

God Alone

[Ps. 62: 5-12; 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31; Mark 1: 14-20

Modern theologian and teacher Paul Tillich, whose book The Courage to Be influenced mainstream American Christianity in the mid-twentieth century, was unfaithful to his wives, had a number of mistresses, and even dedicated a book both to his wife and his mistress. The Rev. Jesse Jackson, who volunteered to counsel President Bill Clinton after the scandal of Clinton's liaison with a young staffer, did so at a time when one of his own young staffers was carrying Jackson's child. Even William Sloane Coffin, who was genuinely concerned to offer scriptural counsel to young persons trying to make sense of intimate human relations, managed to end up twice divorced and thrice married.

Now, it is not unusual for people to have complicated personal lives, but religious teachers like the ones named above and like Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and Jimmy Swaggert end up scrutinized because they have their livings, in part, from denouncing the moral failures of their times. A lot of people become addicted to painkillers, but it makes the papers when one of them has been a stern critic of persons involved in drug abuse. An anti-gambling preacher had to give up his investment in a thoroughbred race horse when his partial ownership of the horse became known.

It makes me uncomfortable talking about these instances of what many regard as hypocrisy because pointing out other people's sins is discouraged by Jesus Christ, for one thing-- we are supposed to remove the big piece of wood in our own eye before trying to address the speck in another person's eye-- and for another, at least some of these persons who appeared self-righteous were brought down by fellow hypocrites they had exposed. All of them had their failings publicized because they were public figures whose role required them to speak against lax values, and every preacher is in the same circumstance.

There's two ways to respond to these things, and that's the reason I am speaking about them. The first is to tell ourselves, "Look, these people say others have to lead moral lives but they can't do it themselves! How dare they set themselves up as critics of anybody else!" The next step from that often is to tell ourselves that nobody can lead a righteous life or should be expected to do so, that every one has his or her little vice, and that society's teaching against misbehavior always is a kind of hypocrisy.

When we respond to the failings of well-known persons that way, we are making it easier on ourselves. We presume that persons noted for their moral pronouncements and paid well to make them should have an easier time being good than we do, when the the Bible should make us expect that pride goes before a fall, and we know from the newspapers that the experience of the prosperous and privileged is that wealth and fame

make it at least as easy to go wrong as to do right.

I suspect that those who please the public by pronouncing indignation are doing what most people recognize as theater, that it is not always the inevitable outrage of a good and innocent soul betrayed by others' perfidy, but that it simply is a way for persons who want to make some sins worse than others to feel justified in belittling philosophical or political opponents. That, in turn, has its cheering sections among the public at large. We know this really is how it is because it almost never happens that such figures are disgraced and retire from public life. Those who have admired them make excuses for them, because they want them back expressing their distaste for whatever it is that irks them.

We are drawing not only a dangerous lesson from focusing on the hypocrisy of prominent preachers, but the wrong lesson. We shouldn't look at them as phonies pretending to be good and making chumps out of the sincere little people who look up to them. We should think about them as human beings prone to the same weakness, selfishness, appetitiveness and folly as ourselves. We should recognize that the real moral lesson to be drawn from misbehaving ministers is not the impossibility of being good, but the universal nature of the temptation to do wrong. We may resent the millions of dollars spent by Bakker or envy, perhaps, the celebrity of Jackson, but we should factor those things out when we learn they aren't as good as we would wish, and try to see their actions not in public terms or political terms, but as the actions of mortals like ourselves.

It is ourselves, after all, over whom we have some control. It is our lives which will gain by the ability to act wisely and suffer from excesses or misdeeds. Other people's missteps should earn our pity as much as our scorn, and remind us that the path of life can trip anyone up. The person whose path we should watch is our own, so that we ourselves don't go wrong.

When Jesus calls his first disciples they respond to him right away, and part of that must result from their eagerness to escape a world of moral messiness and compromised intentions. They have a chance to be holy, to be with a wise teacher who will help them live more successfully for God.

We know from the pride and prominence of the Pharisees that leading Godly lives is a big deal in first-century Galilee and Judea. People would jump at an opportunity to have a good conscience before God the way that people now would grab at a chance to make easy money. Even ordinary people, the kind the Pharisees didn't see as likely candidates for religious success, understand that godliness is life's greatest aim.

Those who respond to Jesus' invitation to be disciples feel that way. They also know themselves to live in a disappointing time, a time when their own leaders have sold out to the power and persuasiveness of a foreign culture, and foreign rule. Jesus promises them integrity in a world in which people seemed doomed to bear the stain of collaboration with the enemy or the moral cost of violent opposition. It is a society of anger and anxiety, manipulated by leaders on all sides for their own advancement, and costing the most to the

masses whose daily labor fills the tax coffers both for Pontius Pilate and for the administration of the Temple.

The Pharisees try to offer a way out through religious scrupulousness, but there is something selfish and unsympathetic in their approach, and Jesus rejects it. He offers a different path, one which the disciples never wholly understand until it all is over. At that point the resurrected Christ reveals himself, and proves that all the time he'd been living for an invisible God and trusting in power beyond this world and life beyond this world, he'd been right. There is a God after all, and it makes sense, after all, to live for God even in the midst of a world gone wrong, even in a world hostile to compassion, cynical about forgiveness, and contemptuous of gentleness.

Paul writes to the Corinthian church a generation after the resurrection, and with the constant memory of having been persuaded by an overwhelming experience of the living Christ. He knows that this present world is a passing thing, often a false and disappointing thing, but that behind it lies a world of beauty and power and justice and love. That sounds too good to be true in the first century, but Paul knows it is true. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth have established it. Paul's task, once he knows that, is to share the good news with everyone who will listen to him.

So churches spring up, like the one in Corinth. People who were leading their own little lives of struggling daily to keep themselves alive and out of trouble in a selfish and heartless world now have hope. They accept the gospel with enthusiasm. They don't, however, manage to get either the head part or the heart part of Christianity right immediately. They're like the disciples Jesus calls in Galilee, who respond right away but take the whole gospel to begin to catch on.

Paul writes to the Corinthians to set them straight. Some of that is scolding and some of that is suggesting, and in today's scripture he's suggesting. How can they live in this world the right way? They can live in this world as though the values and attachments of this world have no meaning. Paul isn't telling them to become irresponsible--he's telling them deliberately to conceive themselves as responsible to heaven. That includes loving the people to whom one has obligations, and even loving people one doesn't owe a thing. It's a more responsible life than the one the world asks of one.

Can that advice still help would-be followers of Christ? Can we accept the idea that we always live in suspense, never wholly leaning on the things of this world, always trusting that there is something more to who we are and what we can expect? Can we reject the temptation to believe that if we don't take care of ourselves, nobody else will, and be freed from that fear to live gratefully and compassionately? Can we echo the Psalmist, that God alone is our hope, our salvation, and our fortress? Can we count each day on God as our refuge, recognize this world for what it is, and say, "steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord," and so live our days that we are at peace with the last line of Psalm 62, which praises God and says to God, "for you repay to all according to their work."?

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