

But seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6:33

You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.

Luke 16:15

For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

1 Peter 4:17

Anno Domini 2008: An Open Message to Pastors

Happy New Year in the name of the Lord Jesus! I pray this is a blessed one for you as you carry out the work of shepherding your particular flock, however big or small it may be. For as the Lord Himself said in His parables, the loss of even the least of his lambs is unacceptable in His sight; He will leave the 99 still with Him to find the one that is lost. And when He finds that one, He rejoices.

God uses the analogy of sheep and shepherds rather frequently. Detractors of Christianity also like to use the analogy to describe us as simple, unable to think for ourselves and easily led but God uses it to illustrate that people need Him. Even though He gave us dominion over all the Earth, we are still limited in our abilities. We are not strong enough to dominate nature (ask anyone who ever lived through a hurricane or tornado or weathered a severe storm at sea) and we certainly don't know enough about this world He created - and what makes it up - to manipulate it the way God can. The wisest person among us is the one who knows that he doesn't know everything and must turn to God in order to get through this life.

That knowledge is humbling yet liberating at the same time. Because when we yield ourselves to God, when we "get it" that He is in control of our lives, we are released from worrying about things that are really His concern and not ours. We learn not to think as the world does, but with the mind of Christ, whose concern is for souls to be won back to God. Yet, we do not do the actual "saving;" that is the job of the Holy Spirit. What we are called to be are witnesses to His life, death and resurrection, and to be His ambassadors, serving in His Name and in His authority, and doing what Jesus Himself did while He was among us.

Some of us have forgotten that little fact, and are presently striving to do a number of things that may not necessarily be what God intended for a church to do in an effort to make a name for ourselves and, by extension, Him

(yes, in *that* order). We have succumbed to the temptation to “package and promote” the Gospel in the same way we advertise soap and soft drinks. We have a “McDonald’s mentality;” remember when the burger joints actually kept track of how many people were served? (I believe they finally abandoned the practice when the number reached 99 billion.) We think that success is measured in numbers, so the more people we can pack into the church house to hear the message (and contribute to church operations), the better. So our churches become little better than “Holy malls,” complete with bookstores, coffee shops, Bible “action figures” and lines of clothing where recognizable brand names are “spun” to give them a Gospel twist. Instead of the church setting the bar for the world to see how we act and operate and desire what we have, the church is imitating the world in the hope that if we look enough *like* the world, we will not be rejected *by* the world for the moral demands God makes on our lives.

On the face of it, this is a poor policy because the Kingdom of God cannot be brought to Earth through human effort. Every time we try, the endeavor either runs out of gas or falls flat on its face, and is left by the wayside as another monument to human fallacy whose lessons people ignore as they rush toward the “next big idea.” But God can use this, however imperfect it may be, if the *message* given in the pulpit is *the* Gospel, and based firmly on the Scriptures.

Unfortunately, sometimes what is presented is not the Gospel, but philosophy, social engineering on *our* terms instead of God’s – that, presented with no pretense at all, no one would want anything to do with – moral laxity or outright greed with a heavy coat of selected Scripture passages to make it more palatable. This is not merely misrepresenting the Sovereign Lord Almighty; that’s bad enough. But what most people do not realize is the effect of such thinking leads to a focus away from God and the work of the Holy Spirit in people’s lives but to focusing on how clever we are; on the pastor instead of the pastor’s Boss. The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law of Moses operated in much the same way in Jesus’ day; demanding strict adherence to the Law as it was interpreted, but taking advantage of a number of “loopholes” to continue to live as they pleased. Jesus was especially hard on them for living off the backs of those who gave their money in obedience to the law:

Beware of the teachers of the Law. They like to dress in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ homes and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.

(Luke 20:46, 47)

Even today, because we are fallen creatures, without the clear guidance of the Holy Spirit, the natural outcome of such human-focused thinking is abuse of authority in a host of ways:

- In Atlanta, Georgia, the 80-year-old leader of a megachurch was at the center of a recent sex scandal where paternity tests indicated he fathered a child by his brother's wife; this apparently is not the first time this sort of thing has happened at this particular church, but the pastor is now accused of lying under oath – perjury – about the latest incident.
- In Tulsa, Oklahoma, Richard Roberts stepped down as president of Oral Roberts University after receiving a “no confidence” vote by its board of regents over allegations of lavish spending by his wife and himself.
- Six other televangelists now face investigation by the U.S. Senate (announced by Iowa Sen. Chuck Grassley) into accusations of lavish lifestyles on ministry donations.
- Here in San Antonio, two local pastors are under media scrutiny for questionable moral choices and using church funds for equally questionable spending.

And even in cases that don't make the news, there are situations that we all have seen where pastors are dressed in fine clothing or driving fancy cars while the church building falls apart around them. Or where services are either staged dramatic productions where worship is not a participatory event or chaotic, disordered “events” in the guise of “freedom in Christ” where the Holy Spirit does not reign. Either we have forgotten the lessons of PTL and Jimmy Swaggart some 20-odd years ago, or we learned nothing from them at all. But God has not forgotten. Those well-publicized scandals in the 1980s were a warning from Him to turn away from teaching that focuses on our desires instead of God's. While God is a patient teacher, He is also a persistent one. If we didn't get the lesson the first time, He will teach it to us again, and yet again – as many times as needed – until we finally “get it.”

And the reason He will repeat the lesson as often as necessary is that He dislikes being... misrepresented. God will always seek for His children to repent above all else, but if not, He will clean house.

The last passage of Scripture given at the beginning of this message often is viewed with foreboding by most believers at first; a kind of warning that God's got a “big stick” sitting next to His throne and is just *itching* for a chance to use it (possibly confusing God with the false god Zeus and his thunderbolts). And while God does discipline His children when needed, there is a positive aspect to the idea of judgment – you can *ask* Him to do it. Voluntarily. Let Him examine you (do a “diagnostic,” if you will, if I may use an electronics reference). Or, as King David put it,

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

(Psalm 139:23, 24)

If you as a minister or a pastor are using church money for “upgrades” on clothing, hotels, airplane seats and the like, or if you are using the very members who are entrusted to you for your own desires, if you are enriching yourself in any way from members who are giving themselves and their resources to God in all sincerity of faith or doing *anything* that you know, deep down, to be wrong and unworthy of His calling on your life –

STOP!

Stop *now*. Repent before Him and let Him cleanse you and be the pastor He called you to be. Whatever benefit you think you may be getting from what you do with God’s resources, God has far better things for you if you will let Him do what He desires; in some cases, things you cannot even possibly imagine. Things you probably would not believe even if He told you.

All of us are called to serve Him in one way or another. But those of us who are called to this type of ministry are held to far stricter standards, because we dare to say that God has called us and that God is right and the world is wrong. Am I advocating vows of poverty like some monastic orders? Not unless this is what God specifically called you to. Does God begrudge us good clothing, a decent vehicle to get around in or other modern conveniences or even (if you can find them anymore) wholesome forms of entertainment? Certainly not. But when we pursue these *things* instead of His Kingdom and His Righteousness, our focus is reversed. We cannot say the world as it stands is wrong and still try to be like it. We cannot execute the tasks God has given us with full confidence when our hearts do not fully trust Him to make us into what He wants us to be.

For those of you who are sold out to the Lord Jesus and earnestly striving to do His will in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit, my prayer for you is that God will bless you with a greater portion of His presence and that He would lift you up; not only in the presence of church members you have been entrusted with but in the presence of your enemies as well, be they open or secretive. But for all of us in this Year of our Lord 2008, I pray for greater conforming to God’s image of us. Because God is bringing Revival such as this world has not seen in a very long time. But this time, Revival will be run His way and for Him to receive glory and honor and praise for His works. We can submit ourselves to Him and be a part of the great work God is preparing, or we can go our own way and be left behind wondering why people are leaving our churches (as they are already beginning to do in ever-growing numbers) as they go to where God is doing His greater works.