. If the fundamental gospel-promoting activity is hidden from us, it is clear that involvement in God’s mission requires *faith* more than activism, *dependence* more than programs and *humility* more than boldness...

Not all of us will feel confident speaking to others about the message of salvation, but all of us can feel confident in speaking to God about the salvation of others. Doing so is a fundamental

expression of both dependence upon God and commitment to his mission: it is a hidden but glorious promotion of the gospel.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Priestly Service of Proclamation**

Now, whilst the above is true of all members of the body of Christ, there are those who are called and gifted by the Lord as evangelists and preachers. Some are called to serve God especially by proclaiming the gospel in their local community; others He calls to serve Him by travelling to areas where the gospel has not yet made its impact, and to announce the Lordship of Jesus there.

Certainly Paul understood his ministry of proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles in these terms. He says,

...because of the grace given me by God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 15:15-16)

More, Paul understood his sufferings in proclaiming the gospel as part of his offering of love to the Lord. He described the fact of his impending death for the gospel's sake as being like poured out as a drink offering (Php. 2:17, 2Tim. 4:6). The drink offering was a "subset" of the burnt offering: the drink was poured on the ground rather than drunk, and so dedicated to God's use alone. Paul sees his possible death a sign of devotion to the Lord Jesus.

The people of God share in this priestly service together with the evangelists and preachers in a number of ways. Firstly, they pray for the work of God through the ministry of these set apart people. Paul requested that of the congregations founded in his preaching of the gospel, that they pray for an open door for God's word among those to whom he went, and for an open and courageous mouth for him (Eph. 6:19-20; Col. 4:2-4).

Secondly, the people of God can share in this work with an offering of their own, a fragrant and pleasing offering to Him. That is in their financial support of the proclaimers:

Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. I have received full payment, and more, I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, *a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.* (Php. 4:14-18)

This financial partnership is spoken of by Paul here in thankfulness for the help it was to him, and in honour of the service that it is to God Himself.

All of our lives, every day, a cry arises in our hearts, given by the Spirit of God: "I want to live my life for you, Lord. Lord, for you I want to live my life." This cry is at times challenged—by opposition from without, or from temptation and assault within—and we may lose the sound of it. But the Spirit of God, who is the bond with Jesus Christ given to us by God the Father, is always at work to renew and restore this cry to our hearts. He does this by constantly pointing us back, when we have forgotten or doubted it, to the great work of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, by which

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<sup>3</sup> *Promoting The Gospel, op. cit., pp. 65-67*

we were cleansed from our past sins. When our whole-hearted love for God and neighbour is at a low ebb, the most important thing is to ask again that the Lord will fill us with His Holy Spirit, show us again the greatness of His grace, and strengthen us again to love Him with all we have and are, and to love our neighbours as ourselves.