

A Gospel of Loyalty (1)

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of loyalty. There is no more powerful statement of loyalty than the loyalty of God toward man in providing the way for us to possess eternal life. The highest act of loyalty is to die for one's friends (John 15:13). But, what about dying for one's enemies (Romans 5:10)? Laying down my life for my child or for my wife is natural. But, exchanging places with someone who hates me is another matter. This takes loyalty to an entirely new level.

Relationships within the church are rooted and grounded in our relationship with Jesus Christ, and his relationship with us. We love others because he loves us (1 John 4:7ff). "Accept one another, then, *just as* Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." (Romans 15:7) It is the phrase "**just as**" that stands out. How can we do anything "*just as*" he did? "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, *just as* Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Ephesians 5:1-2) "Husbands love your wives, *just as* Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..." (Ephesians 5:25)

My understanding of the gospel determines the course of my life. It informs my every decision. It sets the direction and the pace for every venture. The gospel provides the power I need for salvation (Romans 1:16). Though profound in its details, it is simple enough to be expressed in a children's song. "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." And though I love its simplicity, I long to know the gospel in its detail so that I can begin to "grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge" so that I "may be filled to all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:18-19)

It is my opinion that we do not love one another deeply enough in the local church because we do not fully appreciate how deeply we are loved by the one who "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves." (Colossians 1:13) I believe we are not more loyal to one another because we do not fully understand how loyal God is to us because of his Son. The invitation of the gospel is an invitation to love God and his other children unconditionally and intentionally, living this out within the reality of the local church.

When the first gospel sermon was preached in Acts 2 by Peter, it had a profound and real effect on those who embraced it, obeyed it, conformed to it, and became a part of a new community of believers. This gospel's logical conclusion was for those changed by it to band together in community to "devote themselves to the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers." (Acts 2:42) The fact that they met regularly, publicly and from house to house, is a testimony to the power of the gospel which changed their relationship with God and put them into new relationship with others who had been changed.

When the early saints banded together, they did not do so because it seemed like a good marketing decision to get the gospel out. They did not debate methods and logistics and systems. They were drawn together because of their common acceptance by God through the gospel. This is what we must see! **Being and staying together is a logical and natural outworking of the gospel itself.** The gospel is the glue of unity. The gospel trumps any dispute we might have. The gospel transcends any disagreement that might threaten to separate us. I can no more deny you as my brother than I can deny the one who purchased us from our slavery (Romans 14:1-8). Since one slave did not buy another slave then how can a slave say his fellow slave does not belong to the Master?

In this series I want to attempt to understand the principles of loyalty found within the gospel itself, and to see how these principles, when embraced, will create an inseparable bond among all those who are truly disciples of Jesus Christ. I understand there are sociological factors that divide us. I understand there are personality factors that divide us. I understand there are hermeneutical factors that separate us. But, the one factor that is more powerful than all of these other factors is the gospel factor.

Now I want to be very clear at the outset of this series of articles that I do not believe that everything that is called the gospel is the gospel. Just because someone references Jesus does not mean they are Christians. The gospel is not all things to all men. The gospel does not conform to us we conform to it

(Romans 6:17). The gospel is a unified message that addresses man's deepest need, i.e. for eternal life, and God's unique means to provide for this need. The gospel is universal and will save anyone in any land in any century. It has not changed since it was nailed down on Calvary. It was ratified by God when he raised Jesus from the dead. It is the same as the gospel that was preached around the world by the apostles. It is the gospel that caused the church to be planted in cities large and small in the first century. It is not a brand of gospel. It is not a flavor of gospel. It is simply the gospel.

The gospel also demands one common response to it. Since we are the ones being rescued, we do not set the terms of the gospel. God does. The demand of faith, repentance, and baptism is universal. This response is interwoven in the fabric of the gospel. To try to separate faith, repentance, and baptism from the gospel would change it and make it a non-gospel. It is for us to see how this gospel speaks loyalty to us. We must not muzzle it. We must not filter it. We must let the gospel speak for itself. We must only repeat it.

"The unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" is an outgrowth of the calling we have received (Ephesians 4:1-3). It is not ours to create. It is ours to "keep" (Eph.4:3). It can only be kept as we do so in the context of the local church where we are allowed to learn to love one another as he has loved us, without division and without grumbling.

Rod Myers, August 10, 2009

A Gospel of Loyalty (2)

In about 2000 BC God made a promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1ff) that through his "seed" all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Paul makes it clear that the "seed" which was promised was "one person, who is Christ" (Gal.3:16). "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised." (Romans 4:18-21)

The gospel of Jesus Christ is based on The Promise of God, initially made to Abraham. That Promise and its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus depended on the power and the commitment of God to mankind. Once God made the Promise, he was obligated by his own character and integrity to keep his Promise by bringing his Son into the world, ordaining his death, and facilitating his resurrection for the benefit of all those who would believe as Abraham did. God's loyalty to his own Promise was also a demonstration of His loyalty to all mankind.

This is a God-Sized Promise. Imagine from a human perspective all that seemed to work against God being able to keep his Promise. His Promise involved working with his people, the descendants of Abraham. The Promise had both a divine and human component. The human component was lived out in 2000 years of Jewish history. To say the least, the Jewish people were not very loyal to God or to his Promise. They did not cooperate very well in his plan. They were indispensable to the plan in that Jesus had to be able to trace his lineage back to his forefather Abraham. Therefore, God's unceasing and unchanging loyalty to the Jewish race, in spite of their disloyalty to him, was based on his character.

The Hebrew writer says, "When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying 'I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.' And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf." (Heb.6:13-20a)

This explanation of God's commitment to his Promise made to Abraham is the foundation of the gospel. Without this commitment by God we could not trust that he would do what he says he will do. Without God's "firm and secure" promise to us we would have no basis for faith. God must be absolutely and undeniably loyal to each one of us or our faith fails. Paul writes, "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself." (2 Tim.2:13)

So through the wanderings in the wilderness with the Jew's idolatry, pagan revelry, sexual immorality, and their grumbling, God remained faithful. (1 Cor.10:1-13) In this text God's faithfulness to provide a way out of our temptations shows that even in the midst of our sin and shame, God will be near to lead us out of temptation and to deliver us from evil. He will be faithful. "He is faithful and just and will forgive us of our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

In the days of the Judges when the cycle of sin, oppression, and deliverance repeated itself over and over as God raised up numerous judges (deliverers), God showed himself faithful to his Promise. In the days of the united kingdom of Israel, under Saul, David, and Solomon God guided this faithless nation through,

and even reinforced his Promise through his servant-king David. Paul preached this in Acts 13 while in Pisidian Antioch. "We tell you the good news (gospel): What God promised our fathers, he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.' The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words: 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.'" (13:32-34) Notice this is the "holy and sure" blessing.

In the days of the divided kingdom after Solomon's death, God remained faithful to his Promise. When the northern kingdom of Israel became so wicked that all the Jews were threatened with extinction by their enemies, God raised up the Assyrians to bring judgment on unfaithful Israel, but spared the southern kingdom of Judah. When Judah became so wicked that the Promise of God was in danger of being broken, God raised up the Babylonians to discipline Judah by taking them off to Babylon for 70 years, yet preserving a remnant through whom the Promise would be fulfilled. God was faithful.

God guided the Jews through the perilous times after the exile, during the days of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. He provided prophets and teachers to guide and preserve them. Then, through the long 400 years between the testaments, God worked through good and devoted men and women to keep the Jewish nation together and safe. When the calendar turned the page and became AD, God continued to watch over the fulfillment of his Promise, baby Jesus. He saved him from Herod's wrath. He watched over him through his elementary and adolescent years. He brought him to maturity, and anointed him to preach the gospel (Luke 4), protected him in the temptations of the devil in the wilderness, and guided him all the way to the cross. God was loyal to Jesus and us by not leaving Jesus in the grave. He resurrected him and ascended him back to himself, crowning him King of kings and Lord of lords.

Do you see the point? God demonstrated his loyalty through 2000 years of history (Actually long before that, but I just started with Abraham). Look at what he put up with, yet he still remained loyal. Could there be any clearer example of the way we as his people are to be loyal to one another? The very integrity of the gospel rests on God's faithfulness.

Now notice Paul reasoning in Romans 3. "What if someone did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written, 'So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.' But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, 'If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?' Why not say-as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say-'Let us do evil that good may result'? Their condemnation is deserved." (Romans 3:3-8)

God cannot and does not make his choices to fulfill his promises based on our choices and decisions. He remains faithful to us and his will for our lives regardless of how we act. Of course, as Paul so taught, in the end this very faithfulness of God will be the very thing that qualifies him to be our judge. Since he provides us with every opportunity and blessing to be able to be saved, he will be right in his condemnation of us if we reject his grace. People will be lost because they reject God's grace, but his grace will be extended right to the very end in one form or another because God is a faithful God.

How does this apply to the church? Since it is by God's faithful grace we are saved, then "faithful grace" becomes the currency of the church. We transact our business with one another based on "faithful grace." Now this grace does say sin is okay. "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say, 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope-the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ..." (Titus 2:11-13) The sin of division, separation, grumbling, complaining, leaving, and the like are not in line with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Grace speaks to these and says, "No."

Rod Myers
August 11, 2009

A Gospel of Loyalty (3)

Loyalty to one another begins with loyalty to God and insures loyalty to self. Sin cuts three ways. Sin is primarily an offence against God. David wrote, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge." (Psa.51:4) Sin is also an offence to others, either directly or indirectly. In David's case, he sinned against his wives and children, Bathsheba and Uriah, and the nation of Israel. And, sin is also against the one who sins. Didn't Paul teach us this? (1 Cor.6:18) We hurt ourselves when we sin. Haven't you heard, "To thy own self be true?" The violation of our conscience, our values, and our character is a self-sin.

The harmony and balance of a marriage, a family, a church, or a nation depends on the commitment of the participants to sin less and to cover whatever sins exist with love and forgiveness, as each one seeks to accept the forgiveness of God. When spouses are unconcerned with their sin, letting it loose to infect the relationship, chaos, confusion, and division occurs. When family members act as if they do not care about how their actions affect others, doing what is right in their own eyes, then the family is filled with chaos, confusion, and division. When members of the local body of Christ allow even private sins to go unchecked the entire body is weakened. One cannot have an infection in their big toe without it eventually causing the entire body to become septic (as in septic tank).

The story of Achan in Joshua 7 makes the point well. At the battle of Jericho, described in Joshua 6, the people were instructed not to touch the "devoted things," the silver, gold and the articles of bronze and iron. (6:19) The Lord declared that destruction would come on the Israelites if these items were taken for their personal use. It is my belief that God's intent was for this wealth to be retained for the community so that it could be used for the community's good. However, during the attack of Jericho, Achan disobeyed God by taking a beautiful robe, some silver, and gold, burying them in the ground. This act caused the Israelites to be defeated in the next battle, the battle of Ai.

There was "sin in the camp." Achan was found out. He confessed. He and his family were destroyed at the valley of Achor (trouble) as God promised. The disruption of harmony, peace and victory for God's people was occasioned by one man among them. Could there have been any stronger message to these people that sin matters, even private sin matters?

Sin is disloyalty to God, others and one's self. Sin is unfaithfulness. The children of Israel in the wilderness, wandered and died over a forty year period because of their "unfaithfulness." (Num.14:33) The southern kingdom of Judah was taken captive to Babylon because of their "unfaithfulness." (1 Chron.9:1) Ezra describes the Israelites taking foreign wives after the exile as "unfaithfulness." (Ezra 9:2,4) Listen to Daniel's prayer: "Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame-the men of Judah and people of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you." (Daniel 9:7) Daniel continued to plead with God for forgiveness. Jeremiah compares Judah's unfaithfulness as a woman's unfaithfulness to her husband. (Jer.3:20)

Faithfulness is a characteristic of God. Moses writes, "Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands." (Deut.7:9) God is sinless precisely because he is absolutely faithful. He never betrays. He never lies. He is totally consistent. He can be counted on. He always acts in our best interest. Faithfulness prevents God from saying "Yes" and "No" in Christ. All his promises are "Yes" in Christ. (2 Cor.1:18ff)

However, the nature of our sin is "Yes" and "No." We say one thing and do something else. We say we love God, will serve God, and then fail. We make commitments to one another and then fail. This is why Jesus admonished us to let our "'yes' be 'yes' and our 'no' be 'no.'" (Matt.5:37) James calls it "double-mindedness." (Jas.1:7) Jesus calls it hypocrisy. (Matt.23) Sin is when we act contrary to truth. Sin is transgression or lawlessness. (1 John 3:4) Sin is knowing to do good and not doing it. (Jas.4:17)

God used betrayal and disloyalty as the means by which loyalty could be established. Psalm 41:9, says "Even my close friend, who I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." When

Jesus predicted his betrayal by Judas he quoted this verse. (John 13:18) God used Judas' betrayal to establish his covenant of loyalty to his people through the death of Jesus on a cross. But, it was not merely the unfaithfulness and disloyalty of Judas that caused Jesus' death. We too kissed the cheek of Jesus sending him to his death! It was MY DISLOYALTY that sent Jesus to the cross. "Many a man claims to have unfailing love, but a faithful man who can find?" (Prov.20:6) Paul declared in quoting the OT, "All have turned away..." (Romans 3:12)

The shame of disloyalty can only be taken away by a supreme act of loyalty that is absolutely underserved. The gospel declares this. The gospel embodies this. The gospel provides the only means of reconnecting what is broken when one person is unfaithful to another. Spiritual adultery has a cure. We are made right with God and with one another through his faithfulness. Hebrews 3:6 says that Jesus is a faithful son in God's house. He is the only faithful son. But, by his faithfulness we can be called "faithful brothers." (Col.1:2)

The gospel makes the unfaithful faithful. This is our new identity in Christ. We are called to be faithful. However, just like all the words that describe our true identity in Christ, this has to be lived out in the day to day practice of life. And, where is this tested? Surely it is tested in our marriages, our families, and in our churches. Christians are struggling today in all three areas. A lifetime of loyalty seems impossible for most. Relationships come and go. But, this is not how it is to be. The revolving door of relationships is made in hell, not heaven.

The apostle Paul learned the hard way what Jesus meant in John 16:1-3: "All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me." I wonder if Paul reflected on these words in the course of his life. Paul reports Jesus words to him as he neared Damascus on what he thought to be a mission for God. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." (Acts 26:14) Paul believed himself to be completely and zealously loyal to God. (Phil.3:4bff) He had great confidence in this. Yet, he learned that his so-called loyalty was really disloyalty to the one who died for him. He was destroying his own brothers and sisters in Christ in the name of God!

This shows the deceptive nature of sin. (Heb.3:13) We can believe we are doing what God wants and actually be doing the opposite. How many times have I heard someone argue that God wanted them to divorce their spouse or to leave their church? We find ways to believe it is true. I know the passage that says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Romans 12:18) I know the passage in 1 Corinthians 7:15 about the unbeliever who will not live with the believer and departs. We let them go.

But, I also know the God of Hosea. This is the God who commanded Hosea to marry Gomer, a woman of prostitution. This is the God who commanded Hosea to pursue her after she had spent herself in prostitution and was sold into slavery. This is the God who commanded Hosea to buy his wife out of slavery, court her and pledge his love in marriage to her again. This is a God who would not cast his adulterous wife, Israel, out. And, are we not thankful we serve such a wonderful God who does not allow our sin to so offend him that he will not do whatever it takes to bring us to himself, even the death of his totally loyal Son on a cross?

Going the first, second, third, et. mile of the way to preserve our unity and to demonstrate to the world the unfailing love of God is the mission of God's people. How different would the world be if they had a living demonstration of loyalty in Christian homes and in our Christian churches? Sin has been dealt with. God has atoned for disloyalty so we could live in peace with one another. Praise God.

Rod Myers
August 17, 2009

A Gospel of Loyalty (4)

I believe the two key words of the gospel are Grace and Faith. They correspond to one another. God provides the grace so we can respond in faith. Grace promotes a faithful response. The goodness and mercy of God creates a climate in which we can be faithful. Imagine another word instead of grace. Imagine the word **Law**.

The gospel can only be understood properly when we understand the nature of law properly. "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known..." (Romans 3:21) Paul asks a critical question in Galatians 3:2, "I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?" What difference did it make? In the next verse he equates the law with human effort. The contrast could not be more striking. It is either by divine effort or human effort we are saved. Which will it be? Though the law is holy, righteous and good (Romans 7:12), it is not designed by God to save us. His good law enables us to recognize the utter sinfulness of sin. (Romans 7:13)

The great fault of the Jews was to think they held a special relationship to God because he gave them the law by Moses. (Romans 2:17ff) The law merely showed their inconsistency. Reread the scathing denunciation of the Jewish leaders by Jesus in Matthew 23. Such preaching will cause us all to flee justification by law and long for a gospel of grace. Jewish leaders established their loyalty to one another based on their perception of who was keeping the law more or less on par with them. They measured themselves by themselves. They maintained their salvation club membership based on a check list of do's and don'ts. Those outside this list were deemed "sinners," people not to be associated with. This is why Jesus' practice of socializing with sinners was not acceptable to the Jewish leaders.

The story of Luke 7 is only one among many showing Jesus' being drawn to sinners who knew they were sinners, those convicted by the law. "A woman who had lived a sinful life" wet his feet with tears, wiped them with her hair, and emptied a box of perfume on them. The law-keeping Pharisee, with the smell of sweet perfume in his nostrils, started talking to himself. Since Jesus allowed this to happen to him, Jesus was disqualified as a prophet in Simon's mind. After telling a story to show Simon's total misunderstanding of grace, Jesus forgave the woman, noting "your faith has saved you; go in peace." (7:50) Do you see the gospel in this story? Law leads to condemnation. Grace leads to forgiveness based on faith. Jesus lived out the gospel in his ministry.

The principle of faith-based salvation is taught in Romans 4. Abraham stands as the ultimate example of faith. This chapter makes the point that Abraham's faith was neither based on circumcision nor the law of Moses. Why? Because Abraham was declared righteous by faith (Genesis 15:6) before he was circumcised (Genesis 17) and about 400 years before the law was given (Galatians 3:15ff). This is what Abraham discovered in the matter. (Romans 4:1)

So what is my point? Faith properly understood will transform our relationship with God and transform our relationships with one another. If we stay connected to a Grace-filled God by our faith, then when we extend grace to one another we also will stay connected by faith. My premise is that we break apart from one another in marriage and in the church, for the most part, because one party concludes the other has failed in keeping some "law" and that redemption is not possible. That is a hard conclusion to come to in light of how the gospel holds out the possibility of redemption for all men.

If our relationships are based on the Law-Works model we are doomed to failure, division, separation, and disloyalty. But if our relationships are based on the Grace-Faith model we will treat one another the way we want God to treat us. Remember the writing on the wall in Daniel 5? The message was sent to King Belshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar's son, who completely ignored God. He should have known how God dealt with the pride of his father (Daniel 5:18ff). The message was "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting." (Daniel 5:27) In our relationships with one another we are constantly being weighed on the scales and found wanting. But, in Christ this is not the end of the matter. We extend grace because God extended grace to us when he weighed us on his scales.

So if we do this, extend grace in the face of sin and failure, then we have a greater opportunity to see others respond faithfully. If we extend judgment in the face of sin and failure we will call forth despair and disappointment. Which climate would you like to live in? We do not ignore the places in which we are found wanting or the places where others are found wanting, but we balance the scales with grace which calls forth greater responsibility.

So what specifically do we see about faith that causes us to be faithful? Abraham is our teacher. Romans chapter 4 is our text. First, and most importantly, is that the focus of faith is God himself. About Abraham we learn, "he is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed-the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were." (Romans 4:17) This is so significant for healthy relationships. God sees us as we can be if we come under the gravitational pull of grace. The kind of God we believe in is a God who wants to give life to the dead and wants to create things that do not exist.

Let this sink in. If our faith is God-like, then we too seek to infuse life into others and to bring about in their lives something that does not now exist. We do not walk by sight but by faith (2 Corinthians 5:7). We see the unseen in others. We believe. We create. We cause others to live. Separation, division, and disloyalty saps life from others and deny that others can be anything other than what they are. Marriages and churches are suffering because we are more law-based than faith-based.

Second, faithfulness breeds in the ground of fact. "Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead-since he was about a hundred years old-and that Sarah's womb was also dead." (Romans 4:19) There is nothing in faith that denies the facts of a matter. In marriage we see it as it is. In the local church we see it as it is. But, facts can change if we believe. Paul saw Corinth as it was. He had no rose-colored glasses. It was bad. But, it was redeemable. The power of faith, hope and love was called into play.

But, first we face the facts. The fact of a matter begins where the gospel begins. We are sinners in need of grace, not law. We are the man in James 1 who looks at his face in a mirror. If he hears the word and does not put it into practice he turns from the mirror forgetting what he looks like. This is the faith put into action that James speaks of in his next chapter.

Third, in spite of the apparent degree of difficulty of what God promised, Abraham "did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God." (Romans 4:20) Remember that our faith is in a God who fulfills his promises, and he does not work on our timetable. Impatience is unbelief. Abraham was fully persuaded that God could do what he promised. (Romans 4:21) Might we do well to see what promises God has made to us individually in our spiritual growth, in our growth as brothers and sisters in Christ, and in our marriages? If God has made promises that show that he will bring to completion the work he began in us (he made us a Christian, he made us one in Christ, and he made man and wife one), then should we not be patient to see his work unfold? Shouldn't we be fully persuaded the he will do what he promised? Does not Philippians 1:6 teach us that we should have confidence in God's ability to bring his work to completion? Separation, leaving, grumbling, complaining, and divorcing are usually symptoms of either impatience with God's pace of work or our lack of cooperation in his work.

The gospel teaches us a Grace-Faith system. When we relate to one another based on this model we will find ourselves working through our problems and being victorious in our relationships. Later in Romans Paul writes, "everything that does not come from faith is sin." (Romans 15:23) Think on these things.

Rod Myers
August 23, 2009

A Gospel of Loyalty (5)

As I move into Romans 5, I notice many wonderful gospel truths that illustrate the faithfulness and loyalty of God toward us, the undeserving. What Romans 5 teaches me is that loyalty is not about equality or reciprocity. My relationship with God is more nearly like a man's relationship with a gnat, with the exception that the gnat was not made in man's image. God is all wise. I am stupid. God is all powerful. I am weak. God is all loving. I am inconsistent and incomplete in love. God is efficient in all he does. I am incompetent and sluggish in comparison. Didn't Job learn this lesson?

In Romans 5, Paul uses the words "powerless, sinners, and enemies" (5:6, 8, 10) to describe us. He identifies us with Adam through whom sin entered the world. (5:12ff) We are weak and unable to affect our own salvation. We are immoral and unholy, undeserving of a holy God. We are estranged and at war with God, yet a target of his reconciliation. We are more like our original fleshly parent in practice than we are like the Father who actually gave us existence.

Romans 5 pin-points our dire circumstances with Christ. We are devoid of justification. We are deficient in peace. We are standing on the outside, denied access to grace. We are without glory having been defamed by sin. Our sufferings mean nothing. We are without hope. The divine Spirit is not our internal companion. We are ungodly. No one beside Jesus would want to die for us if they could see our utter sinfulness. We are under the wrath of God destined for hell. We are separated from God. We are under the sentence of death. We are law-breakers. We are under the same condemnation as our father Adam. We also are disobedient as Adam was. Our knowledge of the law only makes our responsibility before God for the sins we commit increase.

But Romans 5 also shows what has been introduced into our pitiful world that makes the eternal difference. We have justification through Jesus' death. We are given something to put our faith in because of Jesus' death. We have peace with God through Jesus' death. We have a hope of the glory of God through Jesus' death. Our sufferings in this present world are given meaning and purpose through Jesus' death. His purpose is to develop our character so that we might be more like the one who died for us.

Jesus nailed the "right time" so that we could be rescued. Jesus showed us that he did not die for us because we were righteous or good, but because we were sinners in need. Jesus' death on a cross was a demonstration of God's loyal character, not a response to our deservedness. Jesus reconciled us to himself precisely because we could not reconcile ourselves to him. Jesus counter-acted the entrance of sin into the world and the death that followed by giving us the gift of his own life. His grace overflowed to many just as the sin of Adam overflowed to many. Jesus established kingdom rule in our lives where sin once ruled. Jesus reversed the effects of disobedience through his own obedience on a cross. Jesus reversed the effects of death by providing the opportunity for eternal life.

Read the text and see if you do not find all these truths there. But, what does this mean for our relationship with one another. Our relationships in Christ are modeled on these truths. We do not base our dealings with one another on equality and reciprocity. Our dealings are always unequal, always unbalanced, always not fair, and always one-sided. We never get everything we feel we need or want. We never respond in proportion to the grace of another. We never really deserve the kindnesses of others. We never feel that every transaction is equitable. We must learn that the gospel teaches us that the same way Jesus loved us, warts and all, is the same way we are to love one another.

This is why we must bring a large bag of grace to every encounter with our fellow man, including our fellow Christians. Make sure you fill that bag to the same level you want others to fill theirs as they deal with you. But, more importantly, make sure your bag is filled to a level comparable to the level you desire God's bag to be filled for you. But remember your bag is always too small to contain a fraction of the grace that God has for you.

Paul said in Romans 3:22b-23, "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." In 3:19, Paul says the entire human race's standing under the law ends with every mouth being silenced and every person being held accountable to God. Do you see that? "It says, "to God." Quoting

from Psalms Paul says, "There is no one righteous, not even one." (3:10) The legal charge is that all Jews and all Gentiles alike are under sin. (3:9) Again, I am not saying the gospel allows us to live as we please or to ignore the sins of our brothers and sisters. But, I am arguing that the gospel constantly reminds us of the truth stated in Romans 12:3: "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." Grace and faith cause us to keep our relationships in perspective.

Peter learned this truth in a dramatic way in Acts 10. God told him to go to a Gentile's house to share the gospel. Peter did not want to go because it was a Gentile's house. I wonder why Peter did not recall the experience in Samaria a few years earlier. (John 4) God gave him a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven filled with all manner of unclean animals. He was told to "kill and eat." This was repulsive to Peter. But, God's message of grace was more powerful than Peter's stomach. He did as he was told, and he witnessed the pouring out of the Spirit on Gentile-sinners. Peter's response was "So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think I could oppose God?" (10:17) What made Peter and Cornelius equal was a common "gift", i.e. grace.

Have we really captured the essence of this gospel truth? There is a place in the body for rebuke, confrontation, correction, instruction, and even withdrawal of fellowship. (2 Tim.3:16-17; Matthew 18:15ff; 1 Cor.5) But, the bar of fractured fellowship or divorce is set very high and has some very specific criteria. The gospel of grace demands extraordinary efforts to maintain the unity created by the gospel. Remember unity is created by grace, not by law, and not by us. We maintain it. We keep it up. I fear we go to more effort to maintain our physical houses than we do the church of God (though I mean the church as our relationships in Christ, it seems we do not care as much about the physical structures we share, bought with the Lord's money). In Ephesians 2-3 Paul describes our unity in Christ in rich terms. Take a moment to read it. Not only is this God's plan from the beginning, manifesting his great wisdom, but it was secured by the death of his own Son. Jesus died to please his Father who wanted all men to be one in Christ, to live together in peace, and to demonstrate to the world through our diverse fellowship that God's love is the most powerful force in the universe.

This is what God wants for us more than anything else in the entire world. Yet we act as if we are too good to dwell together, trashing God's dream for his people. How can we do that? Who do we think we are? "I can't put up with this or that" we say. We should just be happy that God puts up with us! God must be repulsed that we care so little for the unity that he fought the very demons and devils of hell to give us.

Brother Marshall Keeble, beloved black preacher of the last century, would talk about us being 'mud-balls.' He decried the fact that we often think we are too good to embrace others. We parcel out forgiveness sparingly and grudgingly. We run, leave, remove ourselves, talk about, give up on, ignore, and write off all in the name of Jesus. Such is not the language and currency of grace through faith.

The gospel teaches us that we all began in Christ at the same place, sinners, helpless, and enemies. We all come into Christ the same way, through the gift. We are all sustained in Christ the same way, through his constant love. If this is true, then how then shall we live together in marriage and in the local church?

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