

1. Loving Leadership Agonizes Over God’s People with TEARS

a. Love is willing to be persecuted by its enemies in order to make its beloved thrive

i. testings of the plots against me from the religious

1. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that the extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸ We are experiencing trouble on every side, but are not crushed; we are perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ we are persecuted, but not abandoned; we are knocked down, but not destroyed, ¹⁰ always carrying around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are constantly being handed over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal body. ¹² As a result, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. (2 Cor. 4:7-12)

ii. afflictions and imprisonments await me

1. My confident hope is that I will in no way be ashamed but that with complete boldness, even now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether I live or die. ²¹ For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²² Now if I am to go on living in the body, this will mean productive work for me, yet I don't know which I prefer: ²³ I feel torn between the two, because I have a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, ²⁴ but it is more vital *for your sake* that I remain in the body. ²⁵ And since I am sure of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for the sake of your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that what you can be proud of may increase because of me in Christ Jesus, when I come back to you. (Phil. 1:20-26)

b. Love comes with tears

i. The agony of love, the longing for freedom of the gospel and the holiness without which nobody will see the Lord

1. Love for the Lord

- a. “I count my life as having no value...but to complete what Christ has assigned to me – to finish my course”
- b. His greatest love is to honor His Lord, to serve Him, to make His name great and complete what has been assigned to him by His Savior

2. Love for the Lord’s elect

- a. “I endure all things for the sake of the elect – that they may also obtain salvation in Christ Jesus and its eternal glory.” (2 Tim 2:10)

ii. Galatians 3:19 – “I am in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.”

1. This vivid and remarkable image shows us three things about a ministry mindset:

- a. Paul wants to see the Galatians “*formed*” and so he has a vision of something great they can be. His goal in each relationship is growth.
 - i. In the greatest of ministry relationships, each spouse’s goal is to “*present*” the other to God “*radiant... without stain or wrinkle or... blemish.*”
 - ii. It is the same in any spiritual friendship.
- b. Paul wants them to specifically become like Christ, “*...till Christ be formed in you.*”
 - i. He does not want his “children” to resemble him, but to resemble Christ.
- c. Paul expects to go through labor pains in order to do this. Any mother expects to hurt— maybe hurt very badly — in order to birth a child. It is considered very unusual and “lucky” for a birth to not be filled with pain and danger.

- i. So Paul’s image tells us that any minister or friend who hopes to see another person come to Christ and become like Christ should expect there to be lots of struggle and hurt and pain. We should expect to be misunderstood, disappointed, drained.

2. So any ministry should: have a growth goal, have Christlikeness as the growth goal, and expect there to be an emotional cost to the spiritual “mother.”
- iii. In a healthy ministry, your own life is so consistent and your heart so satisfied with Jesus Christ that you can genuinely long for others to know Him as such, too. And if you are truly living in transparent community with people, then they will see your motives and your joy, your weaknesses and your dependence upon the Lord, your sorrows and your rest in Him, and will be intrigued by it.
 1. If you are enslaved to idols through works-righteousness, you will demand that people live just like you, but out of a desire to justify yourself and deal with your own anxiety and need to believe you are “all right.”
 2. But if you are free from idols and self-righteousness, you will simply want others to share your freedom. Your efforts at ministry will be warm and personal and self-revealing (“*become like me!*”) not condemning and harsh and impersonal.
- c. The Ephesian elders were so deeply convinced, in their hearts, that Paul loved them that they were devastated when he told them he was going away for good
 - i. His affection for them pollinated their affection for him
 1. Love begets love
 2. The wounds of a friend are faithful, but kisses from an enemy are deceitful. (Proverbs 27:6)
 - ii. Persuading people of the truth of Jesus is not merely saying the right things, it is also living consistent with them.
 1. People have to be able to look at our loves and lives, to assess how we handle trouble, how we deal with disappointment and interruptions, how we conduct our relationships, how we feel and act so that they can see whether Christ is real and how the gospel affects a day-to-day human life.
 - iii. Generally, we find faith mainly through relationships with joyful, flawed-but honest, loving Christians, not merely through arguments, information and books.
 1. This is why Paul refers to them as “the Church of God” and “flock” and uses all plural terms
 2. Such loving truthful community, that which “speaks the truth in love” (Eph 4:25), is the soil in which God has ordained true spiritual growth into holiness.
 - a. Change happens in truthful loving community.

2. Loving Leadership TAKES NOTICE of Threats to God’s People

- a. Note how Paul prays for the Ephesians a couple of years later, when he writes his letter back to them from prison
 - i. “I pray that according to the wealth of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner person, ¹⁷ that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, so that, because you have been rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ you may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and thus to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who by the power that is working within us is able to do far beyond all that we ask or think, ²¹ to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Eph. 3:16-21)
 - ii. See how he prays that “Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith”
 1. But, didn’t Christ already dwell in their hearts through faith when they believed?
 - a. Yes, but he is asking that Christ may dwell in such an *experiential way* that they would “be able to comprehend the love of Christ”
 - iii. See how he prays that “you would thus know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge”
 1. To know that is beyond knowledge?!
 - a. Yes, that is to know not merely intellectually, but *affectionally*, to have the truth of the teaching (it is knowledge) light your love on fire for Christ as you know, really seize in your hearts, the great love of Christ Jesus

- b. This is what it means to be full of the fullness of God
 - iv. So, you see, the goal is the dwelling *in our hearts* of Christ Jesus by dependence upon Him, to know His love deeply so that it ignites our love for him, and all of this happens *together with all the saints*
 - 1. Yet, there is a problem – we are vulnerable to warped teaching, to bad knowledge, to deception and ignorance
 - 2. Therefore, we are to keep watch, to take notice of faulty teaching which does not increase the affections of our hearts towards Christ Jesus and our utter dependence upon Him
 - a. “the grace...would cause thanksgiving to increase to the glory of God.” (2 Cor 4:15)
- b. Take Notice Over yourselves
 - i. One part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit is the fruit of “self-mastery” – the wisdom of knowing one’s own weakness and the dependence which takes hold of its Helper and of the help of others
 - ii. Leaders, too, are tempted to return to their performance, to trust in their own righteousness, as the standard for what is approved by God
 - 1. Leaders must be on guard against such Christ-minimizing belief
 - 2. They must exalt Christ Jesus as our righteousness, as our only hope, as our “wisdom, righteousness, and sanctification” (1 Cor 1:31)
 - a. We ask questions of potential teachers at EBF to discover this:
 - i. Do they show joy, excitement, confidence, awe, and gratitude when they speak of Jesus?
 - ii. Do they confess their own *present* sins and weakness and welcome accountability?
 - iii. Do they speak highly of God’s people, or are they often complaining and pointing out how wrong or foolish other Christians are?
 - b. Do they have confidence that:
 - i. God is sovereign, so they don’t have to be in control
 - 1. Or are they overbearing, inflexible, risk-averse, afraid of people’s opinions, impatient
 - ii. God is glorious, so they don’t have to fear others
 - 1. Or do they speak differently around different people, pretentious and fearful, passive-aggressive
 - iii. God is good, so they don’t have to look elsewhere
 - 1. Or are they complainers, hopeless, burdened with a sense of duty, escape to hobbies or substances or alternative projects
 - iv. God is gracious, so they don’t have to be afraid to fail
 - 1. Or do they take criticism badly, find it hard to relax, proud or envious of powerful positions, make others feel guilty and condemned, and blame-shift to others
- c. Over the *whole* flock
 - i. Both Jew and Gentile
 - 1. The word “whole” is important, because it evidences that the leaders are to guard the entire flock of God the same
 - 2. There is a tendency to subdivide the Church between various delineations
 - a. Religiosity –
 - b. Ethnicity –
 - c. Economics –
 - 3. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians confronts this very delineation quite strongly
 - a. Religiosity – 2:4-9
 - b. Ethnicity – 3:6; 4:1-6

- c. Economics – 6:1-9
 - ii. Flock as sheep in need of protection
- d. Because the Spirit has made your overseers
 - i. An overseer is a protector, a guard, a watchman, and a steward/provider
 - 1. That is, they don't own the flock, but they are tasked with watching over its good
 - 2. The flock is "the Church of God"
 - ii. The action of overseers is described as "to shepherd"
 - 1. To lead them to the necessary provisions
 - 2. To care for them so that they flourish
 - 3. To feed them the food which brings them 'healthy' nourishment, i.e. 'sound' food
 - 4. To guard them from burdensome wolves
 - iii. Which He obtained
 - 1. God obtained His Church
 - 2. She is His beloved, His treasure, His delight
 - 3. He paid for her – sheer mercy born out of sovereign love
 - a. Through the blood of His own [Son]
- e. Because wolves will arise
 - i. "burdensome" (Βαρύς)
 - 1. Translated "fierce" by the ESV
 - 2. But it is translated as "weighty" or "burdensome" everywhere else
 - a. 1 John 5:3 – "His commandments are not burdensome"
 - b. Matt 23:4 – "[The Pharisees] tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger."
 - c. Matt 23:23 – "Woe to you, experts in the law and you Pharisees, hypocrites! You give a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, yet you neglect what is weightier in the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness! You should have done these things without neglecting the others."
 - d. Acts 25:7 – "When Paul arrived, the Judeans who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bring many and burdensome charges against him that they could not prove."
 - 3. The idea is that these 'wolves' devour, not by mere coercion, but by placing heavy burdens of accusations of failure and the weight of Law-Performance upon the shoulders of the sheep
 - a. They place you "under the Law" again, as Paul warned the Galatian churches, too
 - b. "Now this matter arose because of the false brothers with false pretenses who slipped in unnoticed to spy on our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into bondage." (Gal 2:4)
 - 4. There are also wolves within you – those terrifying accusations that you have outsinced God's kindness and that He would never take you back
 - a. LIES! BURDENS from WOLVES who seek to devour you and destroy you.
 - 5. The reality is that God's grace is contraconditional – it works against the conditions
 - a. That is, it works against the sin which compels it – God's mercy is moved by sin and His love – nothing else
 - b. It is not our repentance that moves God – it is our sin that moves God to mercy
 - i. Because His mercy began before the world was ever laid down – before Jacob had done anything wrong God had chosen Him
 - ii. Before you had done anything wrong, or anything good, God was already working in mercy to redeem you and make you His own

because He set His love upon you before you were even formed in the womb

1. Do you really think that he is now surprised by your failures? By your weaknesses? By your foolishness?!

ii. From among you

1. The dangers from within the Church are always more harmful to it than the dangers from without it
2. Heresy always arises from within to poison the flock
 - a. Legalism is more common in the Church than outside the Church, and this burden destroys the flock
 - b. Wolves pretend to be sheep, call themselves sheep, yet place God's people under burdens which are not meant for sheep
3. It is, therefore, the overseers' task to protect the flock from teaching and actions which would harm the beloved Church of God whom He has obtained at such a high cost
 - a. She is valuable and significant and treasured by God
 - b. If you love God, you will love His Church
 - i. Christ looks at the good which He is working in them more than the ills which He is abolishing.
 - ii. God is never disgusted with His children, and even when He must discipline, He disciplines because He loves us as children, not because He is disgusted with mere humans (Heb 12)

iii. "not freeing" the flock "from burdens"

1. The overseers' role is to keep the eyes of the flock and the hearts of the whole church upon the Master, to see Him carrying the burden of the Law's demands for them, so that they love Him
2. Out of this love, we hear His voice and we obey Him, knowing that if He gave His life to free us from the curse, He can be trusted in all that He says

3. Love TRUSTS God and the Word of His grace to Protect and Transform God's People

- a. Legalism roughs up God's people because it doesn't trust God
 - i. It demands the inheritance now, impatiently, without compassion, like a slave-driver
- b. Grace agonizes over sin and its bondage, but it patiently, gently, meekly, calls sinners to look to Christ and repent, trusting Him to build them up and grant them, by His grace, all that they need
- c. It is God's grace, His kindness, which is "able to build up"
 - i. It is God's grace which builds up true godliness
 - ii. How?
 1. Because as we grasp the love of Christ in our hearts, so that it seizes our affections, we are "wooned" to obey Him out of love
 2. The LAW brings mere threats – "Do this and you will live – but fail it and you will be cursed!"
 - a. Thus, it only compels outward obedience, not out of love for God, but out of fear of the consequences of failure
 - b. Those who live like this will never run *towards* God when they fail, but only flee from Him in despair and terror
 - c. Those who believe that God's mercy is true and that Christ Jesus has answered for their failures (ALL of them, even these present ones) will actually run *towards* God when they fail, because they know Him to be merciful and gracious
 - i. The Father runs towards the prodigal son when he returns!
 - ii. **Where do you run when you fail?**

3. “On the tenure of “do this and you will live,” a spirit of fearfulness is sure to enter; and the jealousies of a legal bargain chase away all confidence of intimacy between God and man; and the creature striving to be square and even with his Creator is, in fact, pursuing all the while his own selfishness (blessing) instead of God’s glory. With all the conformities which he labors to accomplish, the soul of obedience is not there, the mind is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed under such an economy can it ever be.

It is only when, as in the Gospel, acceptance is bestowed as a present, without money and without price, that the security which man feels in God is placed beyond the reach of disturbance. Only then can he repose in Him as one friend reposes in another...the one party rejoicing over the other to do him good...in the impulse of a gratitude, by which is he awakened to the charms of a new moral existence.”

~Thomas Chalmers, *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*

- d. Able to give the inheritance
 - i. Among (distributed) all who have been set apart (sanctified) by the Word of grace
 - ii. It is God’s grace which grants the inheritance, not the works of His people or the perfection of their obedience or the surety of their hearts
 - iii. The power of growth and change is the good news of God’s kindness and graciousness
 - iv. The power of hope and a future is the good news that God grants us a future according to His own compassion and lovingkindness
 1. To be received, not earned or achieved
 - v. To be obtained as a gift through the sacrificial work of Jesus, not our adherence to the burdens
 1. “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery.” (Gal 5:1)

Conclusion:

To the proud – God doesn’t smile upon you because you are great and have done well, but only because Jesus is great and has done well. It is your representative that is awesome, so humble yourselves when others around you fail and struggle and fall down – when they don’t “get it” and you do. Be patient because God, in Christ Jesus, is so very patient with you when you think that you “get it” and you really have no clue.

To the despairing – God doesn’t smile upon you because you are great and have done well, but only because Jesus is great and has done well. He gives you His record freely, and God is delighted in you because of Him. You are His beloved child in whom He is well-pleased. Throw your failures upon the cross and watch them die. They are dead and buried in that tomb with Jesus. You have already died with Him – there is nothing else left by which God would be wrathful or disappointed in you. That you is dead to sin b/c you died with Jesus 2,000 years ago. And now? Now, you live to God. You are raised up with Him to the newness of life, bound with Him in His blessings, gaining the inheritance of God because Jesus has won it for you. Rest in Him. Rest in His rightness for you. Cease from your fearful striving, your fear of not being perfect, and trust Him. He holds you when you have let go. He pursued you when you ran away. His grace is superabundant and He justifies the ungodly and welcomes sinners into His house when they are wed to His Son.

See your sin in all its ugliness, and throw it upon Christ. He came to you for that purpose. He can bear them and pay them down. Then, see the grace of God in all its fullness. He loves you. He answers for your sin so that they are killed and gone and dead. And He gives you His new life in the love of God unsurpassable.

“I pray that according to the wealth of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner person, ¹⁷ that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, so that, because you have been rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ you may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and thus to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who by the power that is working within us is able to do far beyond all that we ask or think, ²¹ to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”