



Be Careful How You Live

1 Kings 3:3-14; Psalm 34:1-18; John 6:43-58; Eph 5:15-20

Baptists cut our eye-teeth on concerns of personal conversion. We stood for principles of the individual's right and responsibility to come before God without dependence upon an institutional church. We understood that we are to stand individually before God to give account of our lives before the Almighty. We grasped that there will be no one to mediate that accounting, but we are to face the throne of heaven alone. It was a marked distinction from the standard theology of the day in the 1600's and 1700's. The Catholic Church declared that it alone held the keys to heaven. The Church of England made the same claim of authority over the individual. We were right in our stance, but sometimes there is a need to recover from such a driven focus. If we are not careful, the good principles on which we build our lives and theologies become excessive preoccupations and steer us away from the solid foundation on which we began.

Surely, you also have heard the gospel message reduced to a single moment in one's life. We have heard such on television and perhaps in church or at funeral services, as well. Since the days of the revival movement sweeping the US in the Great Awakening, we have been tempted to reduce the gospel of Jesus Christ down to one single identifiable event in time—a moment in which one gives allegiance to Jesus as Lord and Savior. It makes for an easy presentation. It makes for an easy system to count conversions and assure ourselves we are doing our part in evangelism. It also makes it easy to speak of our prized Baptist doctrine we call the "Security of the Believer." It doesn't mean we have done a good job in our summary.

There is much more to the gospel than a decision made in one singular moment in time. There is something more regarding a lifetime's standing alongside that singular decision. It is what we call discipleship. It may indeed have an identifiable beginning point, yet discipleship is much more than one prayer and statement of conversion. It is more than following with a submersion in water we identify as baptism. It includes the commitment of one's life through a lifetime of service and submission to God.

The Bible is filled with stories of people who made decisions, good and bad. Some began on a good footing they later abandoned. Some stories begin with a character opposed to God's plans who later accepts the higher order of God's direction. Some made good decisions, faced moments of crisis, and returned to a relationship of submission and trust in *Yahweh*. Most are simply a mixed bag. All are found in need of divine grace.

Solomon's story begins on a decent footing. There is some passing critique of his character in relation to God in today's passage, but he begins on the right foot. He comes to a recognized altar to make sacrifices, apparently hoping to incubate a revelatory blessing from *Yahweh*. Samuel had been through the incubation routine in his childhood. Now Solomon comes to the high place, offering thousands of sacrifices and sleeping before God in hopes of a special revelatory experience. As in Samuel's case, *Yahweh* deigns to offer Solomon a gracious response.

God offers blessings Solomon did not request, even though Solomon would not remain faithful throughout his life. Solomon was faithful in relation to some, yet fell below the standards of God's ideal. It is with grace, however, that God responds to him, offering more than Solomon sought. There are points at which Solomon is already missing the mark. There will be more to come, however, as he

begins marrying wives from foreign lands to establish political alliances. These wives would bring greater idolatry into Israel, further polluting the religious landscape. Even so, God was willing to deal in grace with Solomon.

From a perspective of Solomon's future dealings, Israel could see the quandary in God's blessing Solomon. He built a great temple to *Yahweh*, yet he allowed for the ongoing practice of idolatry among his foreign wives. The momentary decision to follow *Yahweh* did not fully become reflected in his life. More was required—a standard to which he did not attain. He was too content and comfortable with a statement of belonging to *Yahweh* and failed to follow through with his life.

When Jesus talked about a relationship of faith, the gospel writers generally use a present tense Greek verb to express his meaning. He speaks of believing—trust. The force of that verb, however, is not the question of a moment in time. It is the force of an action that is ongoing. Some have suggested that his words be translated as “continues to believe” or “continues to trust”.¹ It is not enough to claim a relationship. A relationship requires relating. To call one “Lord” requires submission to following the Lord's requirements for living. To take Jesus as bread and flesh we eat is to become transformed by the one who gives us life. It is to allow Jesus to live through us in character, word, and deed.

Paul approached this question of relationship and trust from the perspective of evaluating the practice of one's life. If we are to call ourselves believers and Christians, we are to build our lives on the example and character of the one we claim to have accepted as Lord. Paul goes on to speak of the effects alcohol can have on our actions. Too much alcohol can reduce our inhibitions and affect our decisions. It changes the way we move and process information. It affects our interaction with other. While Paul does not say we should avoid wine, he says that we should be influenced along these lines by the Spirit of Christ, not something as mundane as alcohol.

Baptist missionary Hudson Taylor would say that being a Christian included an impact on the lives of others around us. He would question his hearers as to whether their Christianity made those living around them glad. He was not so concerned as we with how happy it makes us, but how happy my faith makes others. Life with Christ was to infect and affect the way we interact with one another, including the very animals in our homes. If our faith does not have that impact, what is it really worth?

We can talk and sing all day long of God's grace, love, faithfulness, and forgiveness. We can declare to have made a decision to accept Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior. Until it changes the way we related to one another, however, Christ has not yet begun to live in us. We can have all the right doctrine, theology, hymns, and patterns of worship, but the gospel is not about those dressings, so much as to allowing Jesus Christ to live in and through us, offering through our lives the very same character of grace and love Jesus shared with people two millennia ago.

What good is love, if we do not live it? What good is our faith and doctrine, if those around us are not better off for it? What good is a decision made to accept Jesus as Savior, if it does not transform us into disciples who are willing to live and die even as the One we call Lord? “So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not be drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit.”

—*Christopher B. Harbin*

¹ Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981.