

FREE GIFT
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, Tennessee
February 10, 2008

Romans 5:12-21

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal tells of churches that are reviving the ancient practice of excommunication and shunning members who will not repent. These churches, the article said, think it's time to restore the church to its traditional role as moral enforcer. The idea seems to be: Get right, or get left behind.

It tells of one 71-year-old woman who had been a member of a church for years, but who had questioned the pastor's authority. One Sunday when she showed up for worship, the pastor called 911 and had her arrested by the police. "I've been shunned," she said as she was led away in handcuffs.¹

I'll have to admit that as a pastor that has a certain amount of appeal: Got an irascible member who disagrees with you? Simple: ship 'em off to jail! But my calmer moments, I know, and you do too, that is no way for the church to act.

Nevertheless, this business of shunning members seems to be part of a larger trend in church circles, where church people are quick to say exactly what God wants us to do, and are quick to judge those who don't do it. The farmer-philosopher Wendell Berry puts it this way:

Anybody half awake these days will be aware that there are many Christians who are exceedingly confident in their understanding of the Gospels, and who are exceedingly self-confident in their understanding of themselves in their faith. They appear to know precisely the purposes of God, and they appear to be perfectly assured that they are now doing, and in every circumstance will continue to do, precisely God's will. . . . They are confident, moreover, that God hates

¹ *The Wall Street Journal*, online edition for January 18, 2008.

people whose faith differs from their own, and they are happy to concur in that hatred.²

The theology of such folks is a “try harder” theology. You’ve got to be a little better, a little more holy. There are a lot of bad things out there, and you’re not supposed to do them. Don’t drink, don’t chew, don’t go with girls who do. And God is a lot like Santa Claus: “He knows when you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake.”

Theology professor John Leith puts it this way:

Fundamentalism in any form, whether on the right or on the left, makes too simple a distinction between people. It sees that on the one hand there are good people who work hard and who have money, who obey the laws and who go to heaven. . . . On the other hand there are lazy people who do not work hard and who do not have money, who disobey God and who do not go to heaven. . . . Those who make such distinctions always think of themselves as hardworking people who deserve money, as the good who are going to heaven. There is no gospel in this, only a self-righteousness that is self-deceiving.³

That is not gospel. That is a religion that earns its way by its own works and its own self-righteousness. But the gospel of grace says that we don’t earn our own way. In fact, we cannot earn our way. Sin is not just a few bad things we do, a few moral slips and peccadilloes that get us in trouble. Instead, the Bible sees sin as the very air we breathe. Our world is under the dominion of evil, so that not just in our bad deeds but even in our attempts to be good, we find ourselves polluted by the very evil we hate. We cannot get away from that simply by trying harder.

Benjamin Franklin, in his autobiography, tells of trying to attain moral perfection in his life. Franklin, in his characteristic way, came up with a list of thirteen virtues. His plan was to concentrate on one virtue a week, and after awhile would be a man of virtue. However, after several years of working on it, Franklin had to admit “I was surprised to find myself so much fuller of faults than I had imagined.” He finally had to confess that he “never arrived at perfection.”⁴

² Wendell Berry, “The Burden of the Gospels.” In *The Way of Ignorance* (2005).

³ John Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 181.

⁴ Karen Pidcock-Lester, “Romans 10:5-15.” *Interpretation*, July 1996, p. 289.

According to the Apostle Paul, the one who got us into this mess was old Adam. It was not just that Adam ate the apple, or whatever kind of fruit it was. The real problem was that Adam disobeyed God. “Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.”

It is from passages like this one that Christians have developed the idea known as Original Sin. St. Augustine in the 4th century thought that sin was transmitted from parent to child biologically, like the color of your eyes or being left-handed. There aren't many who still think of sin in that way, but the fact remains that we are born into a world where sin is real, and where, despite our best efforts, we enter into sin. Original Sin might better be called Universal Sin. We sin in bad things we do, and even our best efforts are tainted by sin.

Maybe one of the clearest ways we sin is precisely by the enthusiasm with which we judge others. Our sin is in thinking we're right, that we know best. But in fact, “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” (vss??)

So how are we extricated from this mess? We cannot get out by ourselves. Trying harder seems only to get us in deeper. How do we get out? Here is how Paul puts it: “If the many have died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for many. . . . Therefore just as one man's trespass lead to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.”

How do we get out of this mess? Here is how—by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, who was obedient even unto death. Adam's act of disobedience was relatively minor: he ate the fruit of the tree. But because sin was unleashed on the world, the act of Christ had to be a major one: he gave his life on the cross. A small act had to be undone by a great act.

We've just passed the 10th anniversary of the Exxon Valdez tragedy. You remember the event, how a great oil tanker ran aground and spoiled one of the most beautiful and pristine places on earth. They say that the pilot was drunk at the time, and his inattention caused the crash. They also say that there is still plenty of evidence of the devastation, and some wonder if it will ever again be as it was. One relatively small act—getting drunk—leads to a major disaster involving millions to clean up. A small act had to be undone by a great act.

So with Christ. “The free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification.” The sacrifice of Christ is the greater, and so we receive the greater gift. Do you hear how Paul just heaps up the words: “how much more . . . much more surely . . . grace abounding . . . the abundance of grace.” Paul can hardly find the words to express the greatness of God’s gift.

Isn’t that better than working harder? Isn’t that better than trying to save ourselves? If we could work harder, if we could do it ourselves, what need would there be for Christ? It is just because we cannot do it ourselves that Christ came. One writer says: “We contribute nothing to our own salvation except the sin from which we need to be saved.” All the rest is done by Christ.

The Church of the Holy Selpulchre in Jerusalem stands on the spot where it is supposed Jesus was crucified. To get to the Chapel of the Crucifixion you have to go up a flight of stairs. You enter a room that is all gold and silver. You can get on hands and knees and crawl under the stone altar and place your hands in the hole, now rimmed with gold, where the cross stood.

When you go back downstairs, you may notice another chapel directly under the first, only this one has no silver or gold. This second chapel contains a massive rock behind a metal grill door, the base of the stone on which the cross stood. According to legend, that rock also marks the place where Adam is buried. So that when Christ was crucified, the blood from his hands and feet, and the water that poured from his side, flowed down onto Adam’s grave, baptizing and redeeming him. “On that day, Adam’s sin was canceled, his curse reversed, and the whole creation was made new.”⁵

Here’s the choice which the gospel presents to us: We can either try to work hard and save ourselves, we can be quick to judge others and declare who’s right and who’s wrong, who’s good and who’s bad; or, we can open our hands to receive the free gift of grace offered in Jesus Christ. The old way or the new way in Christ.

Here is good news. The price is paid. We are set free. It’s a gift, a free gift. Don’t ever go back to the old way. †

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 105.