

T H E T E A C H I N G

LEGACY

O F D E R E K P R I N C E

The Quest for Character

When we think about a big city—like Miami, for instance—we would say there are many different churches in Miami. But I don't think that is how God sees it. I believe God sees only one church. After all, the book of Revelation tells us Jesus is going to marry the Church—His Bride—and I do not believe Jesus is a bigamist. He's only going to marry one church. So we can think about many different churches, but God sees only one church. When Paul wrote his epistles, he didn't write to the Baptist church in Corinth, or to the Church of the Open Bible in Rome, or to the Evangelical Church in Ephesus. He always wrote to *the* Church in the city. We are a long way from that today, but I don't believe God has ever changed His mind.

Therefore, I believe it is important that the leaders of congregations within a city or region know how to relate to one another. It's very easy to become self-centered—to think about “*my* church” and to focus on that alone. But that is not a scriptural attitude. I believe we should see one another as co-elders in the same church.

One of the most important elements of Christian character is revealed through asking ourselves what place the cross plays in each of our lives. In Galatians 2:20 Paul establishes the standard.

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me . . .

I ask myself if that is true in my life. Because that's the only protection. In Galatians 5:24 Paul goes on:

And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

There's the description of those who truly belong to Christ. It doesn't say they belong to the Open Bible Church or are Baptists or Presbyterians or Catholics. The only mark of those who truly belong to Christ is that they have crucified their flesh.

Now in Romans 6:6, Paul says "our old man was crucified." That was something God did. But in Galatians 5:24, he says it's something you have to do. You have to put the nails into your own fleshly nature. And crucifixion is always painful. There is no painless crucifixion.

God's Standard

Having established the fact that character only comes through the cross, let's look at a picture of the character that God expects. It is found in Psalm 15.

LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart; he who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor does he take up a reproach against his friend; in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but he honors those who fear the LORD; he who swears to his own hurt and does not change; he who does not put out his money at usury, nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved.

The first verse is a question, and the rest of the psalm answers it. David lists seven characteristics of the people who will dwell in God's holy hill. If we are going to be there, we need those characteristics. Let's look at these points about the person who will dwell in God's holy hill—remembering that these are produced by grace, a grace that works.

One who walks uprightly. His actions are right in God's sight.

One who works righteousness. He doesn't just preach it, he does it. He "speaks the truth in his heart." What comes out of his mouth is what he has in his heart. He doesn't say one thing with his mouth and have another thing in his heart.

One who does not backbite with his tongue. He doesn't speak against other people behind their backs. It's been said that many Christian ministers who are wounded have their wounds in their back.

One who does not do evil to his neighbor. He is kind and fair.

One who does not take up a reproach against his neighbor. If you go to him and tell him something bad about his friend, he won't listen to you. He won't take it up. This is one of the most important points of Christian ethics.

In whose eyes a vile person is despised. He doesn't bow before the wicked. A person may be very important politically or even in the church, but if he's vile, he is despised by this man.

One who honors those who fear the Lord. He shows respect for all of God's children. He treats with respect even those who might seem unimportant.

One who swears to his own hurt and does not change. If he makes a commitment, he sticks to it—even if it turns out to be to his own disadvantage.

One who does not put out his money at usury. He doesn't charge interest to somebody who has borrowed money from him.

One who does not take a bribe against the innocent. You cannot pay him to do something against an innocent person.

At the end it says, "He who does these things shall never be moved." A person like this is unshakable. If all the elders in the Church were like that, there would be no problems in the Church. I believe these are the marks of Christian ethics. If we practice these ten points we could eradicate ethical crises in the Church.

Let's look at Colossians 3:3–5 and go even deeper.

For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Christ is our life. It's a life that cannot be destroyed. It cannot be extinguished. It is undefeatable and it will continue forever. And Paul added, "Now put to death your members that are on earth." In other words, you have to keep them dead. It's not just one single experience, but it's a life of continuing discipline.

Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

Here in Philippians 2:1–4, Paul describes our attitude if we are to keep unity in the Body of Christ. He uses several different words, but there is one word that covers it all: *humility*. That's the key to unity. Proverbs 13:10 says "Only by pride cometh contention" (KJV). So it's logical that the opposite of pride—humility—would be the solution to contention.

The Bible never says that God will make us humble. The Bible always tells us to humble ourselves. It is not something God will do for us. It's something we have to do for ourselves.

Paul also said to let nothing be done through selfish ambition. In my opinion, selfish ambition is the greatest single problem in the Church.

I have a friend who is the editor of a religious magazine in the United States. Some years ago, I said to him, "Many of the articles in your magazine are good. But after I read the advertisements I feel I need a bath, because it is all self-promotion."

It's Personal

Christianity is primarily about right relationships, not right doctrine. The Gospel is not a set of rules. It's not a statement about God. It doesn't come through knowing everything about God. The purpose of the Gospel is a right relationship with God. Any preaching of the Gospel that does not produce that is a disaster.

In Matthew 18:15–17, Jesus speaks about how to maintain right relationships with others.

"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."

So there are three steps involved. Go to your brother by himself. If you alone can settle it, then you don't need to go any further. But if you can't settle it, then take two or three reliable witnesses so that there's a record of what has been said. If that still doesn't settle it, then bring it before the whole church. Whatever the church says will have to be done. If he will not listen to the church, then don't treat him as a fellow believer any longer. He's lost the right to be called a believer.

That makes the church very important. I often wonder if some churches are in a condition where they have the right to do that. Jesus goes on in verses 19 and 20:

"Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

In the Greek, "agree" is a musical word. It gives us the word "symphony." It speaks about harmony. And Jesus says, "If two of you can harmonize on earth

about anything that they ask, it will be done for them.” I’m not a musician, but I do know that to be *almost* in harmony is very painful. I’ve seen many Christian relationships that are *almost* in harmony. I think God stops up His ears in heaven.

You may have noticed I skipped verse 18. Let’s look at it now.

“Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

That is such tremendous authority! In a certain sense, the authority of heaven is committed to us as believers. But notice, it is *we* who have to do it. I’ve often heard Christians pray for God to bind or loose something. But that’s not what the Bible says. God says, “*You* bind it in My name.” It’s up to us to have the faith and the courage to do that. Then, when we have bound it on earth, it is already bound in heaven.

I’ve seen over the years many Christian ministers who are very insecure because their security depends on success. I have a different view of life altogether. For me, success is to please my Father. And security is knowing I am loved by my Father. I believe that’s what the Gospel is intended to produce. If every pastor in a city had as their primary motive to please the Father, there would be no rivalry. There would be no competition.

I believe that is the way God wants us to live. I believe it’s the answer for the question of Christian ethics. If we get our relationship right with the Father, all other relationships will fall into place.

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