

Faith and Works XXXII

The Contemporary and Biblical Contexts

Col. 2:8

Focus

A candle is easily seen in the dark. Jesus is the light of the world, and though the darkness has not overcome it, yet now, Satan comes as an angle of light. It is not always so easy to focus on the light when there is no apparent darkness.

Anything that draws attention away from Christ by focusing on ourselves in the form of what we must do, rather than how to prepare good soil for the seed of the gospel will diminish or even nullify the power of the gospel. Fruit is a matter of how we receive and respond to the truth of the Gospel, that revelation of which is the treasure we hold in earthen vessels, the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

It is hard to keep the center of focus on Jesus when hearing a given message when two out of every three sentences contain the worlds "I" or "me", and the third sentence usually contains the word "you". The Gospel is about changed hearts that in turn bear the fruit of changed behavior, not first changing behavior in order to bear good fruit. We do not offer our fruit to God, but ourselves as a living willing sacrifice that we leave with Jesus Himself on the cross, that the life we live might rest wholly on the foundation of the new life offered in the risen Christ.

It is the root of the tree that determines its fruit. Christ is looking for fruit that will remain, not changed behavior or religious acts done as a role or performance or for the sake of appearance.

As soon as we measure faith by our circumstances we are looking at the physically visible which is temporal, perishing, and not the unseen through the eyes of our heart and spirit which is eternal.

2 Cor. 4:16-18 Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

The bronze snake that Moses lifted on a pole, even as Christ was to be lifted on the cross, was a sign of the death of that which was responsible for death. Paul asks in Romans chapter 7, "who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" He was ready to see that it was not the bad works outweighing the good works he had done, but by his very nature, born of the first Adam, he was a child of wrath and that by the works of the law no flesh would be justified.

Our focus should not be on doctrine as an object, but rather the object of the Gospel, Jesus Christ Himself. (Col. 3:1)

When the Gospel, or parts of the Gospel that have been mixed with other teachings or ideas, is packaged into a product that can then be used to repeatedly draw a supporting audience in order to sustain a typical commercial religious media enterprise or business, a vital ingredient will typically be missing from the message, and what is left in the message will draw attention to itself, those who are presenting it, and those who are receiving it.

"You search the scriptures", Jesus said, "because in them you think you will find methods to make your life a success both now and eternally", yet the scriptures, as Jesus pointed out, point to Himself, the Christ when the scriptures are understood in their own context. Yet Jesus said, people searching thus are unwilling to come to Him that they might be free of their heavy burdens and have eternal life.

Scriptures, doctrines and religious rituals were never intended to be the focus of our attention in themselves, anymore than focusing on a map is the same thing as traveling to a destination.

The ingredient typically missing is the heart of the Gospel, Jesus Himself. When He is the focus the Gospel message becomes simple enough for a child to understand. When religious teaching does not draw the focus on Christ and His finished work at the cross and at His resurrection, that is when other ingredients must be added to the message in order for man's participation in what was supposed to be an exclusive work of God accepted by faith, can be validated. The doctrine of Grace must be shifted around so that the focus is on man and what he can or must do in order to achieve eternal life or do the works of God, or even become as God.

Paul asked the Galatians, are you so foolish, having begun in the spirit are you now being perfected in the flesh? He reminded the Romans that by the works of the law no flesh would be justified. To the Colossians Paul wrote that religious teachings, even those that taught severe treatment of the body, were in reality of no real value against the flesh. That is because when the flesh and its actions, good or bad, become the foundation on which we are building, or when our works become the payment in a contract with God, the flesh is not left for dead on the cross of Christ, and the marriage to the first husband continues despite confessions of salvation and joy over the pardon of Grace for we are not abiding in Christ, not truly clothed with Him, an adulterer rather than the bride of Christ.

We are not sinners because we sin, we sin because we are sinners, and as the Bible teaches, we are born into a fallen race, by nature children of wrath. When we focus on the external, when our mind is focused on the flesh and we are our own foundation, and the clothing, our identity, is the sum total of our own works, and perhaps the self esteem we earn from those around us by meeting their standards of perfection and success, when we remain in that state or plain of existence and

awareness of ourselves, the death that has reigned since Adam is still our master and we remain debtors to the success or failure of our flesh.

When the emphasis of religious teaching is about what we must do to be saved, we do not believe on the one that God has sent in the way that the message of the complete Gospel intends, and instead the focus is on ourselves. Likewise, when we only focus on the love and forgiveness of God as a means of justifying our continued work of building on the old foundation, we are not abiding in Christ. To do so, to abide in Christ, requires a cross, not just for the judicial pardon of acts of sin that we have committed, but for the very essence of what we are by natural birth.

Salvation is not in ourselves. Our old nature is not to be redeemed, refurbished, or renovated. It is, figuratively speaking, to be left behind us; we are not to look back. The old nature is of no value to us as we are now in faith in Christ looking to a rock that is higher than ourselves and our ability, we now have a treasure in Christ worth holding at the cost of letting go of all that we once held dear.

We are admonished in scripture to count the cost before attempting to build. The old nature based on ourselves is to be discarded, disowned, no longer the foundation of what we are. It was our very nature that Christ took on the cross, and with Him it died there. Were we to die, the story would end at our death, with our souls locked eternally at enmity with God. But Jesus, being both man and God, rises from mortal death as a new unity between man and God, and as Col. 3:1 teaches, our focus for who we are is to be on Christ where He is and what He has done, not on ourselves and what we must do. Good works, fruit, is a response. We love because He first loved us. We forgive as we expect to be forgiven.

The Gospel calls us to make disciples of Christ, not followers of man or teachings that have an appearance of godliness in outward behavior modification and severe treatment of the body, such practices that in reality the Bible teaches have no value against the flesh. When the Word of God is clear, undiluted and sharp, then it can

cut between soul and spirit, bone and flesh, and the axe can be laid to the root of the tree. When the root is good, Jesus taught, so will be the fruit that is produced. When we focus on ourselves and not Christ, we become increasingly narcissistic and the Gospel is only sought in the context of keeping our first husband alive and content.

In some countries today there is severe persecution of those identifying themselves with Christ. His body must meet in secret whenever possible. The seed of the Gospel is often seen to be watered by the blood of those who overcome this life by the word of their testimony and that they do not love their lives in this world, not the things in it, even unto death. Their focus is on a heavenly kingdom, the kingdom of those who by new birth are joint heirs with the Son of God.

But the sad truth is that should Christian religion be approved and accepted by the culture, and adapted to that culture rather than changing the participants of that culture, it is then that the devil's tactics are surly seen to be the most successful not at preventing religion, but by making it in the image of man for man. For it is the nature of man to take comfort in circumstances, and to measure themselves by the external, by the approval of others, the surrounding culture. The focus soon becomes about who has the largest building, where are the crowds going and enjoying the most entertainment or having their expectations met. Soon the church organization is no longer the body of Christ, but is a business that must sustain itself by attracting supporters by catering to what is popular.

It is rare that those rich in this world's goods and satisfied with their standing before mortal man would then choose to leave all and focus on the treasures of Heaven, the inheritance offered in Christ. WE may need eye salve so that we may truly see what are the riches of His inheritance in the saints, those called according to His purpose.

We amuse ourselves by ourselves to convince ourselves that we are rich and in need of nothing. The Bible is often cannibalized and mixed with the worlds notions

of religion and spirituality so that man may assure himself that his dependence and security in himself is justified. If he can just know the right thing to do to get control of his circumstances and to achieve eternal life, he by nature, taking after his father in the fall, trusts in himself to do it, and would rather do so than surrender control to another.

In short, rather than a radical message to leave all, including the foundation of ourselves and follow Christ, being built on Him, the chief corner stone, the message we too often hear is one that says God really wants to join us in our quest to establish ourselves. All the difficult parts of the Gospel, that of being crucified with Him, abiding and clothed in Him are removed. Nothing to see here, move along, keep going down the broad path that so many now follow, and take comfort, surely the majority know best?

A typical message or teaching will rarely mention Jesus except as an example of what we are to do to emulate Him or learn to operate as He did, so the focus remains on ourselves. God is generically referred to, and the supposed rules or laws by which it is said He Himself operates have been left by Him, or are similarly available to us, so that we can become as Him, operating with His control over our reality. Some say He is refusing even to answer prayers, waiting for man to realize his own godhood.

And so our self esteem comes from the praise of one another rather than from God our creator, for that reflects the external. Our self esteem is carnally based on our acceptance by our peers based on the roles we successfully play before each other in the local religious or social community groupings. And our testimony concerns how our circumstances have become favorable due to our success in operating faith or spiritual principles or winning favor from God based on our works of righteousness by the law. People who are in comfort and ease who praise God for their circumstances are not the ones the world will inquire for the reason for the contentment they are experiencing, for all the gentiles seek these same things believing they will find contentment in meeting the debt to the flesh to bring it to

satisfaction. They too understand the peace and contentment that comes when we think we are rich and in need of nothing, and our flesh is satisfied with the things of this world.

No, the ones we will find strange, even alien to our normal way of living, and of whom we will inquire of the source of their peace even in the midst of tribulation, are those who can sing praises to God while chained in prison after being physically beaten and persecuted for the testimony of Christ. The ones who can say "death, where is thy sting, where is thy victory" who because of their faith in a God and a salvation and inheritance that even death itself cannot separate, can do all things in Christ, these are the ones the world will find peculiar. They have a peace that passes our normal understanding.

And so, we are not responding to the true message of the Gospel, we are not identifying ourselves crucified and risen with Him, instead we are identifying Christ with us, as an accessory to our continued lifestyle of being dependent and a debtor to our foundation, the flesh. The mind set on the flesh is death, even for those who are religious seeking to fulfill the requirements of the law, which indeed is necessary, for without Holiness, none shall see the Lord, for He is Holy.

If Jesus is presented and sought as merely a means to an end, and not the end, the alpha and omega, the way, truth and life, He will not be our primary focus, he will be in our side view mirrors as we travel toward our own goals. Until we come to the Biblical realization that the life we are seeking is not in ourselves, but in Him, we will never get beyond seeking Him for the loaves and the fishes, we will never know about the food He offers, Himself, that quenches that internal spiritual thirst for those truly hungering not for their own righteousness, but for God's righteousness that He offers us in Christ, freely calling us to the wedding supper of the lamb, on the condition that we come clothed not with ourselves and our works, which are at best but filthy rags, but with Christ.

The true spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus, and true faith in the revelation of Christ by the written word in the scriptures and the inner witness of the Holy Spirit with ours that we are indeed children of God in accordance with the law and the prophets. Only those so enabled and inclined will be those before whom the very gates of Hades, that place the devil sought to keep with himself those made in God's image in a place of separation from God, even the gates of Hades will not be able to remain shut. Those with true saving faith in Christ will overcome by the word of their testimony, that Jesus is the anointed one, the Lamb of God, the only begotten Son of God.

They know, as do all true believers, that though there be tribulation in this world, their faith in Christ has overcome the world, and that He is faithful and just, and will keep that which is committed to Him against that day when He Himself appears and all those who are spiritually clothed with Christ will be also physically transformed into His likeness. Even so, come, Lord Jesus, may you send laborers into the harvest, may you God our Father, stretch forth thy hand to heal and cause signs and wonders to be done in the name of thy servant Jesus.

We need to focus on the eternal unseen things, not the temporal external things that we perceive with our physical senses. We need to see ourselves, and help each other see themselves, complete in Christ, seated at the right hand of the Father along with Christ, joint heir with Him, through Him and in Him now not slaves earning a wage, but members of God's own household along with His precious Son.

We thus need to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author, prefector, and finisher of our faith. Even as Moses lifted the bronze serpent, so we need to lift Him up, to present not ourselves, but Christ, being not ashamed of the true Gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation for all who are begin saved.

It is when our hearts are stirred, not our pride or ego, that we begin to recognize that any teaching, ritual, or message that is not drawing our attention and focus to

Christ, is not good news, no matter how well intentions, no matter how practical for the sought after success in daily living or improving our appearance and esteem before men, no matter how well it satisfies our itching ears.

One can even see the trend away from what the doctrine of the Gospel points to, to a focus instead of on Christ Himself to man's own ego being assuaged by reiteration of doctrine as an object in itself, in the early writings of the Church fathers. The doctrine of Christ, the Gospel, is repeated as a correct theological formula and pattern of words lifted from the writings of the Apostles and the Bible. And yet though they seek to accurately repeat the correct words, one can see in their writings where they begin to lose the conviction, heart and spirit of the original writings as they continue to focus more on correct statements of doctrine rather than focusing on the object to which those doctrines point.

It is only in a living faith, a living relationship and reliance through the Holy Spirit on who we are in Christ, that the power of the cross, and the power of Christ's resurrection can bear fruit. We are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, it is there in the realm of our focus that we win or lose the war being constantly waged against the saints by the devil. Consider the focus of the following passages of scripture, and compare them to the current typically narcissistic messages of "me, myself and I" that seem so popular today.

John 15:1-8 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

Galatians 2:18-20 For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Colossians 3: 1-4 If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

Ephesians 3:14-21 For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height — to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.

Amen.