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Connecting Broken People to the Love of Christ

ELYSE M. FITZPATRICK

and DENNIS E. JOHNSON

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Counsel from the Cross: Connecting Broken People to the Love of Christ

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To our children and their spouses,
Eric and Susanne, Christina and Julien,
Peter and Mandi, Laurie and Daniel,

*with the prayer that the Lord will continue to give them
grace and wisdom as they nurture our grandchildren from the cross.*

DENNIS

To pastor Mark Lauterbach and his wife, Rondi,
*with thanks for their friendship and for consistently
reminding me of our Savior.*

ELYSE

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Introduction

NINETEENTH-CENTURY Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield wrote:

There is nothing in us or done by us, at any stage of our earthly development, because of which we are acceptable to God. We must always be accepted for Christ's sake, or we cannot ever be accepted at all. . . . This is not true of us only when we believe. It is just as true after we have believed. It will continue to be true as long as we live. Our need of Christ does not cease with our believing; nor does the nature of our relation to Him or to God through Him ever alter, no matter what our attainments in Christian graces or our achievements in behavior may be. It is always on His "blood and righteousness" alone that we can rest.¹

What did you think when you read the preceding quotation? Let us suggest a couple of possibilities. Did you think, "Of course I believe that it's only because of Christ that I'm accepted! Why bring that up again?" Or perhaps you think, "Yes, justification is wonderful. But I'm looking for a book about sanctification. Perhaps this isn't the right one for me." There's even a possibility that you were a little uncomfortable about the words "blood and righteousness," and you're wondering what they have to do with the brokenness you are feeling today.

In this book, we have collaborated to bring you a book that will take the truth of our acceptance before God by Christ's righteousness alone and make it practical as you live your everyday life. We know that there are already literally thousands of books on counseling topics, so why write another one? Is there anything to say that

hasn't been said countless times over? Why talk about the gospel again when what people need is concrete advice for living? There are several reasons.

First, many Christians love Jesus and the gospel but just don't know how his incarnation, sinless life, substitutionary death, bodily resurrection, ascension, and reign ought to impact them in the "real world." When I (Elyse) asked a friend of mine how the resurrection should impact troubles she was facing, she replied, "I suppose that it should but I just don't know how." We've written this book for everyone who can echo that thought, for those who say, "We know that Jesus should matter more than he does; we just don't know how to make that happen."

Some of you are feeling weak and broken right now and you are wondering if what you need will indeed be found in hearing the gospel message again. We can tell you with greatest assurance that the answer is a resounding yes! Everything we need is found in Jesus Christ, in some aspect of grace or beauty or suffering or glory that he demonstrates for us.

"But," you might be thinking, "I've heard that message before, and I'm still struggling." Yes, perhaps you have heard and believed the message before, but can you tell us how his ascension thrills and comforts you right now? If you can't answer that question, don't be discouraged. Most of us have never even considered it. But there is great hope in the ascension, and we will show you why.

Second, we focus on gospel truths for the sake of Christians involved in helping ministries who want to see how the Bible and, in particular, the gospel of Jesus Christ can help others who are suffering. For instance, does the Bible address the blight of pornography or the darkness of depression? If so, how? Does the gospel speak to men and women with broken hearts and broken marriages? What does Jesus' sinless life mean when your friend discovers that her husband has filed for divorce?

Third, restating gospel truth is vital for brothers and sisters who identify themselves as "biblical" counselors and who are already

Introduction

convinced of the sufficiency of Scripture to answer life's problems. To these dear friends we are issuing a gentle call to remember Jesus and the declarations of the gospel. Biblical counselors have fought a long and difficult battle to call the church back to her confidence in the Word of God in order to effect change in the lives of God's people. This is a great good. But in our desire to bring Scripture to our friends and counselees, have we overemphasized the imperatives or obligations of Scripture but neglected the declarations or indicatives? This is a question every biblical counselor should ask himself or herself. Only you know if, in your desire to help others grow in godliness, you have left Jesus behind.

And finally, we tread again the ancient gospel paths as a gift for all believers who love their Savior and want to spend time savoring him. Many of us are so caught up living the Christian life that we are in need of a little visit with him. So here you are. Go ahead; remember how much he loves you.

CHAPTER ONE

What Do You See?

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.

Ephesians 5:1



I (ELYSE) HAVE LIVED less than a quarter of a mile from Interstate 15, one of the busiest freeways in California, for about eight years now, and because of that I've had firsthand experience with what is commonly referred to as "white noise." Although this busy freeway is so very nearby, I'm rarely aware of it; its persistent hum has become background noise to me. Of course, if there is a semi rolling down the stretch near my home and the driver lets his foot off the accelerator, I'll hear the popping of his engine, but generally speaking I don't even know that the freeway is there. It has become white noise, and I'm glad that my brain tunes it out, because at my age I don't need any more distractions.

While I am thankful for this innate ability to ignore unimportant, repetitive sound, I'm afraid that we don't do a very good job differentiating between what we need to pay attention to and what can be safely ignored. To be more specific, I fear that familiarity with certain biblical concepts is liable to make them seem insignificant to us. I'm afraid that we unintentionally strip certain concepts of importance and prominence and relegate them to the category of white noise—we recognize they are there, but we just don't pay much attention to them.

WHAT ARE YOU AWARE OF?

Please look again at the verse with which I opened this chapter, Ephesians 5:1. Now, let me ask you a question: What do you see? When you read those eight words, what were you most impressed by? Close your eyes for a moment and try to recall its message.

If you are familiar with the New Testament, you might have recognized the passage and were probably most aware of the command to imitate God, both because a command to imitate God is astonishing and because it's not something most of us would think we have mastered. Of course, we realize that there are other words in the verse—"therefore" and "as beloved children"—but because we think we have already understood or mastered the truth that God forgave us (4:32, to which "therefore" points), and that we are his beloved children, we gloss over them. The "therefore" and "as beloved children" are white noise to our spiritual ears. We filter these words out; they have become irrelevant. And when that happens, it changes the message of the verse and, ultimately, of the entire Bible.

When all we see in Ephesians 5:1 is the command to imitate God, our thoughts will turn inward onto ourselves, our efforts, and our record. If we fancy ourselves serious Christians and all we see in this verse is our duty, then we will probably spend a few moments thinking that we need to be more conscientious about obedience. *Oh, yes, yes, I can see that I need to try harder at imitating God.* Or, if we are painfully aware of our ongoing failure to be godly, despair will flood our hearts and we will feel confused and overwhelmed by such a command. *Imitate God? How could I ever possibly do that? I'm already such a failure!* However, if you are someone who helps others apply Scripture to their lives, you might immediately think, "Now, there's a verse I could use with so-and-so!" thereby deflecting the command off of yourself.

You see, if certain concepts in Scripture have become white noise to us, it will be all too easy to read a verse like Ephesians 5:1 and see only its obligations. I, too, can see myself using the verse to

develop a list of the attributes of God and then making a plan to implement those attributes in my daily life. *God is holy, merciful, righteous and just. This month I will concentrate on being holy. I'll research what it means and then I'll try to implement it in my life. Next month I'll . . .* Because I'm like you, if you asked me what I saw in that verse I would tell you, "We're called to imitate God."

Our propensity to disregard the familiar can be so very detrimental to our faith. When the rest of the verse, "therefore" and "as beloved children," has become white noise to our spiritual ears, we will quickly gloss over it without stopping to consider why it's there or what it's meant to tell us. We won't think to ask why the Holy Spirit positioned such a daunting command in the context of such familiar words. Instead, we will be quick to strip out the familiar and boil down Scripture to a tidy little take-away list of do's and don'ts.

What actually gets relegated to this position of irrelevance is nothing less than the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, nothing less than Jesus' accomplishments through his incarnation, sinless life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Because we are so familiar with the gospel message, it gets shoved to the periphery of our spiritual consciousness and becomes nothing more than words to be remembered at Christmas and Easter. The truths represented by "therefore" and "as beloved children" are like the constant din of the Interstate 15—unless someone draws your attention to them, they just don't register.

When we lose those truths, what takes center stage in our awareness? We do, of course. When we lose the centrality of the cross, Christianity morphs into a religion of self-improvement and becomes about us, about our accomplishments, and about getting our act together. We become people who ask WWJD (What *would* Jesus do?)¹ without ever considering the gospel or WDJD (What *did* Jesus do?). Although most of us recognize that Jesus' work is somehow tied to our work, we don't know quite how or why. For instance, if I asked you how the ascension informs and impacts your life today, would you be able to tell me?

To illustrate how detrimental it is to push gospel declarations out to the margins of our awareness, let's see what "therefore" and "as beloved children" from Ephesians 5:1 tell us.

YOU ARE FORGIVEN

Ephesians 4:32, the verse that immediately precedes Ephesians 5:1, reminds us of a wonderful truth: *God in Christ has forgiven us*. When Paul commands Christians to imitate God, he does so in light of a very specific divine action: "God in Christ forgave you." What he is saying is this: *because* you have already been forgiven, you can and should imitate God. *Because* God has already declared that he will not hold your sins against you, you can adopt this attitude of grace with others. That's why Ephesians 5:1 begins with "therefore": "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children." The "therefore" is a gospel declaration, meant to comfort, encourage, and inform you *before* you get to the gospel obligation, "be imitators of God."

You might be wondering why it is so important to hear yet again what Jesus has already done. After all, haven't we heard that message before? Why would we need to hear it again? We need to hear it again because if we have forgotten his work on our behalf, it will skew the way we think of him, the way we think of ourselves, and the way we think of others. In addition, we will miss the emphasis on imitating God's forgiveness that this verse is meant to communicate, not just a generic imitation of Godlike qualities but a specific imitation of his forgiveness.

HOW WE THINK OF HIM

If we forget God's generous, overwhelming grace in forgiving us, we will think of him as a "hard man, reaping where [he] did not sow, and gathering where [he] scattered no seed" (Matt. 25:24). We will have low thoughts of him. We will see him as a harsh taskmaster, exacting rigorous, impossible obedience from us and being disappointed and angry with us when we (predictably) fail to meet his expectations. We will assume that God continues to hold our sins

against us and that he is tallying up all the ways in which we fail. When we fail to savor his astonishing mercy, he will morph into a satanic caricature in our minds, a Pharaoh, demanding that we make bricks without straw. In response, we will be bound to hide our talent in the ground for fear of greater failure or harsher rebuke and then grudgingly return it to him when we have to (Matt. 25:25).

HOW WE THINK OF OURSELVES

If we forget that we are forgiven by God because of his Son's sacrifice, we will see ourselves as slaves trying to earn his goodwill and make up for past miscues rather than as forgiven children. We will be afraid to try to obey because we know we are bound to fail. If God is like Pharaoh, he won't be touched by our halting efforts at obedience. We will be afraid to persevere because we'll know that we are doomed from the start. Why bother trying? We will be void of the love for him that is meant to motivate and fuel all our attempts at obedience. We will become lazy, unbelieving servants (Matt. 25:26).

HOW WE THINK OF OTHERS

If in our sight God becomes a caricature of Pharaoh, then our brothers and sisters in Christ are nothing more than fellow slaves who had better pull their weight. If God seems harsh and demanding, unforgiving and exacting, then that is exactly how we will treat others. Forgive them for sinning against us? Well, maybe, but only after we've gotten our pound of flesh, and they have proven that they are really sorry and have really changed. Why would we be generous toward them when God has been so demanding of us?

When we forget about God's lavish forgiveness, we will hate our Master, and we will oppress our fellow slaves. After all, it certainly wouldn't be right for them to get away without meeting Pharaoh's quota like we have to! We will demand strict obedience without forgiveness because that's what we imagine God has demanded from us. Forgetting that we are already forgiven will rob us of

those Christlike qualities of kindness, generosity, gentleness, and longsuffering. It will also rob us of the only acceptable motive for obedience: love. The gospel declaration embodied in the “therefore” makes all the difference in the world.

YOU ARE BELOVED

After reminding us of God’s mercy and forgiveness, Paul writes that we are to imitate God as *beloved children*. It is important that we remember that we are beloved children because beloved children function differently from houseguests or foster kids. Although guests or foster children may be welcomed into a family home for a time, everyone knows that they aren’t really part of that family. A guest or foster child knows that he doesn’t have the same access, inheritance, freedom, or assurance that a son or daughter has. He can’t just run and jump on the father’s lap and kiss his cheek and ask for treats. He knows that his position is tenuous and can change at any moment. He knows that he has to earn love and a place in the home.

God’s disposition toward us is entirely different because we are beloved. He isn’t simply tolerating us, regretting that he opened the door to the likes of us. No, we’re *beloved*. This is the same word that the Father employed to describe his disposition to his Son; he referred to him as beloved or as his Beloved (see Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Eph. 1:6), and because of Christ’s work on our behalf, so are we. Jesus himself said that his Father loves his people as he loves his Son (John 17:23). This is an astonishing truth. You are his beloved. *Beloved* is what your heavenly Father thinks of you. Does that make you want to be near him, to learn of him, and to be like him? Of course it does. If you are in Christ, he calls you his beloved.

Not only are we beloved, but we are also beloved children. All Christians have been irrevocably adopted and given full rights as God’s sons. (In the grace of Christ, both women and men enjoy the privileged status of sons.) All the riches of grace and blessings of relationship with him are ours now; all that he has is ours by inheri-

tance. We can rest securely knowing that he won't ever abandon us. He is a good and faithful Father. He is devoted to our soul's safety and complete sanctification. Because he has adopted us and made us his children, he is determined that we *will* be like him. We are his children; we will ultimately resemble him. He is shaping us into his image (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 4:24).

In light of these blessed declarations, we can boldly pursue godliness. His Spirit is in us, and he has guaranteed our eventual transformation. Because of the Son's ongoing incarnation and the indwelling of his Spirit, we are "bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh." The Son has been made like us; we are being made like him. He is the firstborn among many brothers. We are family!

HOW COULD THESE TRUTHS BECOME WHITE NOISE?

If Christianity is about Christ, how does it happen that he becomes marginalized in our daily lives? How do the truths of the gospel become nothing more than insignificant white noise? Why does John 3:16 bore us? It bores us for at least two reasons, one more insidious than the other.

We naïvely press the gospel out to the margins of our faith because we have never really been taught how it's meant to connect with our daily lives. One day I had a conversation with a dear friend who told me about struggles she was having in a relationship. I asked her, "How do you think the resurrection impacts this circumstance?"

She replied, "I know that it should but I just don't know how."

I think that we all have a sneaking suspicion that the truths of the gospel ought to mean something more to us than they do, but we don't know how to make those connections. Yes, the incarnation, perfections, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ ought to have a practical impact on our daily walk, but just how those dots connect isn't really clear.

More insidiously, I think that we relegate the gospel to the back of our religious bus because, although we may admit our spiritual