

newsletter

2nd quarter '09

By Chris Simmons

Hi all

I hope you are having a wonderful summer. This is my second newsletter and I'm aiming to share some thoughts on grace and legalism. I hear these two words "banded about" a great deal in both our and the wider church. I want to talk about the biblical references for both these words and how they may be used correctly and incorrectly. There is no question that these words are both biblical and that both signify different things to different people in different contexts (by contexts I mean culture).

Writing as a pastor, on a difficult subject like this, I'd like to highlight three things. The first is that theology (about God and his relation to us) isn't an ethereal existential truth about God, devoid of His real presence in our real world. Wrestling with theology is intensely practical, as we seek to know God's heart and mind. As a pastor let me tell you this isn't always easy and we don't always get it right. Secondly, James writes to erstwhile teachers in the church that *"not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers and sisters; because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly"*. I take this part of scripture very seriously, so have some empathy for me if you disagree with some of the things I might say. I have a higher judge to whom I will one day report. The third thing is that I, like you, stumble in many ways and I know full well the frailty of my own heart and life.

THE SPIRIT AND THE LAW

Our church is filled with grace and we again and again emphasise the importance of continually *"being filled with the Spirit"*, if you like, the presence of God. It is a vital part of our church's culture. In contrast,

Paul writes to the Galatian church, *"You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? ... I would like to learn just one thing from you: did you receive the Spirit by observing the law or by believing what you heard."* In other words, Paul is saying the way you got in, believing the word and receiving the Spirit, is the way on. The Spirit is God's way of being present in our own lives and in our own church community. Paul confronts legalism and a rigid adherence to the law (for example, the Old Testament law such as circumcision) as being foolish and no longer needed. There is some debate as to whether the Galatians felt they must adhere to the law to "stay in", or adhere to the law to "get in", but either way makes no difference. The law is always a very hard task-master. Its impossible to live the Christian life adhering to its demands.

The church down the ages has struggled with the role of the Spirit and the role of the law. So we are going to struggle too. The apostle Paul says many things about the law, sometimes positive, many times negative. You can only imagine how many commentators have written books on this subject! Paul is, however, a total "man of the Spirit". To the Corinthians he writes about the coming of the law with Moses as a *"ministry that brought death"* (2 *Corinth 3:7*). This should indicate just how strongly he felt about the new age of the Spirit poured out in Jesus' ministry and then at Pentecost. It also shows how negative he was towards a rigid adherence to the law. He more than anyone else knew the law didn't bring life.

LEGALISM VS. GRACE: a secular and a biblical example

The last woman to hang in this country was Ruth Ellis in 1955. Ruth

was hung because she was found to be guilty of murdering her partner. She admitted so to the police. Today psychologists would have described how she entered adulthood with the scars of being sexually abused as a child and that as an adult had been abused by numerous men. On the day of her execution, the Daily Mirror columnist Cassandra wrote a famous column attacking the sentence, writing, "The one thing that brings stature and dignity to mankind and raises us above the beasts will have been denied her - pity and the hope of ultimate redemption." Even if we still had the death penalty today I doubt it would have been used in her case.

In contrast, we have amazing stories like King David's story in the Old Testament. A king who committed adultery, lied, organised the murder of a friend and then deceitfully pretended he had done no wrong. It's worse than anything on Jerry Springer! Yet after all this, David's lineage was, incredibly, the lineage into which Jesus was born. David did repent, and the consequences of his sin were felt for generations to come. However, he did keep his job and the promises given to him by God were fulfilled. God's mercy and love are seen clearly in David's life.

As a pastor I have heard numerous horror stories from people and their treatment at the hands of church leaders and elders. It isn't that they haven't sinned, yes many times they have. It's the fact that the letter of the law is used to condemn; it is not tempered with grace and mercy and offers no possibility of redemption. This is what I think we mean by legalism in our church culture. I don't like it and have little time for church leaders who use it to manipulate or control others. Its simply wrong and a misuse of scripture.

THE STRENGTH OF GRACE

As a church we will always emphasise grace and mercy. Often this means putting yourself into other person's shoes, acting with compassion, being slow to anger and rich with love. This is Jesus' example. The people Jesus got the angriest with were the church leaders. The Holy men did not want the medicine Jesus was offering. The prostitutes, tax collectors and "sinners" lapped it up. Jesus' role in coming into the world was and is missional, and is the reason He spent so much time explaining to the Pharisees and teachers of the law why a "Holy man" might spend so much time eating and drinking with people of questionable reputations (read Luke chapter 15). If we don't understand this we miss the whole point of the church; its "raison d'être". Here, the religious teachers didn't just lie occasionally, they lived a lie. They pretended to be holier than they really were and in so doing acted deceitfully towards others, placing heavy burdens on them. Jesus got very angry with them for this and warned them about the judgement that was coming towards them (Luke 20:41). Jesus got angry, at least in part, because they were meant to be representing Him and their rigid adherence to the law made them legalistic and hard hearted towards the broken humanity they were meant to be serving.

OUR CHURCH'S CULTURE

I believe that one of the greatest strengths of our church community is that like our Saviour Jesus we meet broken humanity with mercy and love. I believe this is at the core of who we are and who Jesus is. I think we should always protect this.

It's the reason we have "come as you are" flashed across much of our advertising. As a church we are endeavouring to be real with one another; sharing our lives honestly and truthfully, good and bad! This is important because without it we are in danger of being like the Pharisees. One of the charges against the wider church is often this same charge of hypocrisy and, unfortunately, in

many cases they are right. I don't feel this is a great danger with us at Brighton Vineyard at the moment. In our context as a local church in Brighton, grace is amongst other things being real and accepting people where they are at, so they can discover God's goodness and love for themselves. I think this is exactly what Jesus would have us do in this city.

WHERE GRACE AND TRUTH MEET

The danger for any church in focusing on grace isn't that we don't accept broken people with love and acceptance, or that we become self righteous and judgemental to the world like the Pharisees of Jesus' day. The dangers to us are quite different. Here are two of them. I'm not suggesting that we have crossed the line at all. Only that it is wise to be aware of the dangers that face us and to try to ensure that "*satan doesn't outwit us ...that we are not unaware of his schemes*" (2Corinth 2:11).

TWO DANGERS WE SHOULD BE AWARE OF:

TREATING GRACE LIBERALLY

One is, that like the Corinthian church, we treat grace liberally and take God's love for granted, forgetting that many times His love draws us to repentance (i.e. to turn away from doing things that are harmful to us). The Corinthians great saying was, of course, "*everything is permissible*". The apostle Paul wrote back sarcastically, "Yes, it is permissible but *not beneficial*." The apostle John writes that Jesus came into this dark world with "*grace and truth*". Grace without being tempered by truth can lead us towards a kind of liberal Christianity where anything goes, and God winks over our sin. The bible is replete with examples that God does exactly the opposite and the naked man bleeding on the cross should remind us of this.

John the apostle also recounts the story of Jesus meeting Mary Magdalene where, if you like, grace and truth meet. In our world this

can be difficult and impossible without the real life changing presence of God in our midst. Meeting Jesus was a life changing encounter for Mary, as it has been for many of our number in the last four or five years who have powerfully met the risen Christ. Jesus didn't just pat her on the back and understand the sin she was caught in. Nor did he condemn her. His power and love instantly changed her, and later we are told cast seven demons out of her.

REPRESENTATIVES OF JESUS

Another danger isn't a danger to us, but a danger to those on the outside of the church looking in, wanting to explore the claims of Jesus. We dishonour Jesus' name and the Gospel itself the moment we decide that "our needs" or "our wants" take priority over Gods will for our lives. Paul wrote to the Roman church "*offer your bodies as living sacrifices*". Not living in a day when we see animals sacrificed, this isn't a concept we fully understand. The first century Christians whom Paul was addressing would have thought about the blood being spilt and the mess involved in killing an animal. The spilt blood would have reminded them that their sin had a consequence. Paul is saying your lives, your very physical bodies now belong not to you but to God (they have been paid for). Indeed, they are now the temple for His presence. So if we live in a place that is pleasing to our self and not to God, not only are we going to ultimately harm ourselves but also we may look like hypocrites to those who don't know Jesus. For this reason, you can read again and again Paul writing to censure the early churches with strong words of correction towards their lifestyles, attitudes or beliefs. He doesn't just leave them to God and say well the love of God covers all your sins, or the grace of God goes with you.

COME AS YOU ARE

So we need to live in the radical place of holding onto both truth and grace tightly. We have a very low bar for entry into our church. The low bar is because we want to meet people with a place of love and

acceptance. To allow them to “own their own spiritual journey” and discover Christ for themselves. I want people to come, see, and “taste that the Lord is good”. However, we mustn’t confuse this low bar as the place we need to stay all our Christian lives. To do so would be to grow into adulthood still wearing nappies – ridiculous! We want to grow up together in love, Jesus’ love.

In closing let me quote some words (edited by me) from Rich Nathan, a USA Vineyard pastor - as ever without permission! The names are chosen by Rich and in no way relate to any real person in our church community. I should also say the examples Rich is choosing are somewhat simplistic, but nevertheless describe in a clear way that living by the Spirit doesn’t ever mean living to fulfil our own sinful desires. Here’s what he says: -

SPIRITUAL MEDICINE

“We are terrible spiritual doctors. We constantly prescribe the wrong medication to ourselves and to others. Think of the situation of Hard-hearted Harry. Hard-hearted Harry is constantly verbally and emotionally abusive to his wife. He regularly screams at her and mocks her. He has emptied their bank account and deprives his wife and family financially. And then there is Partying Patty. She is a single woman who parties regularly. She gets high on a continual basis and has promiscuous sex outside of marriage. Hard-hearted Harry asks the question, “Am I saved? When I stand before God on the Day of Judgment will every thing be okay?” Partying Patty asks the same thing, “Am I saved? When I stand before God on the Day of Judgment, will I be received into Christ’s eternal kingdom?” Harry and Patty say, “We stood at church; will we be able to stand on the Day of Judgment?”. The answer is, “I have no idea, but neither do you, Harry and Patty! You don’t have any observable fruit in your life to say that you are a follower of Jesus Christ.”

Jesus more often, way more often, challenges false assurance than

offers anyone cheap assurance. Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). We never say, “Everything is okay. You’re saved. You are right with God. Don’t worry!”. Instead we say, “Run away from your sins and run into the arms of Jesus. Like the Prodigal, leave the pigsty and come home and be received by your Father.”

On the other hand, there is Anxious Alec and Introspective Isabelle. Alec and Isabelle constantly worry that they’ve lost their salvation because they have lustful thoughts, or they gossip, or they got angry and yelled. Alec and Isabelle constantly confess the same sins to God over and over. And even though they try, they still feel guilty. We say, “Alec, Isabelle, it has never been about you but has always been about Jesus. And remember you can’t be separated from His love.” Here is the apostle Paul speaking to the Roman church: *“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 8:38-39).

CONCLUSION

To some we offer the medicine of repentance. To others we offer the medicine of assurance. Discerning which of these two medicines is applicable in different situations, is where we need the Spirit. Please don’t imagine that it’s either one or the other or that the choice is obvious. I remember John Wimber sharing many years ago about praying for a promiscuous girl who continually came to the front for prayer. On one particular occasion John got tired of her receptivity to God’s love, and frustrated with God that He would continue to lavish His grace on her so tangibly. He moaned at God that He ought to be judging her, not pouring His Spirit out upon her! He found out later that she’d had a history of sexual abuse that resulted in the promiscuity in her

life. She was a victim and needed that unconditional love to help her change. After inner healing prayer at another church her life was turned around. I write this because there is no such thing as an uncomplicated human being. We all have a history that shapes us. I am glad that as a pastor I will not be accountable for anyone else’s life, only my own. Grace and mercy are central to our faith but it is also important to recognise that sin is sin. The only thing that will keep us from God’s mercy is not acknowledging it as such. So let’s pray as a church we continue to hold on tightly to these two and always have sufficient reservoirs of mercy and love to draw on and to give away to other people.

EVENTS & NEWS

FUN DAY



I’m writing this newsletter after our recent fun day. We were blessed with fabulous weather and it really was a day full of fun! We enjoyed face painting, football, bingo and the odd water fight, not to mention an excellent barbeque and some delicious cakes. Thanks to everyone who made it such a memorable day.

As we were packing up a young boy Ollie (about ten years old) approached me and asked if he could take some lollipops home with him. Of course I said, “Yes.” and minutes later his pockets were stuffed full of lollipops! After ten or so minutes he came again, and sheepishly asked if he could take them all! His dad agreed and as lollipops are now officially banned for health and safety reasons on a Sunday (although I do hear some might possibly be smuggled in) I said, “Sure, I’ll get a bag and you can have the box.” It was a large



box! What I liked about this was that as a child Ollie thought, "I've got quite a few lollipops but why stop there? Why not ask for them all?" I couldn't help thinking that God wants us to be the same. All too often we are happy with some of the crumbs from the table. He wants us to boldly approach Him and ask for more. Let's do this and see. Let's depend on Gods lavish generosity and kindness and not settle for what we have right now. Let's ask and see.

BUILDING

I wish I had more news to report on our search for a building. Suffice to say that we still haven't found anywhere suitable, but are continuing to look. The recession hasn't bitten deep enough to offer any properties for sale in the location we are looking. However, we were never expecting this to be an easy or short term project. Please do continue to pray. When the time is right I believe we will find the perfect place somewhere central to our city.

MUSIC

On the music front, the long awaited CD "Dream with open eyes" really is now almost ready! Hopefully it will be out in the next couple of months. It's a great album and I think you're going to love it.

MONEY

We are in a period where we have had to exercise restraint with our spending. I am pleased to say that we have always maintained the ability to give away in excess of 10% of our income. I shall be writing shortly to thank everyone for their giving to the church and include details on where the church's money was spent last year. I also realise the economic crises we are in is "biting" some of you and this is a particularly challenging and difficult time for you.

If you are not yet giving, but feel this is your church home and would like to contribute, please note that standing orders really do help us to budget and, of course, we can reclaim tax back from the government.

FUTURE NEWSLETTERS.

If any of you have ideas or submissions for future newsletters please let me know.

FINALLY

We do have many things going on over the summer so do keep a look out in the notices and on the diary page of our website.

Have a fantastic summer everyone and may God bless you,

Chris

With thanks to Tab Williams for overall editing and to Martin Jack.

