

NO SUBSTITUTE FOR VICTORY

It is November 2006, on the eve of midterm elections in the United States. Domestic and international issues have dominated the struggle for control of Congress, statehouses, and numerous other contests. And then, all of a sudden, another Christian preacher scandal hits the airwaves.

The focus is the senior pastor of a 14,000-member megachurch in the American heartland, within one of the largest and most powerful enclaves in American evangelical Christianity. Only recently had this man been chosen to serve as president of the National Association of Evangelicals, a post of significant political as well as theological influence. In the political campaign then in progress, he had distinguished himself as a prominent leader of a statewide crusade to outlaw homosexual marriage.

And then it was revealed that, in the midst of all this, he had been visiting a male prostitute—and not for Bible studies! Later it would also be disclosed that he had been sexually involved with at least one male member of his congregation. Once again, caught in the glare of a high-profile transgression, trusting believers were forced to wrestle with betrayal and shattered confidence.

The pastor's initial response didn't help. When first confronted by reporters with the allegations, obviously caught off guard, he insisted—among other things—that “I never said I was perfect.” One could hardly imagine such words offering much comfort to the pastor's stricken wife, his five grown children, or the many thousands who had reposed trust in him.

It wasn't the first such episode of betrayal, and it wouldn't be the last. Several years later, another megachurch pastor in one of the great cities of the South confronted similar accusations. Soon thereafter, speaking in his own defense in the context of a Sunday sermon, he too declared, “I never in my life portrayed myself as a perfect man.”

During the race for his party's nomination during the 2012 presidential primaries, a leading presidential candidate was forced to field questions regarding his past divorces and extramarital affairs. He too defended himself with the rejoinder, “I don't think I'm perfect.” Most recently, another prominent political leader, on the comeback trail from a scandal of his own, declared in response to questions about his marital infidelity that “none of us are perfect” (2).

Like a needle stuck in the groove of one of the broken records of yesteryear, the mantra of resignation to failure echoes incessantly from Christian lips, with no end in sight.

Just Forgiven?

Every time I see the bumper sticker, I cringe! It reads, “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.”

I cringe because, while Christians may derive great comfort from these words, I truly doubt anyone else does! For indeed, the past two thousand years have witnessed a steady, heart-sickening parade of Christian imperfection.

Racism. Slavery. Inquisition. Industrial brutality. Ethnic cleansing. Monks beaming while heretics burn. Business tycoons declaring it their Christian right to let workers starve. Men in bedsheets setting fire to two sticks of wood, claiming to glorify Jesus. Churchmen turning a blind eye as trainloads of a despised race chug endlessly across a continent toward the Final Solution.

Moving perhaps closer to home, what of the church elder whose pious words and generous offerings hide the fact that he beats his wife and molests his children? Or the church official who can’t seem to account for funds missing under suspicious circumstances? Or the pastor who so busies himself with “God’s work” that he neglects his family?

The list goes on. The record of Christian history both past and present gives painful meaning to Mahatma Gandhi’s reputed statement, “Call me Christlike, and I’m honored. Call me a Christian, and I’m insulted.”

There are those who insist that in our postmodern age, people expect authenticity from Christians, but not perfection. In the often artificial environment Christians sometimes create for themselves, statements like this may sound reasonably satisfying. That is, until one stops to ponder the actual meaning of such a statement—in plain, nitty-gritty, rubber-meets-road practical terms.

Think about it:

Which sins can I, as a Christian, be caught committing, which would not fundamentally compromise my authenticity as a witness for Christ and Christianity?

If a Christian parent is harsh and needlessly severe with a child?

If a Christian spouse is abusive or unfaithful?

If a Christian business executive is less than fair in the treatment of associates or subordinates on the job?

If a Christian displays racial insensitivity or prejudice?

If a Christian demonstrates a callous, unfeeling spirit toward the poor and downtrodden?

If a Christian indulges the loss of temper, even in a private conversation?

What would the result of such behavior be for the Christian witness of such a person? Can we really anticipate that if unbelievers find a Christian doing any of these things, that they will benignly write it off as just another example of unavoidable weakness?

Whether the world admits it or not, they hold Christians to a higher standard than they hold others, because our profession of faith—by its very nature—demands that they do so. After all, we claim to serve a supernatural God, with supernatural power over evil. We talk about being born again. We talk about changed lives. It certainly isn't unreasonable for the world to assume that when they look at our lives, they should be able to see evidence of something more than the frail best of which most if not all are capable.

The trouble is, for most of the past twenty centuries, the world has seen precious little difference between the professed followers of Christ on the one hand, and those of other faiths or of none on the other. And sadly, too many Christians have encouraged the watching world to believe this is normal. Consider the following statement, from a bestselling Christian author:

It is our human destiny on earth to remain imperfect, incomplete, weak, and mortal, and only by accepting that destiny can we escape the force of gravity and receive grace.

On this basis, millions of sincere Christians believe something less than total obedience to God's will is all their earthly lives can hope for. To one degree or another, they believe falling and failing and sinning will last as long as they inhabit this planet. Yes, they believe in the importance and necessity of holiness in the Christian life. But they insist it will never be complete this side of heaven.

I often wonder whether those who embrace this idea have truly considered its implications. One wishes to honor their integrity and good faith when they insist they believe as strongly as anyone that godly living and obedience to the divine requirements are essential to the Christian experience. The problem arises when one considers what less-than-flawless obedience is supposed to look like. The timeworn mantra of "tolerance" heard so often these days—that everyone's spirituality is unique and that Christians should simply stop "judging" each other—is no help here. Christians might conceivably learn to stop criticizing or judging each other, but that won't stop the world from criticizing and judging Christians! What moral credibility can the followers of Christ possibly maintain before mankind if the sins they so glibly condemn—whether in the church or society—are held by the same Christians to be inevitable, even for the most committed, dedicated believers?

During the late 1990s, the American President came under fierce attack for a moral indiscretion committed with a White House intern. Many conservative Christians, and others, demanded that he resign or be removed from office as a result. But a *Newsweek* editorial offered a telling analysis of the theology this President had been raised to believe—“that once he was born again, his salvation was ensured. Sinning—even repeatedly—would not bar his soul from heaven.” The editorial closed with the disquieting observation that the former President—in the editor’s words—“learned his worldview not in the dark of a Saturday night but in the light of a Sunday morning.”

It is safe to assume, knowing the popular theological assumptions taken for granted by most American evangelicals, that the former President’s salvation theology was one thing he shared in common with those Christians who so desperately wanted to see him driven from power. But one is led to ask, If the former President’s actions couldn’t cost him his place in heaven, why should they have cost him the Presidency?

Here is exposed the crux of the dilemma faced by so many conservative Christians. Sincere Bible believers in our land continue to condemn sin, both publicly and passionately. Many of these declare quite openly that the growing cultural acceptance of certain sins might well be bringing God’s wrath upon the nation. But according to the beliefs held dear by many of these very same Christians, overcoming sin is impossible, even for the most consecrated of Christ’s followers, so long as life shall last.

No wonder the world remains unimpressed—and justifiably disgusted!

Is this dilemma unavoidable? Is the Christian’s earthly destiny summarized in the bumper sticker quoted earlier?

Or does the Bible offer a better way?

We’re going to find out.

The Bible on Victory Over Sin

In one of the most powerful attacks on hypocrisy among those who profess the name of the Lord, God declared the following through the words of the prophet Isaiah:

“Here the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; Give ear to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah.

“To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?” says the Lord. I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats. . . .

“When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood.

“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings form before My eyes. Cease to do evil.

“Learn to do good; Seek justice, reprove the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.

“Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet; they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isa. 1:10-11,15-18, NKJV).

Try to remember—the ones God is speaking to here profess to be His people. These are the ones God is describing as “rulers of Sodom” and “people of Gomorrah.” How would conservative, Bible-believing Christians who consider themselves “saved,” enjoy being called Sodomites?

No, these aren't the heathen being talked about. These are the ones offering sacrifices in God's temple. These are the ones attending God's appointed feasts and ceremonies. Yet they keep on sinning. And God in this passage is exhorting them to be washed clean from their transgressions, which He declares to be “like scarlet.” How we can praise His name that regardless of how dark our disobedience might be, God can make it white as snow!

The Bible contains many promises of how God can do this for those who trust in Him and appropriate His power in their lives. King David understood this, even if he didn't always live accordingly! Listen to what he says:

“Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord!

“Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with the whole heart!

“They also do no iniquity; they walk in His ways. . . .

“Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You” (Psalm 119:1-3,11, NKJV).

We all know the story of the woman who was thrown at Jesus' feet, having been caught in the act of adultery. After Jesus had revealed the hidden misdeeds in the lives of her accusers, Jesus asked the woman, “Where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?” (John 8:10, NKJV). She replied, “No one, Lord.” Then Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more” (verse 11).

This promise Jesus offers to every sinner, to every discouraged man or woman beaten down with addictions and destructive behaviors. First, He offers forgiveness to the heart softened and penitent, desirous of a change. This is how He can say, “Neither do I condemn you.”

But He doesn't stop there, as many professed Christians do. The gospel of Holy Scripture doesn't stop with forgiveness. It continues with the promise of total conquest, total victory, the total purification of the life from every sin that besets us. The Bible contains other promises which offer the same assurance:

“Awake to righteousness, and do not sin” (I Cor. 15:34, NKJV).

“Therefore having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (II Cor. 7:1, NKJV).

“For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds;

“Casting down arguments, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (II Cor. 10:4-5, NKJV).

Speaking of the church, God declared through the apostle Paul:

“That He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:17, NKJV).

According to the New Testament it is the example of Jesus, lived out in His earthly life, which makes possible the victory over sin God’s people can experience here on earth:

“For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps;

“Who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth” (I Peter 2:21-22, NKJV).

Elsewhere we read:

“But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. . . .

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9, NKJV).

The Lord especially promises this work of cleansing for those who wait for Him at His second coming. A number of verses in both the Old and New Testament help us understand this imperative of preparation as Jesus’ coming draws near. Speaking of those anticipating Jesus’ soon return, the apostle Peter writes: “Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless” (II Peter 3:14, NKJV).

The apostle John says the same thing about those who wait for the coming of Jesus at the end of time. In his words:

“Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

“and everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. . . .

“Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous” (I John 3:2-3,7, NKJV).

We saw the passage from First Peter about the example of Jesus, and how by His grace we can follow it. The Bible tells us that this example of guileless behavior is especially to be demonstrated by God’s people at the end of human history, as Jesus is about to come. Both the Old and the New Testament contain this promise:

“The remnant of Israel shall do no unrighteousness and speak no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth; for they shall feed their flocks and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid” (Zeph. 3:13, NKJV).

And speaking of those taken to heaven at Christ’s coming without seeing death, the apostle John declares:

“And in their mouth was found no guile, for they are without fault before the throne of God” (Rev. 14:5, NKJV).

Conclusion

It was General Douglas McArthur, famous for his triumphs during the Second World War, who stated, “In war there is no substitute for victory.” Not even God’s forgiveness can be a substitute for victory in the Christian life, despite what some folks believe. Yes, God’s forgiveness covers our past life of sin. But His imparted strength is granted to all who trust Him, so that our sinful past can truly be left behind.

In 2010, when golf legend Tiger Woods publicly confessed to the sin of adultery, he pledged to go forward “never repeating the mistakes I’ve made.” In words more than slightly remarkable, coming from one of the world’s richest men, Tiger also observed: “Life is not defined by what you achieve, but by what you overcome.”

Too bad Mr. Woods is a practicing Buddhist! I pray someone will find a way to share with him two short and powerful Bible verses, which give in a nutshell both the gospel and the Bible’s promise of total victory. The first is our Savior’s admonition: “Without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5, NKJV). The second is the apostle Paul’s assurance: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).