

An Epidemic of Good News #5

Greetings, sisters and brothers in Christ! Welcome to the 5th instalment of, “An Epidemic of Good News,” a devotional Bible study on Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

Let’s begin with a prayer...

Almighty God, your Holy Spirit gives to one the word of wisdom, and to another the word of knowledge, and to another the word of faith. We praise you for the grace imparted to all your servants and we pray that by their teaching we may be led to a fuller knowledge of the truth which we have seen in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the last instalment we heard these words from Philippians 1:15-18, “Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. The latter proclaim Christ out of love... The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition...”

I want to spend a little more time with this issue: the fact that the motivations of those who proclaim Christ are not always pure or genuine. It is a big topic, and it has occupied the church from the beginning. Jesus even told a parable about this problem: the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, where an enemy has come at night and sown weeds among the wheat leading the owner and the workers to have to decide what to do about it (Matthew 13:21-30).

There have always been both intentional charlatans and people who are simply emotionally unhealthy who come into the church and exploit the trust of others to either profit themselves monetarily, or to stroke their own egos, or simply to take emotional advantage of others. Now, this is true in every aspect of society, from trades and businesses, to professions, to government, to personal relationships—wherever there are groups of people to be controlled or exploited, these people show up.

But this stings especially when it hits the church because of the high standards to which we are called. As Paul says in Philippians 1:27,

“...live your life in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that...you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the Gospel.”

Later in the letter Paul goes into more detail about what that life looks like, and I will deal with those sections in later instalments, so for now let me quote again from Paul’s letter to the Galatians where he names the qualities that characterize a life filled with the spirit of God, namely:

“...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

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High standards to live up to, for sure! But here's the thing, they are not so much standards to live up to as they are qualities that emerge from within us when the Holy Spirit is at work within us. Paul calls these qualities, the fruit of the Spirit. They are not the fruit of our own self-improvement program, or the fruit of our own determined efforts at being good. We might be able to nudge ourselves a little in that direction, but as a package, these qualities come from the Holy Spirit working within us.

So, the issue of people with questionable motives taking on significant roles in the church is not a black-and-white, some-people-are-good-and-some-people-are-bad issue. Rather, it is about when human motivation runs up against God's grace.

There is this interesting little passage in Paul's letter to the Ephesians (4:28) where he says: "Thieves must give up stealing; instead, let them labour and work honestly with their own hands so as to have something to share with the needy."

Now, remember, Paul is not writing a general letter to the city of Ephesus to tell them how to run their city. He's just writing to the Christian congregation there, telling them how to run their church. So, obviously there is at least one "former" thief in the group, and he or she is having a hard time staying away from their old lifestyle. But when Paul tells that person or those people to stop taking other people's stuff, he says that the purpose of working is to share with those in need.

I love this little passage because it tells us so much about numerous things, such as the grace and patience of the Christian community in Ephesus, the role of the church as a place of rehabilitation, the purpose of work from a Christian perspective (not to enrich myself, but to help those in need), and so on. But it also tells us that there are people in the church with very mixed motives, mixed needs, varied levels of maturity and neediness, and so on.

This issue goes deep into our psyches. Who can really know their own motivations for doing things? Behavioural psychologists will tell you that our behaviour is all just a jumble of responses to positive and negative stimuli. Anthropologists and sociologists will counter by pointing out that as social animals we have evolved to be good to each other for the sake of group cohesion. Freudian and Jungian psychologists will point to the subconscious. Natural systems theory counsellors will say that it's all about emotional triangles and our place in the emotional field.

In theology, those who subscribe to the doctrine of the total depravity of man will use various Bible passages to say that we are completely evil, and only God can work good in us. Synergists will counter that God created us good, and that it is not that we are utterly bad, but only that the mirror of ourselves has become tarnished and so are unable to reflect the goodness of God without a combination of God's grace and our own effort.

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All these ideas have their merits and their demerits. All of them are instructive to some degree. But for me, the matter ultimately comes down to one thing: love. Do we love God, or do we not?

For many years I struggled with what it was that we were supposed to be achieving as Christians. Some made it sound like our whole purpose was to “win souls,” to convert as many people as possible so as to save everyone from eternal damnation.

What bothered me about this was that it all seemed very self-serving. The main reason to believe in God was to avoid eternal punishment. So, we are called to “love” God to get something out of it for ourselves. And we are supposed to pass on this bit of transactional “love” to as many people as possible.

It’s all very utilitarian, and it’s enough to make you lose your faith. This kind of “love of God” isn’t really love at all: it’s exploitation. God is just there for me to get something out of. And that carries over into how we often communicate with God: we pray to God to ask for stuff. We turn God into the big dispensing machine in the sky. If I throw in the right coin, say the right prayer, do the right deed, I get what I want. Depressing.

And then I heard this wonderful story about Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva was one of the great lights of early rabbinic Judaism. He lived in the early 100’s, during a very difficult time for Judaism, when the Romans were persecuting Jews for having rebelled against Rome. One day, one of Akiva’s disciples asked him how he knew that he was doing the will of God. Akiva gave this answer:

“If I should die and come before the judgment seat of the Holy One, blessed be He, and he should say to me, ‘Akiva, my good and faithful servant, come into my glory,’ then I would dance and sing all the way to paradise. But if I should die and come before the judgment seat of the Holy One, blessed be he, and he should say to me, ‘Akiva, you louse! Get out of my sight and go to perdition,’ then I would dance and sing all the way to hell knowing that I am doing the will of God.”

When I heard that story, the lights went on for me and a great weight lifted from my heart. But from a Christian perspective, it’s not so much about doing the will of God as it is loving God. Do I love God to get something out of it (which is a sham love, a user’s love, a hypocrite’s love), or do I actually love God?

Ultimately, this is all about falling in love with God. The Gospel is a love story: God loved the world so much that God gave up everything for it. That’s what lovers do for each other. God has expressed the deepest love for me, and the only question I need to answer is, am I ready to enter this relationship? Am I ready to get serious?

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Once you understand that you are being called into a love relationship, then you start thinking about things differently.

The mystics of the church through the centuries said that the impulses of love that we humans have naturally for each other are shadows or echoes of the deeper spiritual impulses of love. Our human love gives us three main metaphors for our love for God: the love between parents and children, the love between friends, and the love between lovers.

The love between parents and children helps us understand how judgment and love come together. To raise a child means to set boundaries. Children will sometimes rebel against those boundaries, and so the parent must enforce some sort of discipline. The child may hate it, but ultimately the parent does it out of love because later in life the lessons learned will be important. Children who have no structure or discipline as children grow up chaotic and unstructured, which leads to all kinds of emotional and social problems later in life.

In fact, a lot of us come into the church with all kinds of emotional deficits from our childhood because, for whatever reason, our parents couldn't be the parents they needed to be, and so we come looking to fill that void in the community of faith. And if we're honest with ourselves, sometimes we put our own emotional needs over true serving: serving out of love for God. "We love, because God first loved us," as it says in the first letter of John (1 John 4:19).

Now, you can also play around with this a little to see different angles of the parent-child relationship as a metaphor for our relationship to God. As adults, our relationship to our parents changes, and yet it doesn't. Staying in touch is key. Communicating. Talking. Even if it's hard. That's prayer. That's worship. Have you called your heavenly parent lately? Maybe instead of talking and telling God what to do, you should just listen. I know, it's hard.

The relationship between friends is another useful metaphor, and some people find it heartening to see Jesus as a friend. After all, Jesus said to his disciples, "I no longer call you slaves...but I call you friends," (John 15:15). Friendships are built on having things in common, spending time together, doing things together, talking. That's prayer. That's study in the Scriptures. That's bringing the consciousness of God's presence into every moment. That's worship, whether at church, or in your living room, or walking in nature.

But I think the one that is the most informative and the most powerful of these metaphors is the love between lovers. The lover is prepared to give all for the beloved. The mystics will often talk in very earthy language when reflecting on this aspect of love for God. They look to the Song of Songs or Song of Solomon in the Old Testament as the key place in the Bible for this way of understanding our love for God and God's love for us. The Song of Songs is a collection of royal wedding songs, but it has been understood from the earliest days as an image of this intense love between God and us. In fact, legend has it that Rabbi Akiva was the one who convinced the other rabbis that these were no mere royal love songs, but

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profound mystical poems. Based on his impassioned presentation, they agreed to include the Song of Songs in the Jewish canon of Scripture.

“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion as fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of one’s house, it would be utterly scorned.” (Song of Songs 8:6-7)

The love of the lover is so intense that, not for all the money in the world would the lover betray the beloved. And the passion of lovers produces offspring, fruit, and when the lover of my soul enters in, the fruit of our relationship is, “...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,” (Galatians 5:22-23). These are our children, so to speak: holy offspring.

I will propose to you (pardon the pun), that until we have truly fallen in love with God, our motivations for doing anything, no matter how good, are suspect. We do them to get something out of them. We are, in some way, using others, probably to feel better about ourselves.

It is only when we do what God desires for the pure reason that we love God that we can say that we have moved beyond all that. At that point suffering for the sake of Christ takes on an entirely different significance. The lover is prepared to suffer for the sake of the beloved. The lover is prepared to go to extreme lengths to show the beloved how much he or she loves the beloved.

Having understood this, we can appreciate all the more when, in Philippians 1:16 Paul says that some people proclaim Christ out of love and others don’t. And having understood this, we are also ready to appreciate better what Paul is talking about in Philippians 1:27-30, and even more so in Philippians 2:1-18, which I will look at in the next instalment of, “An Epidemic of Good News.”

Let’s close with the Lord’s Prayer...

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.**