



CWRm

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What Itching Ears Really Want to Hear

As a handful of sand thrown into the ocean, so are the sins of all flesh as compared to the mercy of God.—St. Isaac the Syrian

The people who know God well—mystics, hermits, prayerful people, those who risk everything to find God—always meet a lover, not a dictator.—Richard Rohr

What a beautiful gospel! God, the ocean of infinite mercy. **God, always the lover and never the dictator!** If that is our God, then I want everyone to know and experience him. Nothing about our gospel says, “Well, if God is so loving, forgiving and inclusive, there’s no point in telling others.”

The Christlike God is the best news ever and deserves global distribution. Indeed, that was Christ’s plan from the beginning: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15). Such good news. But what do you think—is it *too good* to be true?

For the past year, I’ve been meditating on a troubling warning from Paul’s pastoral epistles: *For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths* (2 Timothy 4:3-5).

What a sobering message for an evangelist who believes in and proclaims publically the limitless mercies of God! When I preach the bottomless depths of Christ’s love for the whole world, the question inevitably comes, “Aren’t you just tickling people’s ears with what they want to hear?”

We hear that accusation from critics and we hear it from our own hearts...all too frequently. But when I carefully double-check our scriptures, I’m pleased to rediscover that God’s love really is higher, wider, longer and deeper than we could ever ask, imagine, understand...or preach (Ephesians 3:18-20).

The beautiful gospel exceeds our ability to communicate or grasp. *To infinity and beyond!* (With a happy nod to Pixar’s “Buzz Lightyear”).

Back to the Apostle Paul’s caution. Who were these imposters? We’re not sure, but we know that Timothy was resisting religious teachers who were corrupt doctrinally and perhaps morally. They propagated “myths” opposed to the truth, possibly connected to rituals and requirements that puffed up the religious in-group. Parallels abound in our age. But why does religiosity tickle the ears?

Daniel Skillman, author of *Follow the Rabbi*, articulates it so well that I’ve asked his permission to repeat his words:

When I tell people that God loves everyone, always, and forever, and there’s a good chance all will come to embrace that truth eventually, I’m often told that I’m “preaching what itching ears want to hear.”

However, experience has taught me this: itching ears want to hear that someone’s going to be punished. Itching ears want to hear, “You’re in, but they’re out.” Itching ears want to hear about hell—that it’s very hot, and very, very full.

So, no, I don’t preach what itching ears want to hear. I preach that God looks exactly like Jesus, and this is good news because Jesus loves everyone and He will never stop. Few seem to want to hear that. But one day, I think, they’ll be pretty glad about it.

I think I’m starting to get it. **Grace does not scratch the itch of religious performance.** Yet our age-old message is good news, a beautiful gospel announced even in the Old Testament. I leave the last word to the prophet Micah:

Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious acts of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:18-19).

Hallelujah! □