

Radical Restoration

Sermon at Cross-culture Bible Church, Arncliffe

Sunday 15th February 2004

© 2004 Jodie McNeill (www.jodiemcneill.com)

SCANDAL!

What do the following four people have in common? Rene Rivkin, Shane Warne, Peter Hollingsworth, and Frank Cicutto. Anyone want to make a suggestion?

Well, they've all fallen from grace. Why? Because of scandal. Rene Rivkin was caught inside trading, and now spends his weekends in prison. Shane Warne was suspended from cricket for a year because he took banned substances. Peter Hollingsworth, former Archbishop and Governor General, resigned when his poor handling of past child sexual abuse cases came to light. And Frank Cicutto, former NAB Chairman, resigned this month when he took the heat for a financial currency scandal.

Because of a mistake in their past these men have all fallen from grace.

Have you noticed how much the media loves to circle like vultures over these fallen giants? Did you see the way they portrayed poor Rene Rivkin last weekend? The extravagant, rags-to-riches Rivkin was shown as a debilitated, weak man, hobbling from jail in his dressing gown.

How the mighty have fallen!

But why does our society love to spit these leaders out of our mouth? Why? Because when others fall, we all feel a bit better. After all, we all hate sin and injustice, and when someone else has been caught then it means our own hypocrisy is hidden in their shadow. Suddenly our own dishonesty and immorality pales in significance.

What's more, when a bad-egg is removed from office, we try to convince ourselves that the organisation they left is now somehow cleansed from unrighteousness. Now Cicutto's left the NAB, we can be sure that all the employees will now suddenly make honest and sensible decisions... now that Hollingsworth's left public office, we can now rest assured that all child sexual abuse problems have suddenly been solved... now that Warnie's had a year's punishment, we can be sure that drugs are no longer an issue in cricket.

When a leader in the church falls, we often follow the way of the world. Appropriately, we remove the person from their leadership position. But when this happens, the person often has to move away from the church in which the problem happened. Relationships are severed, and the fallen leader is cut loose from the church.

But it doesn't stop there. Gossip, the Christian News Network, CNN, kicks into action. Spreading faster than lightning, the disgraced leader gets more and more defamed... often in the name of the gospel.

Maybe I'm exaggerating, and hopefully that's usually true. But when it comes to scandal, big or small, Christians often blindly follow the way of the world.

But, brothers and sisters, it should not be this way with us.

RADICAL RESTORATION (first half of verse one)

In the final chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians, God tells us how to act when someone is

caught in a transgression, a sin. And the advice is very different to the way our world operates.

Look with me at the first sentence in chapter six:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.

If someone is caught in sin, the spiritual people should gently restore them.

If you look closely at this verse you will see two surprising words... anyone and any. If anyone is caught in any transgression...

We might expect that God would tell us to restore people with sins that are not scandalous or serious. But that's not what he says. The word is 'anyone'.

No matter how far a person falls from grace, so to speak, they cannot fall away too much to not be restored by brothers and sisters. No matter who they are or what they have done, they are never beyond restoration.

Have you cheated on your spouse? You can be restored. Have you committed fraud? You can be restored. Is your life full of jealousy and envy and drunkenness? You can be restored. Have you misled God's people by preaching a false gospel? You can be restored.

No matter who you are or what you have done, you can be restored.

This is the wonder of grace. No matter what you have done, you cannot sin too much to be unforgivable.

How is this so? Well, as God has made clear in the earlier parts of this letter to the Galatians, a person doesn't get forgiven by God in return for doing good things. You don't get tickets to heaven by impressing God with religious acts or morality.

But the flipside is also true. Even if you have lived your whole life in immorality, even if you have murdered and raped and cheated and lied and anything else, God may still choose to save you. Even if you've burned down churches and murdered priests, you are not too far away for God to draw you near.

How is this fair? How can God show such contempt for his laws? What about the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount?

The answer is simple. If God only saved law-abiding citizens, then the only person he could save would be Jesus. He is the only one who has kept all of God's laws. Everyone else has failed, no matter how moral or religious they appear. That's what God means when he spoke through Paul's words earlier in chapter 3, in the 10th verse "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them". "All things" means all things.

The standard is impossible to keep. One sin and your out!

So then, you may ask, how can anyone be saved? If only one little sin can send you to hell, then how is anyone a Christian?

This answer is also simple. It was only through God's amazing grace that he chose to swap our guilty lives with Jesus' innocent life. Look back again in Chapter three verse 13, "[Jesus] Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us". Jesus swapped his sinlessness for our sinfulness, he swapped his innocence for our guilt, he swapped his life for

our death. And now we can be forgiven by God despite our guilt.

So, this means that our goodness or badness has nothing to do with our forgiveness. No matter what you've done, it's not enough to save you from hell.

So then, how can we be saved? Through faith. Through believing in Jesus. Through trusting his promises and accepting his rescue.

It is for this reason that in chapter six it says 'anyone' and 'any'. No one is saved by morality or religiosity. All that matters is whether God has chosen to save you. And you can know if that is true by whether he has led you to trust his promises and act upon them. If you have said to God "I admit I am helpless to win your forgiveness, so I ask you for mercy"... if you have said to him "Sorry for my sin, please forgive me"... then you can know you are saved.

With all this in mind, you can see why this first verse of chapter six must be true:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression [that is, sin], you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.

This is the mercy of God.

It almost goes without saying, but if you haven't come to God and asked for forgiveness, then don't miss out. Today might be the day that you need to come to him and seek his mercy, and then know his forgiveness, no matter who you are, or what you've done.

GENTLE RESTORATION (first half of verse one again)

So, how should this restoration happen? How are the 'spiritual people' to bring the sinner back into the fold? Look again at verse one of chapter six:

...you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.

Restoration must be done gently, with gentleness.

In the chapter before, God gave us a list of virtues, of characteristics that flow from a spiritual life, a new life given to us by God. One of the aspects of this 'fruit of the spirit' is gentleness.

When a person gets disciplined, it is normal for people to have strong feelings. It often takes courage to confront someone, and if that person doesn't admit their transgression then it can get even messier.

And so this is why restoration needs to happen in a spirit of gentleness. We need to restore the fallen gently. We need to put any painful feelings behind us, and reach out our hand of love to those who have transgressed.

And when we restore them it doesn't mean that they will get back their original role. If a person has shown a weakness for money or has abused children then we will not restore their position as treasurer or Kids Church leader. Yet, if we are obedient, we will restore them to the community of believers, to the church. We will open our arms again and accept them, even if it was our money they stole, or our child they hurt. This is radical restoration.

And, yes, it must be gentle. Even if there is so much we want to say to the person or do to the person, we must leave it behind us and treat them gently. This is God's will for us.

CAREFUL RESTORATION (second half of verse one to verse three)

Yet, we must also show great care as we restore the sinner to our community. We must watch ourselves. Look at the second half of verse one:

Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

When you restore them, be careful you don't get tempted.

In what way might we be tempted? Is it that we might show such empathy with the sinner that we end up doing or accepting the very thing they've been caught doing? Maybe that's the case, and certainly this is something we need to be aware of.

But more likely, what God's warning us to do is to make sure we're not tempted to feel that we're better than the other person, that there's no way I would do such a thing.

Yet if we believe this, then we're fooling ourselves. Why? Because we're in need of help as much as the other person. That's why verse two says that we are to:

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

We're in this together. God hasn't made some of us to be moral policemen and others to be moral criminals. All of us are both moral policemen and moral criminals. That is why we need to help each other, to bear each other's burdens.

To do so is, as the verse says, to fulfil the law of Christ. Everything that Jesus stood for, everything he said and did was out of love for the other person. To bear another person's burdens is to do exactly the kind of thing Jesus did for us by bearing our sins. But unlike Jesus, he didn't need us to bear his sins for him, as he didn't have any. But we need to bear each other's sins.

And so if we think we're better than the other person, we're fooling ourselves. So, verse 3:

For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

If you think you are a moral 'someone' when you're really a moral 'nobody' then you're having yourself on. You think you're somehow superior to the weak sinner you're restoring? Well, God wants you to have a hard look at yourself.

If we really think that we are morally or religiously superior to another Christian then we've misunderstood the gospel. We are all completely unable to escape God's judgement because we think we have a good moral character or perform good works. It may be that God is bringing real growth in our lives by the work of his Spirit. But, remember, it's his work in our lives, not our work in our lives.

HUMBLE RESTORATION (verse four and five)

And so, we need to have a hard look at ourselves. Verse 4:

But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbour.

All of us need to carefully consider what is our work, and what is God's work. Then when we realise it's all from God, we won't brag about our good works to other people.

This is what verse 4 is saying. When it says 'reason to boast' it means the achievement itself, the thing that we naturally want to boast to others about. "I met up with John the other day... yeah, I told him that even though he'd treated us so badly, I told him we had forgiven him... it wasn't easy, speaking gently to him and all, but I know it was important for me to

have that conversation”.

When you do a good work, like obeying God by gently restoring a transgressor, realise who is responsible for the good work. Test it. And then you will realise that it's really only from God, not yourself. The fruit of the Spirit, are fruit of the spirit, not fruit of your heart. When we are gentle or kind or loving, it is from God, not from us. When we show peace and patience and goodness, it is God's work, not ours. Whenever we show self-control or joy, it is the hand of God.

So, don't go on taking God's glory for yourself. Instead, let the reason to boast, the achievement, remain in yourself alone. Keep it to yourself! Don't brag about it! Don't let the achievement be in your neighbour, don't let them even know about it. After all, as is the case with financial gifts, we must follow Jesus' command to keep these things secret.

Why? Because, verse 5, each will have to bear his own load. If you want to take the glory for your good acts, then you can take the blame for your bad acts. If you want to play by those rules, then you will have to bear your own load when you are judged. But to do so is crazy. If we bear our own load, then no one could stand.

COSTLY RESTORATION (verse six)

Now, after these five verses Paul makes a statement that seems to have no connection with the verses before. He says, in verse 6:

One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches.

Students need to materially support Bible teachers. Christians are obliged to financially support Bible teachers in their ministry.

What has this got to do with the verses before and the verses after?

Well, we don't know for sure, but my hunch is that the person in verse one who was caught in sin may well have been a Bible teacher. Perhaps he was the one who is preaching the false gospel that Paul has just knocked on its head. Maybe these words we're looking at today are written to stop the Galatian readers from harshly treating the man who is preaching untruths.

We can't know for sure, but in my mind it seems to make sense.

Imagine one of the members of our church stood up during announcements and revealed to us that one of the leaders in this church was caught in sin. This leader had been telling us something that was untrue, and we've all been conned by his lie. How would we feel? Probably very angry and hurt. And so the right thing to say in this sad announcement would be

“now everyone, we need to be gentle... and we need to work towards caring for this sinner, even though we're hurt. Because, after all, we're all sinners too, and it's only by grace that any of us can be saved. Furthermore, we should continue to provide support to this person, continue to financially care for him and his family as we restore them to the community by God's hand. And then we can talk about the future later.”

This is radical restoration. This is gentleness that comes from the Spirit, not from the flesh. But this is what God demands of us, and what he will enable us to do by his strength.

This is the way that we are to understand good works. This helps us know why and how we should do good to others, to be generous, to be kind, to be honest, to be moral, to be obedient.

You see, the good works come from God. He made them happen. Like Ephesians 2:10 tells us, God prepared even our good works in advance for us to do. Any good works you do today are already part of God's script for your life. So, when we do a good work, when we show love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, it's from God.

Yet, despite all this, God tells us to do the good works. And he judges us when we don't.

Hard to work out just how it can be that God is the maker of all good works, yet he can also punish us when we don't do them. I don't know just how this works out, but both facts are true.

VALUABLE RESTORATION (verse seven to ten)

And it is the second of these truths that we see in the remainder of this passage. Look at verses 7 to 9:

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

In other words, to quote Jesus, store up your riches in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy. If you spend your money and your good works on earthly things then they'll be burned up on judgement day. If you spend your money and good works on heavenly things then those things will last forever.

Are you wise with the way you spend your money? Are you wise with the way you spend your time? Are you wise with the way you live and love? Spend your money and time wisely, and make them count for good. Otherwise, you're wasting your life. And God will take it into account on judgement day.

For this reason, let us do good. But to whom? Verse 10:

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Whenever we can, let's do good to everyone! After all, our works are meaningful! If we do good, then we will reap the benefits of doing them. If we fail to do good, we will be wasting our time and disobeying God.

But note, it's to everyone. To restrict our good deeds to just fellow Christians is to misunderstand our role in the world. If we are to be salt and light in the world, it will be costly. But the cost is worthwhile.

I am always reminded of the remarkable verse in 1 Peter 3:1 where God tells women to win over their husbands to the faith "without a word". Her good works, her life of love, will have a positive outcome in this life and the next.

When we do good in our world, God can use our wordless acts to win people over. When we show random acts of kindness, or maybe targeted acts of kindness, we can be a testimony to the world to the loving kindness of God. When we show love for the unlovable, we show God's love without words.

Yet, we must be careful to not leave it there. We may win an audience by our good works, but we must make sure we speak so that they can hear and believe. If they don't know why we're being kind then ultimately it won't do them any good.

However as we do good we must make sure that we look after other Christians. We must show kindness to each other, showing love amongst one another as God has given it to us.

RESTORATION

Despite his one year ban from cricket, Shane Warne was this week restored to his position as the Sultan of Spin. Again, our pitches will be graced by the man who is arguably the finest spin bowler in the world. No doubt there was pain and bitterness. No doubt there was and continues to be resentment amongst the ranks of cricket.

Yet, all that is now left behind. Warnie now returns to do what every Australian, except perhaps Stuart McGill, wants him to do best.

When a leader sins, it is unlikely that they will be allowed to return to their position of leadership. Yet, like all Christians, they are never beyond restoration. God wants us to restore all sinners to our fellowship, even if it is painful for us or them. Yet, as we do so, the fruit of the Spirit will be seen, and our good works will testify to each other and to the world that God is great and God is good.

May God strengthen us to do his will.

Amen.