



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-11

APRIL 2015

A New Humanity

As the father came into the office, his eyes were red and his face ashen. "My son thinks he's gay. What should I do?" This was no moral or political issue for him. This was a Christian man shaken to his core. He wanted to know what hope, if any, the Christian message had for the son he loved dearly.

He is not alone. The social pundits can toss this moral football all over the field trying to make points with their particular constituencies, but for confused and hurting people, the question remains: Does the gospel of the Bible have an adequate answer?

Popular former pastor Rob Bell has been quoted as saying that we can't let 2000-year-old letters be the authority for our choices here. The "people's gospel" of contemporary culture declares that reality is determined by moral consensus, and that today's society is capable of being more right than the Bible.

However, one of those "2000-year-old letters" addresses the issues with great hope. My hope is that the controversy and pain associated with this issue will lead the church to reexamining the gospel we have believed, and hopefully rediscover the same one that captured and transformed

Paul. In his letter, Paul addressed the young Christian community in Corinth because they had questions about how the gospel of Jesus Christ affected the way they lived. Many had been involved in the moral escapades of Greek idolatry and sexual perversion, and some of them wanted to bring their old patterns with them into the new community of faith. Paul explains:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the

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name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

1 Corinthians 6:9–11 (ESV)

The obvious implication is that a drastic and positive change occurred in those who embraced the gospel Paul preached. What kind of change? Maybe a broader context will help.

The Genesis account tells how God created humanity with tremendous dignity. Mankind in his original state worshipped God as sovereign and good. He partnered with God in tending the creation and was grateful. He was biological but much more.

...why does the current **popular** gospel **fail to produce** the true **humanity** that Paul described?

When the humans chose to reject God's rule, their humanity was degraded. Instead of joyfully doing their work, they hid behind a bush, ashamed of who they were. Then their offspring began to practice behavior consistent with their degraded state. Refusing to name God alone as worthy to be worshipped, they began to misname everything else in creation. They classified the created as the creator, and exchanged truth for a lie. In this state of degradation, they misnamed and abused their distinctive sexual function. They behaved like biological beings without any sense of a greater purpose than pleasure and survival. Finally, they publicly approved the immoral and despised the moral, which

negatively affected every aspect of human life on earth. (This is covered in the first chapter of another one of the 2000-year-old letters, the one written to the church at Rome.) The promise of Paul's gospel is that God has acted in history to restore degraded and shameful humanity back to "normal" (his original intended design). He even declares that those in Christ are new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The testimony of transformation in those who embraced Paul's gospel raises a couple of questions in our context. First, why does the current popular gospel fail to produce the true humanity that Paul described? I believe there are at least six (6) evident reasons:

1. Today's popular gospel allows a form of living that does not require sharing the life of Christ. Humans were not designed to live only by values, rules, and principles. They were made to live a shared life with God himself. Moral living without a passionate love for God through Christ is dead in experience and powerless in its effect. If principled living could have restored humanity, the Law given to Moses would have been enough.
2. The popular gospel assumes that partial obedience is acceptable to God. Many are being exhorted to believe they are blessed because of their obedience. They are given principles to make life work and told to follow them with the promise that if they do, they will be blessed. But what human can always do the right

thing for the right reason, or even know what his or her motives are? All human obedience is partial. "Normal" (according to design) humanity loves God with ALL the heart, soul, body, and spirit. Who among us qualifies? Actually discovering that there are principles that govern created life on earth is just recognizing the covenant God made with Noah. Yes, life on earth works better when we follow the rhythms that God instituted to maintain and sustain the earth. That is low-level blessings, and has little to do with being restored to the dignity of Adam and Eve in the Garden. Degraded mankind can work the principles for a while, but ultimately, he will abuse them, and they will bring his destruction. Paul's gospel is the New Covenant where all blessings are in Christ Jesus alone. He is the only "normal" human, the only one who obeyed fully from the heart. He gets the blessing. Those who trust him only are given his blessings totally by his grace.

3. The popular gospel promotes progress as being sufficient for acceptance. The goal is being better. But better is not enough. Usually better means life is more controllable and with less pain. It is not expected that we could actually live for the glory of another. We are comforted by knowing that we have improved in some areas, even if we have trouble judging others who have not. Righteousness is God's goal. He makes us righteous in Christ so we can live righteously.
4. The popular gospel implies that God is partial to relatively good people. The Pharisees of Jesus' day certainly felt that way. They were better in their own eyes than those who did not practice the disciplines that they practiced. Again, Paul's letter to the Romans addresses this when he tells the moralists that they are not excused just because their sins are not to the degree of the heathen. They are judging sexual perversion while actually dipping into sexual misconduct themselves (Romans 2:1-11). They accuse the greedy while stealing a little themselves. Because judgment has not come upon them, they conclude that God approves of their hypocrisy, but actually it is God's kindness giving them time to repent. Paul reminds them that at God's judgment, the bar is perfection and every man will be judged accordingly. He goes on later to show that since no man can get past the bar, all have need of a savior. Jesus came as the representative, and not only was he vindicated as righteous, but he paid the debt of guilt for those in him. Since this is reality, God actually shows favor to the sinner. Only the sinner glorifies him by trusting him for what he has paid dearly to give.
5. The popular gospel settles for knowing the truth without doing it. The Jews made that mistake too. They were special and interpreted that as meaning they were exempt from actually living out the truth. They had been especially

avored by God to receive the Law of God in written form. Surely this made them better off than those poor nations who had no Law from God. However, they too are judged by obedience to the truth, not knowledge of it. Often today people feel that, because they know the Bible narrative and understand a Christian worldview, they are right and others are wrong. From God's perspective, only lived truth counts.

6. The popular gospel permits a religious life that is lived for one's own glory. Professing to represent Christ, people continue to treat their bodies and their neighbors as tools for their own purposes. Paul's gospel gathered people into a new community that lived for the purpose for which Jesus came to earth. Everything about their existence was to promote his honor. Paul argues that as long as we believe our bodies are ours to do with as we please, we will misuse them. The body of a human is part of his or her essence. It is important enough that God raised Jesus' body from the dead and promised that we too would be raised. It is not just a biological entity meant for our pleasure. It is for the honor of Jesus who purchased it. Sexuality is much more than biological. God designed it for "normal" humans to enjoy an uncommon union between male and female regulated by marriage and capable of reproducing. It is inconceivable to think of joining Jesus' body with prostitutes or any other form of sexual misuse. And for the

restored human, the body is a temple of God. One cannot expect to be free from immorality while still practicing any form of idolatry. Honoring God with the whole being is the only salvation from enslavement to substitutes.

The whole picture of **baptism signifies** the **washing away** of all **shame**. The **unclean** is made **clean** and **usable** again.

Second, why does the gospel expect believers to live righteously? It is obvious from reading, not only the 2000-year-old letters, but also the teaching of Jesus to his disciples, that Christians are expected to live lives that reflect the image of Jesus. (And that means more than a clumsy, mushy love that permits people to do whatever they desire.) Why? There are two reasons:

1. God, in Christ, addressed the root problem that causes humans to be unrighteous. He didn't just try to encourage us to do better. He didn't just threaten us if we didn't do better. He didn't promise us a prize if we would just do better. He dealt with both guilt and shame.

Guilt is the consciousness that we have done wrong. It includes the awareness that a debt is owed that we can't sufficiently pay. We have broken the rule and the relationship, and there is nothing we can do to repair them. Guilty people live under condemnation. No matter what good things they do, they can never catch

up on the payments. Jesus came to the guilty with forgiveness. It was costly. He paid the debt by becoming sin for us. The full wrath of God was released on him as our sin. He absorbed it all, and all the indictments against us were wiped out. Forgiven, we can come readily to him to acknowledge our need of grace. We bring our sins, our weaknesses, and our fears to him because we are forever forgiven. He doesn't have to die again each time we mess up. Guilt has been cut off at the root.

Shame is the awareness that we are wrong at the core. We are defiled, unworthy, and unclean. Defiled people practice defiling things. Once we had the dignity of "normal" humanity, partners with God in tending the earth. But that is a distant memory. We are biological creatures trying to gain some measure of honor back, but find ourselves slaves to the very desires we demanded freedom to satisfy. We build ourselves, boast of our exploits, relish our independence, and refuse to blush at our depravity. We defile everything we touch. We use people, abuse our appetites, and misuse our gifts. Food is for eating. Friends are for using. Sex is for personal pleasure. Money is for power. God is a crutch, and morality is a social construct of people who are not so liberated. But Jesus came to rid us of shame.

The dynamic of shame is depicted in the history of Israel by the categories of honor. The lowest level is "unclean." The next is "clean." After that there is "sanc-

tified." If something became "unclean," it was useless for its "normal" use. If a bowl had touched certain blood, it was useless for anything else until it was washed ritually. It was shunned. It was put aside. It was shamed.

There was a Syrian General who had leprosy, which was a disease of shame. Lepers were not allowed to mingle with normal people. They were put aside, shunned. A Jewish maiden told Naaman about a prophet in Israel who could cure him. When he arrived the prophet told him to dip in the Jordan River seven times. It was irrational because it was a muddy river, but when Naaman washed, his flesh was not only clean, but also like a new baby. It was a picture of the embarrassing grace that God bestows through his Son.

The whole picture of baptism signifies the washing away of all shame. The unclean is made clean and usable again. But there is more. He not only washed the unclean, but sanctified the new clean. It is beyond clean. It is no longer common. It is set aside for special use. It now has a role of honor. It reveals the wealth of its owner. Defiled sinners are made undefiled, and then they are made holy. They are the showpieces for the master. But that is not all. That which was unclean, but now has been washed and has been set aside for special use, is also justified. What does that mean in this context? At least it means that we have been set right with God the way humans were always intended to be. We

have been given the fellowship privileges of Jesus the Son. We are actually in a better state than Adam.

The famous story of the prodigal son reveals a lot about shame and God's attitude toward it. The young son shames his father by asking for his inheritance before the proper time. The father absorbs the shame, and the boy leaves. We can only imagine the rumors in the community about the father whose boy was off in the far country living shamefully. Shame-filled people do shameful things and end up in shameful situations. The Jewish boy ended up feeding swine, an unclean animal. In shame he determined to return to the father's house, not hoping to get his honor back, but to live in shame as a servant just to survive. When the father saw him, he endured the shame of running toward a defiled son (while the neighbors shook their heads) eager to cover his son's shame. He threw his own coat over him, put shoes on his feet and his ring on his finger, and to beat all, had a party to honor him. He demanded that the boy live as one washed, sanctified, and justified. He would not permit him to continue to live in any form of shame.

2. God refuses to settle for us living below our privilege. His love will not permit us to settle for loving something less than him and still be "normal." If we honor someone or something less than him, we will be less than human, less than satisfied. He is fully committed to our

living out what he has imparted to us. He won't hear of our guilty shameful excuses. The community that is created by the gospel refuses to let any member settle for less than God has provided. Those who slip or run into defiling ways must be confronted. They are too precious and their victory was too costly. There can be no sloppy tolerance for those who have been washed, sanctified, and justified.

The Christian gospel is truly good news. It declares that sin and Satan have not won the battle for the ones God created in honor. God offers his own life to those who want to be a new kind of human. The problem never has been primarily sexuality. It has always been idolatry. When that problem is fixed, all other issues are aligned. When we live for his honor, our dignity is restored. Without guilt and shame, we can live according to the purpose and design of our Creator.



P.O. Box 101
Euless, TX 76039
(817) 267-9224
Fax: (817) 354-5522
Email: Mail@KerygmaVentures.com
www.KerygmaVentures.com