

14 ||| From Glory Unto Glory

A man in his mid-twenties had struggled with his spiritual life for years before he came to me for help. He had tried to be a good Christian, but he had failed utterly. He stood at the point of despair, prepared to give up the church for good. As we talked, he affirmed his strong belief in the existence of God and spoke of his conviction that he had witnessed powerful demonstrations of God's miraculous workings. However, he had reached a point where he did not care anymore. While the man continued to describe his religious experience, I realized that he had talked for fifteen minutes without mentioning Christ. He had no Savior. Instead, he struggled in his own strength to become righteous and acceptable to God. His efforts only convinced him of his utter unworthiness.

In that moment I gained a deeper understanding than I had ever known of the desperate necessity of a Savior. That man needed to be saved from the power of sin and death. Powerless to deal with his own failure, he needed someone to extricate him from his rendezvous with destruction. He had been laboring for years under conviction of sin, trying to be righteous out of guilt, shame, and a belief that he ought to be different. Yet, the man had never taken the crucial step that would begin the transformation of his life. He had never entrusted his life to Jesus Christ. He had never trusted Christ to bring him to the Father free from sin. He had never had faith in Christ to save him until that morning.

Before my eyes, I saw a physical change in that man as the grace of God enveloped him. As he opened his heart to Christ, the highly agitated and disturbed face that had wept in despair melted into a peaceful glow. Christ had begun a work in him, the end of which is yet to be revealed. Until Christ began it, however, nothing good could happen.

The fruit could not begin to appear until Christ lived within him to produce it. Neither can fruit continue to appear and flourish in abundance unless a Christian abides in Christ.

Knowing the Savior

Christ is literally the beginning and the end of a Christian's life. He is the alpha and omega of existence. He is not the means to life; He is life (John 14:6). He came into this world to share His life that we might be changed. The forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit are only the beginning of this new life. Beyond this first work of grace, Jesus intends so much more for those who love Him. "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18). No method, technique, or discipline can bring about this change apart from Christ.

One of the technological marvels of this age is the banking machine. Once upon a time, when a person forgot to cash a check at the bank before it closed, one went without money. Now, anyone who has a bank card can withdraw money from a banking machine at any hour of the day or night. Before the procedure will work, however, a person has to know a personal access number. Without the access number, it matters not how much money we have in the bank; we cannot reach it. In the same manner, Christ is our only access to the qualities of holiness that satisfy the cravings of life. He said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Receiving the benefits of Christ, however, is not exactly like taking money out of a bank. In another sense, it is like a cold winter morning in an old house. The wooden boards of the floor are icy cold. The chilling draft whistles through the window sill. Even the woolen clothes you have just put on are freezing to the touch. Then you go into the living room where your father has built a fire in the wood stove. As you draw near, you become warm. Soon the misery of the cold is forgotten. You are warm because of your nearness to the source of heat. You are warm because of the warmth. You are not warm in the same way the stove is. It generates warmth, but you enjoy the benefit of its warmth.

We partake of the life of Christ in our relationship to Him. We share the holiness of Christ in our nearness to Him. We benefit from

His grace as we are willing to receive it and be affected by it.

I remember one Christmastime. Like Abraham and Sarah, Mary Anne and I had moved, and we were going to have a baby. I had accepted a ministerial responsibility I never considered as an option or a possibility. I had accepted a call to serve as a denominational executive charged with the responsibility of evangelism. During that Christmastime, we visited churches and Sunday School classes to find a spiritual home.

In one Sunday School class, the leader asked people to share what Christmas meant to them. One man set a negative tone by railing against the commercialism of Christmas. When Christians are supposed to stand for peace, children want toys that support violent fantasies. He then proceeded to list a catalog of social ills that society ignores while Christmas is promoted as a major business.

He made the point that the church needed to be more aggressive in confronting society and the sources of injustice. He cringed at the expressions of piety by Christians when the needs of the world are so great. Yet, with all of this on the man's mind, frustration overcame him at the point of knowing what to do. Having condemned everyone else for the sad state of the world, it became evident that he was not doing anything about any of the ills.

I have always stood in utter amazement at Christians who are frustrated by the wickedness of the world. Christmas is the biggest merchandising festival of the year. It is the grandest marketing extravaganza ever conceived. It is a time for indulging the greed, lusts, and whims of the flesh. How foolish to expect anything else! To keep Christmas, one must have Christ. The things that Christ taught are utter foolishness unless Christ is the Lord, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing" (1 Cor. 1:18). If Christ is not the Lord, then the Epicureans are right: Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

Sadly, the Sunday School member and most of the others in the class had lost the meaning of Christmas. Impassioned as he was, he had a cold intellectual religion that consisted of rules of behavior and social responsibility. He saw no point in proclaiming Christ when there were things to do. Thus, he chose to withhold from the world the only thing that would make the world different. He chose to withhold the Savior while condemning the world for not being Christlike.

He had forgotten what it means to be lost. The world still needs a Savior. All the people who subvert justice still need a Savior. All the people who oppress the poor still need a Savior. All the victims still need a Savior. And until they have a Savior, they will not change.

More sadly, he had forgotten what it meant to be saved. He lived in his own strength and power. At some time in the man's life, the proclamation of Christ had been so important that he accepted the teachings of the Savior. In the process of time, however, the Savior had become superfluous. Thus, he sat frustrated by his impotence to do anything. Instead of the fruit of the Spirit, his life showed anger, hostility, frustration, cynicism, and despair. Piety, or the daily wonder that comes from conversation with the Lord and meditation on His profound goodness and mercy, received his ridicule.

In contrast to this angry Christian, Jesus never focused anger or frustration on the sinners who caused the problems of society. He wept over the Jerusalem that would crucify Him. He loved the rich young ruler who chose wealth over the kingdom of God. He had compassion on the ignorant multitudes, as well as on the sick and lame. Jesus only vented His anger against the religious community that did not take prayer and piety seriously. In His only outburst, He cleared the temple of those who had lost their sense of awe in the presence of God. The merchants practiced a form of godliness but denied the power thereof.

This unfortunate man was right to want to see the world a better place. He was right to want people to do the right thing. The tragedy of his spiritual immaturity rested in his failure to recognize that the ability and the possibility of doing the right thing only comes from the Lord. The man's own failure, even when he wanted to do something significant, points up the fact that not only the power but the motivation must come from the Lord. When the fruit of the Spirit ripens in the lives of Christians, they do the works of their Father.

Being Like the Father

Most families have some physical characteristic that carries over from generation to generation. The Poes have had prominent foreheads and noses for generations. I have the same forehead as my cousin Edgar Allan. Because of the genes that come from my parents, I inherit certain characteristics. The genes that determine the basic

characteristics that I brought into this life are a power at work within me. Sometimes when people say that I am like my father or my mother, they mean I have my father's forehead and nose or my mother's eyes and smile. The genes I inherited from my parents determine these things.

Sometimes when people say that I am like my father, however, they mean something entirely different. My wife tells me that many of my mannerisms remind her of my father. I have noticed one in particular. My father is a gentleman in the noblest sense of the word. When he is introduced to a lady, he salutes her with a courtly bow so gracefully and naturally executed that it seems the normal thing to do even in the ebbing years of the twentieth century. At some point a few years ago, I noticed that I have my father's bow. I do not know how or when I began to do it, but it has become a natural part of me.

Part of being like my father comes from genes, but part of it comes from being with my father. From spending time with him and, I suppose, wanting to be like him, I became like him. The closeness of our relationship led to my adopting many of his ways. Jesus said that the context for becoming like Him rests in the closeness of our relationship to Him "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:29-30). The qualities of the fruit of the Spirit have no meaning by themselves. They do not exist as realities apart from Christ. We learn from Him what they really are.

Because of His Holy Spirit in us, we have a power at work which makes us like our Heavenly Father, much the same as genes transfer the traits from one generation to the next. Being a child of God includes sharing the qualities of the Father. Eternal life is one of these. Holiness is another. For this reason, the New Testament speaks of Christians as saints or "holy ones." The Holy Spirit reproduces the holy character of God in His adoptive children. Paul called the characteristics of this holiness the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. The fruit of the Spirit characterizes what we are, and what we are makes possible what we do.

Just as the Holy Spirit produces the fruit of holiness in a child of God, the children of God produce fruit unto God in their deeds. The fruit of the Spirit is internal, while the fruit of a Christian life consists

in the external things we do. As children of God, God expects Christians to do His will as well as exhibit His character. Jesus said, "We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work" (John 9:4). Eternal life is one implication of being a child of God. Doing the will of the Father is another.

In spending time with my earthly father and desiring to be like him, I began to do things the way he does them. In spending time with our Lord and desiring to be like Him, we begin to do things the way He would do them. Doing His will does not come so much in having a prescribed list of obligations to fulfill as it comes in knowing the mind of Jesus. Bearing the fruit of the Spirit and doing the will of the Father does not come from pursuing these goals. Rather, the fruit comes from seeking Christ.

Peace, like the other qualities of holiness, is not a static gift that a Christian can save or stockpile. We only have access to the gift through Christ. In fact, He is the gift; the rest is a by-product of His presence. Paul did not say that Christ gives peace. He said that Christ "is our peace" (Eph. 2:14). Christ did not promise to give His disciples peace; instead, He promised them *His* peace (John 14:27). The gift is indistinguishable from the Giver. Christ must dwell richly in a heart for that heart to have the fruit of His Spirit. People cannot lay hold of love, joy, peace, or any other dimension of holiness. We can only lay hold of Christ.

The poor human race has always confused desire and fulfillment. We desire love and every other condition which makes for happiness as an end in itself. Instead, we ought to seek out the Source of all happiness and the object of fulfillment. The experience of the fruit of the Spirit rests in the final apprehension by the heart, as well as the mind, that Christ is the end of all desire. All goodness wells from Him, as the old hymn pleads, "Come, thou Fount of ev'ry blessing." Blessings can no more be stored up than sunshine. The fulfillment of all human longing, the quenching of spiritual thirst, comes as a steady stream. Jesus called it a "spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). Apart from the stream, the heart's true cravings and needs cannot be met.

Having the blessing does not come from seeking the blessing, but from seeking Christ and abiding in Him. All His riches in glory are already ours in Him. But only in Him are they ours.