

“Let’s Focus on Potential, Not Problems”

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May 30, 2021

Listen to these words from a sermon by a popular American preacher. “God said, ‘Adam, Eve, where are you?’ They said, ‘God, we were hiding because we were naked.’ I love the way God answered them. He said, ‘Adam, who told you that you were naked?’ In other words, who told you that something was wrong with you? God immediately knew that the enemy had been talking to them.” Then this preacher says to his audience, “God is saying to you today... Who told you that you don’t have what it takes to succeed? Who told you the best grades you could make in school were C’s rather than A’s? Who told you that you’re not attractive enough? Who told you that your marriage is not going to last? Who told you something was wrong with you?”

Well, folks that is an interesting application of Genesis 3. There is, however, an obvious flaw in the interpretation of this passage. There was indeed something wrong with Adam and Eve, something very wrong. They had fallen from innocence to guilt. Their rebellion against God, their disobedience, meant they now face a penalty of physical and spiritual death. The perfect relationship with the creator had been destroyed. In fact, even though the Lord will mercifully allow them to live, this passage spells out how they will experience a variety of painful consequences because of their sin. There was something wrong with Adam and Eve. And friends, though we often don’t like to admit it, there is something wrong with us as well.

Friends, today we focus on a half-truth that is pervasive in our culture. It is often expressed this way: People need to be encouraged by being reminded of their potential. It’s not good for people to focus on their brokenness or failures. The church, especially, needs to be more positive in its message and stop telling people there is something wrong with them. Pastors need to avoid using the “S” word, “sin,” so much. Well, I suspect a few pastors somewhere should heed that advice, but I would submit that, for the most part, the American church doesn’t talk about sin enough. Folks, this is an important topic, so let’s pause and pray we would hear and heed the words that God speaks to us today.

“Pastor Dan, I already feel bad about myself and all the mistakes I have made. If I come to church, you will probably just make me feel worse.” Well, that might happen, and, believe it or not, that actually could be a very good thing. However, I do agree that some people really are in need of an encouraging word. An old song says that “seldom is heard a discouraging word” when one is “Home on the Range.” That is talking about the cattle range of Montana or Wyoming. For some folks on the Iron Range of Minnesota, it would be more accurate to say, “seldom is heard an encouraging word.” Well, let me give you some encouragement right now: You, friend, have great potential. That, folks, is not the whole story, the whole truth, but it is definitely true, for two reasons.

First, as a human being, which I assume includes everyone in this room, you are made or created in the image of God.

Genesis 1:26, 27 Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Wow! Folks, we could have a whole series of sermons, just on those two verses. Our views of the sanctity of life, the roles of men and women, and “animal rights” all flow from this passage. The bottom line is that no matter who you are, no matter how messed up your life is, no matter how many mistakes you have made, you, friend, are made in the image of God. What does that mean?

Many things, but listen to what C.S. Lewis wrote in “The Weight of Glory.” “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization- these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. Next to the Sacrament (Lewis means the Lord’s Supper) your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.” And I will add, that the same thing is true of the person you see in the mirror. You, friend, have the incredible opportunity to make choices that glorify God, the creator of the universe. Other creatures glorify God by doing what they do... a walleye swims, an

eagle flies, a loon sings, but as a human being you have the potential to make choices that glorify God in a way no other creature can. Think about that!

Second, if you are a Christian, a believer in Jesus Christ, you not only have the potential to bring glory to God, but I can guarantee you will ultimately and eternally do that.

Philippians 1:6 And I am confined of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Oh, your life may seem like a winding and often uncertain path, but the grace of God that had preserved you thus far, will surely lead you home. Friend, you may be weak and inconsistent in your faith, but the Holy Spirit is strong and never fails to keep his promises. The road to get there may seem long and difficult, but God's promise is that one day every one of His children, every believer in Jesus, will one day be brought safely to their eternal home, where they will freely and joyfully live each day for God's glory. Looking in the mirror this morning maybe you have missed this truth. People around you may say, "You don't have any potential," but the fact is...

1 John 3:2 Beloved, we are God's children now and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

Friend, if you are a genuine believer in Jesus, trusting Him for your salvation, you not only have great potential, but God, who cannot lie, promises that this potential will one day be realized. Friends, I find that most encouraging.

These words are words some of you need to hear. Speaking of himself as Messiah, Jesus once said, **Matthew 12:20 A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench.**

As His followers, we should seek to do the same, making sure we do not further discourage those who are already struggling. We need to comfort those who are troubled. But that is only half of our responsibility. We also need to, *sometimes*, trouble those who are comfortable.

Christians in general, and pastors in particular have a responsibility to help people recognize their need for a savior. We have to help people see there is something wrong with them. Many folks don't have low self-esteem, but are on the other end of the spectrum. They, as Paul warned about

in Romans 12:3, "Think of themselves more highly that they ought." A few years ago a study by Dr. David Myers discovered that between 85-95% of American adults think they are smarter, more honest, and easier to get along with than the average person. Dr. Bill Bennet, former U.S. Secretary of Education, used to talk about how many American students have low test scores in math, but at the same time are very confident in their ability to do math. He said many schools seem to teach self-esteem better that they do mathematics. I see this in counseling situations. Those involve in a conflict often have a very clear view of what the other person is doing wrong, but are blind as to what their own contribution to the problem is. In these situations, people seem to think more highly of themselves that they ought.

I suspect a lot of folks really don't think there is anything wrong with them. At least anything seriously wrong. A common attitude seems to be, "Hey, I am a good person. If there is really a heaven, I am pretty sure I will be there. Why wouldn't God want me there?" Now, if you have friends and family members who think that way, or if you think that way, I hope you realize how dangerous that attitude is. People who think they are good enough to get to heaven are not going to get there. The bible is clear that we need to trust in Jesus Christ, not in ourselves, to experience God's salvation.

Ephesians 2:8,9 There is none righteous, no not one. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

That is not good news, but it is the truth. We have inherited a sin nature from our first human parents, Adam and Eve. Our sinful action, words and attitudes confirm our agreement with their rebellion again the Holy Creator. And there is even worse news.

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death.

Meaning eternal, spiritual death, often called hell, **but** (here is the good news) **the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

This gift is graciously given. Recipients can do nothing to earn or merit this gift. Jesus Christ is the one who earned this salvation through His life, death and resurrection. Thus, only those, who by God's grace, choose to trust in Him rather than in themselves, will experience eternal life.

It is important to recognize that not everyone, including some who call themselves Christians, agree with what I have just explained. For

example, Pastor Philp Gulley, a self-described progressive Christian, says, "I grew up in a tradition that emphasized sin and the need for salvation, didn't find it helpful, and have resolved to leave it behind." Gulley argues, "We should stop viewing ourselves as wretched sinners, deserving of damnation." He even suggests we should abandon hymns like "Amazing Grace" that speaks of God's saving a wretched sinner. Yet, the reality is that every human being is a sinner, in need of the salvation that only Jesus Christ can bring. There is something wrong with us. There are a variety of ways to express that truth, some ways a bit more blunt and rough edged than others. Even though we should always try to be wise and gentle as we speak, we really do want people to know that they are sinners who need a savior. If people feel bad or are offended when we tell them this, that is unfortunate, but it is essential, a necessary truth that we need to communicate. We are sinners who need a savior. Only when people know, understand, and believe this bad news, can they really embrace the good news of salvation through Jesus.

Back in 1967, Thomas Harris wrote his book, "I'm O.K., You're O.K." That has been the predominant attitude in American society for over 50 years. But, it is not the Christian view. We should instead say, "I'm not okay, you're not okay, there is something wrong with us, but Jesus Christ makes us both okay." Yes, there is bad news in that, but it is trumped by the good news. And most importantly it is the truth. Truth that we have an opportunity to share with folks who really need to hear it.

Sin is also a problem for those who are believers in Jesus Christ. As Christians, we still sin.

1 John 1:8, 10, written to believers says, **If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.**

So, yes, we do sin and it is good when a pastor, spouse, parent or another believer reminds us of that. Is it "negative" to remind others of their sins? Perhaps, but it is an important thing to do. Sometimes we are blind to our own sins, and we need someone else, for example, to say, "It seems like you have a harsh tone when you are speaking to your wife. That is really not treating her as God intends." Or sometimes we see our sin, but just try to ignore it. You know you are probably

spending too much money on new clothes, but unless a friend says something, you will just pretend it is no big deal. It is good that a pastor and someone else in the church reminds you of your sins, especially of the sins you don't realize or don't admit you are committing. There are three reasons why it is good to be made aware of those sins.

First, you can then confess them and experience God's forgiveness. As a believer in Jesus, our past, present and future sins are already forgiven. That is what the bible teaching of justification involves. Whether the sin involves harshness toward a spouse or not spending money wisely or anything else, if you are a Christian, the righteousness of Jesus still is yours. His perfect score is still beside your name and counts as your score. God has forgiven those sins before you have even committed them. But experiencing that forgiveness, experiencing reconciliation with the God you have sinned against, that happens when we confess those sins.

1 John 1:9 Again, written to believers in Jesus, says, If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Friends, if what I have just said, especially about being already forgiven, but needing to experience that forgiveness, seems confusing, make sure you get in touch with me so we can chat. It is an important truth to grasp.

The second reason why it is good for a Christian to become aware of sins in his/her life is because sin by its very nature is destructive. It often produces short term satisfaction, but longer term misery. Spending a lot of money on new clothes for example, may make you feel good for a while, but it will likely lead to financial problems in the long run and in the even longer run, it will probably keep you from experiencing the blessings that come from being a generous person. When you are aware of your sin, however, you have an opportunity, by the grace of God, to repent, to turn away from your sin, to not do it anymore. So you may not be really happy when a pastor, like me, mentions a sin of which you might be guilty. However, keep in mind I am not trying to pick on you, but hoping to spare you from the damage that sin can do to your life, even as a Christian.

The third reason why it is important for us as Christians to be aware of our sins, is because they

remind us that there is indeed something wrong with us, and we are in great need of God's grace. Folks, I think as the Holy Spirit enables, we should all try to live in a way that pleases the Lord. We should seek to avoid sinful actions, words and attitudes. Confessing our sins and repenting of them are always good things to do. But, the reality is, no matter how hard we work on this we will never be free of sin while we are here on this earth. No matter how many sins you confess, there will always be more on the list. Yes, we may enjoy victory over a particular sin and be able to avoid committing it, but there always other sins that creep into our lives. So, for example, you may avoid that harsh tone with your wife and start speaking more kindly to her. But then you become proud of that. You begin thinking you are a better husband than other men in the church. Friends, we have to keep in mind that many of our sins are not actions, but attitudes. They include not just bad things we do, but good things we fail to do. This continual battle within that we as Christians fight is what the apostle Paul describes in Romans 7 and which he refers to in verse 20 as, "the sin that dwells in me." It is why Martin Luther says a Christian is simultaneously a saint and a sinner.

Yet, realizing you are still a sinner can actually provide real encouragement to you. It is the encouragement of God's grace. He chooses to love you, save you, embrace you as His child, even though you are still a sinner! Even though there is still something very wrong with you! God's grace is indeed bigger and more powerful than all of our sin. The apostle Paul knew that.

1 Timothy 1:15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of who I am the foremost.

That is how Paul thought of himself: a sinner saved by grace. And friends, I would suggest seeing ourselves as sinners saved by grace is the surest path to joy. In Luke 7, we are told how a sinful woman, a prostitute, anoints Jesus' feet. He says, **Luke 7:47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven-for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.**

Now folks, I don't think Jesus wants us to sin more, so that we can be forgiven more. Rather, I think this means the more aware we are of our sin, the more we realize how far we fall short of the glory of God, the more we recognize our need for His amazing grace, the greater our love for the

Lord will be. The greater our love for the Lord, the greater our appreciation of His grace, the deeper our joy will be.

Friends, should the church encourage people by reminding them of the great potential they have as creatures made in His image and as believers destined for eternal glory? Sure they should! That is truth the bible teaches and God intends that we use it to encourage each other. However, the bible also teaches there is something very wrong with us. We are sinners, who need a savior. Even as a Christian, you are a sinner who needs a savior. That is truth that we should not shy away from sharing with others and reminding ourselves. Yet, we also need to know that God in His amazing grace provides his own son, Jesus, to be that savior. And friends, I think God's amazing grace is the most encouraging truth of all.