

“God is Faithful”

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

I begin yet again by putting Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in the context of the first century and then what it means for us today.

“When one thinks of Rome, one thinks of the undisputed power of Claudius and Nero. The twin towers of opposition to any idea promoting any authority other than Rome. If you have seen Gladiator 2, one thinks of the foothills and the giant legions; that imperial capital, waiting to seize lesser military powers around the world. It was a powerful, prideful city. The intelligentsia of the day lived and breathed in Rome. Rome was the world’s capital. So much to be proud about in Rome, as the economic and political and influential supercenter of the then-know world”. The U.S. is the modern-day Rome, the economic and political supercenter of the world. And we are headed in the same direction.

Paul-born as Saul- was a product of this glorious empire. An “intellectual powerhouse,” Saul “Attended the universities in Tarsus, sat at the feet of one of the most prolific rabbis of the then-known world.” The young man observed the religious customs of his Jewish people, but he was nationally Roman. Saul earned respect in both worlds, so much so that the Pharisees-the Jewish religious elite-authorized him to oversee the persecution of the Christians.

But then something happened. After supervising the murder of an outspoken Christian named Stephen, and setting off to Damascus to round up more heretics like him. Saul was suddenly blinded. “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” came a voice from heaven.

“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”.

The New Testament records few moments more consequential than this one. Soon, Saul's sight is restored. His name is changed to Paul. And he begins traveling throughout the Roman Empire – visiting the same places, according to the Book of Acts, where he had been “breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples” – spreading the very message he'd formerly been oppressing.

Sometime later, in his letter to the early church in Rome, Paul wrote something that is one of the most absurd sentences in the Bible. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel”, Paul wrote, “because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.”

It was absurd because Paul had every reason to feel ashamed.

“What kind of man with this pedigree would claim saving power in a man called Jesus?”
“No self-respecting Pharisee would look at a man hanging on a tree and consider him to be the savior of the world. No judge of popularity trying to win the masses would affiliate himself or herself with such an unpopular message.”

History would agree. The emperor Nero, who infamously scape-goated Christians for the burning of Rome, set the precedent for centuries of imperial persecution. He murdered the followers of Jesus en-masse: beheading, crucifixions, death by lion, and other public displays of savagery. It was during Nero's reign that Paul traversed the empire, preaching that a carpenter's son from rural Galilee had established a kingdom that surpassed anything Rome could ever hope to be.

Paul paid the price for renouncing his allegiance to the rulers of this world. After years of being beaten, tortured, imprisoned, and placed under house arrest, he was executed by the state of Rome.

And he wasn't the only one.

Consider the case of Peter, the right-hand disciple of Jesus. In his first epistle, Peter writes from Rome to the Christians in Asia Minor – modern-day Turkey – who were suffering for their faith. He beseeches them to rejoice in their torment. Peter teaches them that suffering brings us closer to Jesus; that to suffer is to be cleansed by a refining “fire” that rids Christians of the impulses, attitudes, identities they once possessed.

After comforting these early Christians, Peter admonishes them not to allow this persecution to change the way they witness to the world. Specifically, he tells them to show goodness to the very people who are persecuting them.

First Peter, chapter three: “Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

Peter, in his letter, stopped to recite a Psalm: “Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

Pastor Laurel Bunker asks, “If the evil comes from us, what shall we do?”

She writes about the world's vanishing confidence in the Church. The public hasn't turned against Christians because they act better than the rest of the world. The public has turned against Christians because they act *worse* than the rest of the world.

She argues that much of this bad behavior can be traced back to the Christian victimhood complex, which causes some believers to lash out against enemies real and imagined. Such behavior defies the words of Peter, and the very instruction of Jesus, who famously stated: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemies.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Bunker admits to being the worst offender.

“The reality is, I have messed up. I’ve taken the bait of social media with family. My husband and I are surrounded by family members who are not saved.” Bunker said. “We’ve been excluded. We’ve been ostracized. We’ve been talked about. It hurts. It’s hard. It’s frustrating. Sometimes you want to lose your mind.”

She recounts a particularly tense Facebook argument with her brother. After she’d typed out a long, spiteful message, Bunker said, her husband stepped into the room. He asked her to delete it and get off the computer. “As I sat there and cried, God said to me, through His Holy Spirit, ‘You’re not angry because he rejected me. You’re angry because he rejected you.’” “And I was embarrassed. Because it was true.”

Bunker notes that God doesn’t simply treat sinners with grace; He commands *us* to do the same. Showing grace, she said, is easy when you’re winning. It’s much harder when you’re losing. Paraphrasing Martin Luther – “One plus God is a majority” – Bunker argues that promoting unconditional grace is the defining challenge of the church today.

“We’ve got to remember there is nothing too hard for God,” she writes. “If you’re sitting here, in your right mind, you’re a walking miracle. You weren’t too hard for God – with your messed-up, jacked-up self. So, listen, make a little room for a child of God.

Make a little room for a misfit. Make a little room for that single mother . . . Make a little room for that kid who is mentally burdened with their sexuality. Because here's the reality; we can be mad all we want, at the quote-unquote liberal agenda, but unless the people of the gospel have a better way, we have nothing to talk about."

The next generation of would-be believers, Bunker warns, is watching us. "They want to know if we love Jesus first" – more than money, more than social status, more than a political party, more than a country.

"The work of the kingdom can't be hit-and-run evangelism," she writes. If Christians want to win souls for Jesus, they can start by showing grace to those who don't deserve it; by showing kindness to the culture; by seeing in everyone, especially our enemies, "the image and likeness of God". None of this can be accomplished with a mentality of fear.

"Jesus knows something about being in an opposing place with opposing forces. He used twelve weirdos to turn the world upside down I think He can certainly use a few of us weirdos.

"The Black kids of the city of East Cleveland, the gay kid who struggles with suicidal ideation; the single mothers; the prostitutes; the broken of society. The only way they will know is if we go." "They are not going to come to us. They don't care about our bell towers. They want to know, is my life redeemable? Does my life have purpose?"

In certain points in history, fractures in society have made the Church stronger.

Think back to the 1960s and early 1970s. There was "division all around us when I was growing up.

The assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert F. Kennedy and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.; the Kent State shooting and deadly rioting in cities nationwide; the Watergate break-in and the bloodshed of Vietnam; the drug-culture explosion and pornography epidemic.

Today is a different story. The fractures in society are making the Church weaker.

Pastor Ed Setzer writes about what needs to be purged from the church starting with the nastiness. The love of a merciful God “is not what we’re known for,” he writes, but it could be again if Christians would check themselves. Stetzer was writing an obvious truth. This idea that the church’s unpopularity has nothing to do with its ugly behavior, simply does not pass the smell test.

“Here’s the reality. The last few years, I and many others have expressed concern that people of God seem to be radiating something other than the gospel in too many places in too many ways,” Stetzer writes. “I believe we’ve got to call God’s people back to radiating the beauty of the gospel.”

As I read these 2 pastor’s sermons, there was a common theme. Christians need to stop talking about Christianity and start practicing Christianity. Key to that practice is discipling. In Christian vernacular *discipling* means more than the dictionary definition (“to convert into a disciple”). It is an aggressive, active verb. It refers to instruction-specifically, the teaching of challenging and problematic truths.

Bunker wasn’t wrong when she called Jesus’ disciples “twelve weirdos”. They were all an eclectic and unqualified bunch. There were fishermen and small-time merchants, a tax collector and a political activist.

While following Jesus on His three-year journey of ministry, the disciples were repeatedly, and often comically, oblivious to His teachings. Jesus loved them, but he did not treat them like infants. Time and again, when His disciples got something wrong – or even when they simply showed human weakness – Jesus rebuked them. He chided them for being faithless. He censured them for their vanity and bigotry and prejudice. He criticized them for not grasping His instruction.

This is what discipling looks like. And this is what's absent inside much of the American Church.

I get so frustrated when parents won't bring their children to Sunday School or confirmation classes. It's a catechism problem. It's a formation problem, a discipleship problem. We are supposed to have some knowledge of the Bible, but many of us don't. "The genius of the church is the breadth of it. The hazard is the lack of depth. Many of us are just not going deep enough.

When Christians are discipled primarily by society, inevitably we look to scripture for affirmation of our habits and behaviors and political views. "But if the Bible is the word of God, then God ought to be interrogating those things. That's why Jesus came: to fix our vertical relationship with God". "He wants our whole life. He wants to transform who we are".

1 Corinthians 10:12-13 . . . ¹²So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. ¹³No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

May the peace of God . . . #328 Restore in Us, O God