

Failure, Redux

At the supermarket recently, I encountered a man wearing a T-shirt that said, “Trust No One.” I said to the man, “What your shirt says is not right. You can trust Jesus. Jesus is trustworthy.” And he said in reply, “That’s your opinion, but I was raised in a hypocritical family.” And then he precluded any further discussion with, “Have a good day!” What to make of this? There’s a lot here to think about.

I doubt that this man had the ability to reflect sufficiently on his upbringing to suppose that the hypocrisy of his parents meant that Christianity is a false religion. Somewhere, this guy picked up the standard complaint (rather, excuse) of atheists that “there are too many hypocrites in the church for me to believe in Christ.” Indeed, his parents may have been hypocritical. But the claim that his hypocritical parents prevented him from believing in Jesus is bogus. (Notice, by the way, that this man slandered his parents. Claiming to be virtuous, he too was a hypocrite! See Matthew 7:5.)

Of course it’s true that the beliefs and ideas, and the very lives of others powerfully affect us. We’re all influenced by what we encounter in the world we live in. But they don’t control us. We’re all individually responsible for the choices we make in life. Regardless how immature or superficial the faith of his parents may have been, that dude was still responsible for responding to Jesus’ miracles and especially His resurrection and ascension to heaven in the way that God expects, with trust and love.

Yet there’s too much truth in the claim that hypocrisy is wicked merely to blow it off. Peter regards hypocrisy to be the same as slander, malice and deceit (1 Peter 2:1). Peter mentions it because hypocrisy was (and is) an enormous problem in the church. We are such hypocrites ourselves that we fail even to acknowledge the problem. Hypocrisy is not something to joke about. It’s not a slogan. It’s failure. And it’s wickedness. We must not be hypocrites. We must instead be the real thing.

The Pharisees were hypocrites. They pretended to be righteous and godly, but in fact they were too self-absorbed to even know how they were to live. They were so contemptuous of others that they couldn’t be righteous or godly. They were living a lie. Their religiosity was phony. It was all an act. Theater. And their phoniness undoubtedly caused others in Judea to ignore the faith that God expected of them. So they were dangerous. Pharisee-ism was failure, writ huge. And for their hypocrisy, they were condemned. God is not indifferent to failure. Failure is evil. We’ve discussed failure in the Scriptures previously, let’s examine it again.

The entire Old Testament story is saturated with failure. Failure began in the Garden. It occurred all thru Genesis—it’s on almost every page!—and it goes into the narrative of the Exodus and travel to the promised land. The Book of Judges is a painful-to-read story of failure. The monarchy was an abject failure. And it’s no different for the world of Gentile nations; their story in Scripture, confirmed by all secular history, is one of abysmal failure too. An ideal Messiah/King was promised to come to Israel *because* of all that failure. Someone had to atone for and reverse that mountain of failure in Creation. Jesus is that Person.

Moses understood that the Nation he was leading to the Land was going to fail. That’s because they didn’t have a “heart” for God (Deuteronomy 29:4). It wasn’t merely the noetic effect of the

sin nature, but something deeper. They needed to have a “circumcised” heart, one that desired God, to know and love and obey and serve Him. And this is something that God would have to give them. And so something radically different from the O.T. economy is in the New Testament. A God-given enablement is to have that kind of “heart,” for without that no one can please God; only failure results. Jesus Himself presents this in the Gospel of John, Chapters 6 to 17. And Paul expands on it in Romans 8, and elsewhere.

The Gospel is Jesus, *everything* Jesus. “Salvation” (the term used all the time by evangelicals) is being united to Jesus. In John’s Gospel, Jesus explains (repeatedly), that He has to go back to the Father, but He’ll still be with His followers—in the Person of the Holy Spirit. Those initial disciples would be founding the Church with their teaching and writing, as inspired by the Spirit. And then all followers of Jesus thru the age, until His Return, by union with Jesus would have the enablement of His indwelling Spirit to obey their teaching and their words. So, in this way, Jesus would be present with—and *in*—His followers, and they in Him.

It’s the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, indwelling us that empowers us to obey and live out the Word of God. The Spirit has to have something to work with, and that’s the Word that the Apostles supernaturally gave us. So, in the same way that we absorb food and those nutrients actually become our body, our person, and so we have life, we have to know and absorb the Word of Christ and so we have Life, the life of the resurrected Jesus. Eternal life. Let me say it slightly differently: Christ is present in our lives by means of the Spirit by means of the Word. We have to want to be with Jesus, and we do that by wanting to know and to live out the Word, that is, Jesus’ words, His teachings and His commands. And the Holy Spirit, supernaturally active in us, makes it possible to actually do that. Jesus’ love, peace and joy, indeed His presence, comes to us by our keeping His Word. Fruit-bearing is by keeping His Word. Sanctification is by keeping His Word. This is salvation! This is Christianity.

“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain that build it” (Psalm 127:1). “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ saith the Lord” (Zechariah 4:6). Unless the indwelling Spirit of Christ enables us who believe in Jesus to obey and live out the Word of Christ, we can only fail. But the Spirit is humble. He doesn’t force Himself on anyone. We have to *want* the Spirit to help us live out the Word, and we have to *want* the Word to control us. If not, regardless what professions of faith we make, what theological truths we hold or what Bible knowledge we have, it’s all futile. So our lives are empty, wasted, and maybe even hypocritical.

The Incarnation of the Son is the great, cosmic work of the triune God for His beloved human creatures. The Son entered into Creation. The infinite became localized in a physical body. Yet, that same Jesus, although now risen and exalted in heaven with the Father, is also present with those who love and obey Him—through the indwelling Spirit. So we become new creatures, radically transformed, and enter into union with God and in some way participate in the Godhead. Meditate deeply on John 14:15-23, also on Ephesians 3:16-19. And especially on Romans 8:15 (**“You received the spirit of sonship”** [!]) and Galatians 4:6. This isn’t abstract theology, irrelevant to belief in Christ. This is the blessing that salvation *is*.

God does not fail. He cannot fail. The Son came, offering Himself to us, so that we may live the life that glorifies God, the life of God Himself, forever. In this way we express or reflect God in this time-and-space physical world, fulfilling the “image of God.”

Jesus stated, **“The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and they are life”** (John 6:63, echoed by Peter in v. 68). The Bible is a unique, supernatural book of words that come from God, words that mediate Life. In the Bible we encounter the living God who speaks. And loves. The words of the New Testament extend the Person and mission of the living Christ thru this church age. They mediate His Person. So those same words, entering our hearts and minds, thru the active work of the Spirit, transform us just as the incarnate, physically present Son transformed those initial disciples. Therefore, do not be indifferent to the Word of God! And do not suppose that the command to obey the Word is irrelevant, or just for certain people who wish to go deeper in their faith. Because the alternative to knowing, loving, and obeying Jesus is . . . failure. And to God, failure is wickedness.

Now, allow me to speculate. What might have made this man at the supermarket know that his parents’ faith was real because Jesus was someone to trust? Answer: Sacrifice. I’m referring to deliberate, voluntary sacrifice out of love for and gratitude to Jesus. I’m referring to suffering loss, significant personal loss for Jesus’ sake. I’m referring to a life of personal sacrifices, in which sacrifice is a life-style, done, of course, trusting that God will vindicate in His way in the future. It’s sacrifice that makes faith real. It’s sacrifice that makes love real.

We in the Western world are a self-indulgent people. We don’t even know what self-denial means, yet it’s required to be a follower of Jesus. We suppose that going to church and dropping a five or a twenty in the plate satisfies God, so that we can live as we please the rest of the week. Children see this and wonder, Where’s the reality? I suspect that God asks that too. We fail to understand that there’s no such thing as worship without personal, voluntary sacrifice; the greater the loss suffered, the more God is valued as worthy. Voluntarily suffering loss for God honors God. There’s no way to love God without sacrifice. All obedience to God’s will, to Jesus’ commands, in some way necessitates sacrifice. Why is this important? Because an unwillingness to make personal sacrifices means refusing to obey God. What results? The Spirit (if present) is quenched. So, failure.

The Son of God voluntarily suffered loss in coming to earth in a physical body, taking up a human nature, and then giving His life for sin. He sacrificed Himself out of love for the Father and love for God’s beloved human creatures. His obedience to God necessitated great personal sacrifice. God’s love *had* to be expressed in this way. Likewise, it’s our personal, voluntary sacrifices, however painful they may be, that express love and gratitude and worship and—indeed—our faith. There’s no other way to demonstrate a real, living faith to our kids and to the world. By imitating the Son, we reflect the glory of God. There’s no other way to glorify God. And we’ll do this . . . if we love God.

Let’s conclude: The great blessing to humanity that the Gospel makes available is the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower us to obey and live the Word. But that’s only if we *want* to obey Jesus, if we *want* to serve Him, to trust God in taking risks, indeed, to sacrifice self for Jesus’ sake and so to love others and to be mature. We have to want it! We have to desire God as the Psalmist did, **“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God”** (Psalm 42:1,2). May the Spirit of the Lord incite in us such love, such desire as this. For now and forever!