

Explore the Bible: Equipped to Live

September 28, 2016

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Oct. 16 focuses on 1 Peter 4:1-11.*

The vast majority—85 percent or more—of mainline denominational churches either are plateaued or declining in membership. Those of us who love our churches grieve over empty pews and at the same time wonder why we are not effectively communicating the gospel to more people.

The biblical text for this lesson may be more revealing about that issue than first meets the eye. Peter's concern that Christians live in loving Christ-like relationships is for this primary reason: That in the way we relate to others, "God might be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ."

Humbled by our own failures

If we look back on the verses leading up to that purposeful declaration, we discover a whole new reason for living lives that honor Christ. Peter is quick to remind all of us, right away, that we are not bearing witness of Christ from a person history of absolute purity.

We are all, one way or another, products of the culture in which we live. It is impossible truly to love those who do not know Christ without being humbled by our own history of personal moral failure. That is the emphasis of verse 3.

We all have moral and spiritual skeletons in our closets. One of the most effective ways of loving an unbeliever is to confess honestly that we started where they are now. Christ did not save us from a life of moral perfection and sinless living. We were pulled from the same pit of spiritual despair in

which so many still live.

In no small way, this demands that we are committed to loving the world the way we find it, not the way we wish it were. The only people who ever have affected my life in good ways were those who respected my dignity as a child of God before I learned to behave better.

Certificate of authenticity

Only by owning up to our past can we speak to others of our hope of a redeemed eternal future with Christ. It's hard to believe, but our own miserable failures are our certificate of authenticity to those with whom we seek to share the gospel hope.

I suffered a divorce decades ago. To this day, it's painful to admit to others, especially if I am preaching or writing. I worry about what others might think of me, at the time a pastor, and who might think my marital failure disqualifies me from ever preaching again.

Yet, for every one person who thought of me as disqualified, I have discovered the true joy of being able to say to those now suffering marital failure that I genuinely do have personal familiarity with what they are enduring. I have a much greater audience because of my failures than because of my successes.

In other words, in the way only Christ can make possible, what was once my worst failure now has become a certificate of authenticity with those who are skeptical of the church or its mission in this world.

Draw a picture of hope

So it is that, like the Apostle Paul often confessed, grace transformed my worst into God's best. Sin and its consequences, in the hands of the Savior, became instruments of grace. As it were, the swords of my earlier lost

battles now have been transformed into the plowshares for tilling the soil of the gospel in the lives of others.

Now, as Peter charges, it is our responsibility to live out the hope that is ours in ways that honor Christ. One way of looking at this is to think of our past as the chalkboard on which we will draw the picture of hope that is ours in Christ.

All the chalk of gospel hope is virtually impossible to communicate without the blackboard on which to draw a picture of it. It's a strange thing to ponder. Yet, it is our failures that become the instruments of hope in the lives of others.

What's the difference?

So it is that one reason the church is not growing is because, in the ways we live, too often we're still living exactly as those we're trying to reach. If we conduct ourselves in ways that are not any different than those we're trying to reach, we neutralize anything we say about the gospel. What would motivate them to sacrifice for Christ if it is only going to cost them that which we are not willing to give up?

Even if we don't live publicly immoral lives, we still can invalidate our witness in many other ways. How important is money or making money to us? How do we spend our money? Are we committed to getting ahead no matter how often we have to walk on others to do so? How do we handle or respond to materialism? How do we relate to the poor and disenfranchised? Is our political position more important to us than our witness to Christ?

How do we treat others? How do we respond to conflict, loss and fear? In what ways does the hope of Christ emanate from us?

In other words, if we don't live lives that are different from those we are trying to reach, we will have no authority to bear witness to them of the

power of Christ to redeem. In what ways do our lives bear witness of Christ in us?

Can we honestly say that how we are living is so authentic, when we speak of Christ, people will listen?

It takes a while to learn this—too long for some of us. But when it's all said and done, life is about relationships—relationships with God and with those whom God has given us to share this earthly journey. For the believer, eternal life in us demonstrates itself in the ways we build relationships with those who have no relationship with Christ.

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