



Your Bill Is Paid

Someone gave me an imaginary teaching session by Jesus to the disciples. I don't remember the person who gave it to me or the source of the piece, but let me share it with you:

Then Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and gathering them around him, he taught them saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they who thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied...."

Then Simon Peter said, "Do we have to write this down?"

"Are we supposed to know this?" asked Andrew.

James said, "Will we have a test on this?"

"I don't have any paper," Bartholomew complained.

"The other disciples," John said, "didn't have to learn this."

Judas raised his hand and asked to go to the bathroom.

One of the Pharisees who was present asked to see Jesus' lesson plans and inquired of Jesus, "Where is your anticipatory set and your objectives in the cognitive domain?"

And Jesus wept.

People Problems

Have you ever noticed how people don't act, say and do what you wanted or expected?

I was a pastor for twenty-eight years, and I was always a "sucker" for programs hawked by the folks who built mega-churches, that promised me that if I followed their system, their program, their methodology, I could have a church as big and successful as their churches.

The programs always involved the people of my church. They had to be trained in a particular methodology of evangelism, motivated in particular ways, instructed in the principles of growth, etc.

The problem was the people.

They never did what I told them to do. They never followed the plan. They always did it wrong. They were determined, God bless 'em, to listen to another drummer. They just refused to be programmed.

I would have been far more successful than I have been, if people had just done what I wanted them to do. People never do, act, think or say what you want or expect.

Registering Complaints

I was complaining the other day to the Lord about that very problem. I was doing one of those periodic assessments of my ministry and thinking about all the programs that didn't work.

I told the Lord about all the people who refused to fit into the mold that I had prepared for them.

That was when God got fed up with me.

"You are like that!"

"What do you mean, I'm like that? I've been your servant, lo these many years. I have been a pastor, a Bible teacher, a seminary professor, a writer..."

"That doesn't matter," He interrupted. "A lot of the time you were just like the people you're complaining about. The difference between my plans and your plans is that your plans were often sort of screwy...an effort for you to be 'successful' and 'honored.' My plans were always suitable. My plans were always designed for you and for you to be a blessing to my people."

I don't know about you, but I have a lot of trouble with receiving. I don't like someone to do something for me that I can do for myself.

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he asked me to remind you

That was when he showed me the areas of my life that could have been different if I had only been obedient to all that he had shown me.

And, no, I'm not going to share with you that part of the conversation. That's none of your business.

Then he loved me.

That's right. He loved me, said it was OK and that he had not been

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surprised. He told me that he had taken it all into account on the cross.

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus..." (Romans 8:1).

And so what started as a condemnation of people to whom I have ministered became a rather uncomfortable but profitable examination of myself.

I've been thinking about how I don't do, think and say what I expected.

The Will to Do What We Don't

Paul had that problem, too. He said, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate to do.... I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:15, 18, 19).

Looking to the past and doing a self-assessment has little value in the life of a Christian. You see, the past is the past and you can't change it.

But there is one great benefit that is the benefit of, once again, seeing God's great love, his unbe-

lievable patience and his awesome grace.

That's what Paul did. After looking at his own failure he cried out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (verse 24).

It is no accident that two verses later at the beginning of the 8th chapter of Romans Paul writes: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

The Bill Is Paid

I once had lunch in a restaurant where the owner, a man who had been touched by something I had said, told the cashier to tear up the check. I don't know about you, but I have a lot of trouble with receiving. I don't like someone to do something for me that I can do for myself. When I went to the cashier to pay the bill, she said, "Your bill has been paid."

"What do you mean, it's been paid?" I asked.

"The owner said that you are not to be charged."

"I appreciate that," I said, growing a bit irritated, "but I want to pay."

"I'm sorry," she said, smiling, "but you can't pay it. It is already covered. There is no longer any bill."

I talk to (and receive a great many letters from) a lot of folks who are dealing with the shame, the regret, the hurt and the pain of the past. I guess that's normal...but it's time to move away from that. It's time to let it all go.

But before you do that, thank God for his faithfulness and his unconditional love. Remember that none of his plans were ever thwarted by your failure or unfaithfulness.

Remember that he never stopped loving you. Remember that he forgave you then so you wouldn't have to live in it now. Remember his sovereignty over your past and the things he taught you, even when the lessons hurt. And then praise him.

He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown