

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: I Corinthians 10

Elgin, March 13, 2016

Jonathan Wilson

Introduction

Today's text continues this year's theme of how the New Testament describes problems in the church, how to solve them, and whether those problems and solutions apply today. In reading Paul's account I was struck by his view of three different communities. First, there is his own community of his mission team, who set good examples in the churches they plant. Second, is the community of Israelites, after the Exodus, wandering around the Wilderness. They are a bad example of the life of faith, and what happened to them is intended to be a warning to those who come after. Third, is the community of Corinthian Christians, to whom Paul is writing. They are ignoring the example of Paul's team, and are following the bad example of the Israelites, so that they bear an ugly witness to the world. So we have the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly is a movie from the early 70's starring Clint Eastwood. It was a "western," and the climax of the movie was three men standing off against each other. Eastwood was the good and he prevails. The bad man is killed, but the third man, "the Ugly," is not killed. The Eastwood character tolerates him, to a point, and shows him grace, but there is a definite warning in his act of mercy. The Corinthians were showing an ugly witness to the world. Paul urged them to reconsider their testimony in light of both God's mercy and God's warnings.

Let us pray: Lord God, because you are rich in mercy we can enter into your presence. Make us humble before you, and bold in our witness to the world. In Jesus' name, amen.

1. The Bad

When missionaries come to a new frontier they find people under the power of darkness.

This was true of Paul and his team when they reached the ancient Greek city-states which had a long history of philosophy, poetry, and paganism. This was true of Patrick, the English preacher who, once enslaved by an Irish pirate, returned to the land of his bondage to bring them the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is true today. There is a distinction between a culture leavened by Jesus Christ and one where that leavening is absent or suppressed; think of the difference between North and South Korea, or North and South Sudan, or even Poland versus the Czech Republic, which is called the most secular nation in the world.

Darkness and all that comes with it, including ethical confusion and destructive behaviors, is to be expected from unbelievers. It is important for us to understand that Paul is not addressing unbelievers in Corinth, but believers. For his example from history Paul does not point to a pagan nation that knew nothing of God, but to the Israelites who had seen the waters part, who every day and night saw the pillars of cloud and fire, who ate manna from heaven every morning, and who received the Ten Commandments and promised to be God's people.

It is these Israelites who also complained because all they had was manna but no meat, and panicked every time they could not find a water source. These Israelites were bad examples because they knew God, and yet were faithless. For that reason they did not enter the Promised Land; instead their bodies fell in the desert.

Paul gives a long, but not an exhaustive, list of events where Israel was faithless and ran into trouble with a holy God. He is referring to Old Testament stories found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. The sum of Paul's message is that the same God who brought plagues on pagan Egypt brought plagues on faithless Israel, for God is just and does not show partiality or favoritism. Therefore, as Paul makes clear, the things that befell the Israelites are examples to warn us as believers today. It is a danger to the soul to begin to presume upon God, as though

mercy and grace were a birthright, either of our first natural birth or our second, spiritual birth. If we would inherit the promises of God, that means we function in a life of faithfulness, not faithlessness. The Bad is a life that is faithless, lacking all trust in God despite one demonstration of God's love and care after another.

2. The Ugly

We stand with the Corinthians on the other side of the cross of Jesus Christ and the good news of his resurrection. Like the Corinthians we are sealed in salvation by the Holy Spirit, who exhibits the character of God in us by the way we think, the way we talk, the way we act, and the priorities in life that we pursue. The gifts of the Spirit are the power of God by which we serve God, and the fruits of the Spirit are the character traits of God by which we are filled more and more with the attitude and personality of Jesus Christ himself.

So it raises the question: Why was the Corinthian Church such a mess? It was divided into factions that did not trust each other; it was filled with people who thought they had the right to their loose morals; it had people thinking that loving meant partying down with them in ways that similar to the most outrageous customs associated today with such festivals as Mardi Gras and St. Patrick's Day; it had people taking each other to court; and when it came to their meals together the people pushed each other to be first in line and heaped up their plates so that the church would run out of food before the meek and the lowly got a chance to be served. Yet they thought they had it altogether. When they worshiped all kinds of exciting stuff happened. People broke out praying in tongues, and preachers shouted over each other. They thought this was good stuff, a sign of God's pleasure with them. The Corinthians did not even know to be embarrassed. Proud of themselves, they showed the world an ugly spiritual face, smirking with scandal, greed and selfishness, as if to say, "See? This is what it looks like to have Jesus Christ living in my

heart.” Those with a sense of modesty, decency, and justice, would look at the Corinthians and say, “Then Jesus is not for me.”

Paul was embarrassed for them and fearful because they were living a lot closer to the bad example of the Israelites than the good example of himself. So how did this happen? You know the adage: “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” Also true is that all play and no work makes Jack an irresponsible boy. There has to be balance between the things that are fun and the things that are duty. All worship and no discipleship makes Jack a shallow Christian.

Now we reflect on whether Elgin Covenant ought to be convicted by Paul’s word to the Corinthians. Perhaps we have factions. Perhaps we have some who, in their own way, have made idols in their lives, in forms not mentioned by Paul, such as Workaholism, or ambition, or the need to have things. There may be some who presume that because of their exciting experience of conversion, that they are exempt from the duty to God that we all owe, to show God’s character to the world by our meekness, our humility, and our generosity.

I think, though, that we are not a church that presents an ugly, smirking face to the world. We are a church with warts, and our warts need to be acknowledged and treated. I also believe that we are at our ugliest when we choose to focus on our warts. The purpose of this series on Problems in the Church and their Solutions is not to focus on our warts to discourage us, the purpose is to release God’s healing word to take effect for the treatment and healing of our warts.

So then, the Ugly is a life that is faithless, but presumes to be faithful and God-approved, though nothing of God’s character and the personality of Jesus Christ is shown to the world.

3. The Good

Paul is the example of the good. When we read the scriptures we need to distinguish between the role of Jesus Christ in living a good life, a life centered on God, and the role of Paul,

the apostles, the prophets, and the saints in living a good life. For there are many scholars and authors who have influenced even more preachers, who have said things like, “*Jesus is our example for how to live. All we have to do to overcome sin is follow the example of Jesus.*” The evangelical must reply: **That is complete nonsense**. Jesus certainly models a life of faith, but he does not expect or require us to match his virtue, his qualities, and his character all on our own. The point of the gospel is that we cannot on our own.

Jesus lived among us to show us our need for him and his forgiveness for our sins, and our need for his Spirit which he possessed, that his Spirit would take possession of us in our minds and hearts and wills. That is what Jesus does. The apostles are our examples. Used by God to bring us the Divine Word, the apostles show us how they, as imperfect people and forgiven sinners, endeavored to live in the power of Christ’s Spirit. It is not by the Spirit of Paul that I live to please God, it is only by the Spirit of Christ. On my own I have none of the strength of character to simply follow the example of Jesus: No way do I make that happen. Jesus Christ must be born in me and complete me and remake me. That is my only hope and yours too.

After the apostles, many saints have lived as godly examples of self-sacrificing faith as bearers of the Spirit of Christ. I am glad to know many stories of the heroes of faith. Protestants and evangelicals stamp the names of our heroes on our schools and institutions too, like “Judson University,” for example, or “Paul Carlson Medical Mission.” *This is good*. It is good to read the biographies of Christians who lived faithfully and made a difference in their worlds, people with names like Booth, McPherson, Moody, Graham, Hybels - not to mention Lucy of Syracuse. There are many good examples to inspire us. The flame of the gospel does not die, because these examples from scripture and in the ancient, medieval, and modern history of the church, leavened and stirred those around them in their own generations and beyond. So then, the Good

is a life centered on Jesus Christ in the Spirit of God, empowered to do what God wills while shining the beautiful light of the gospel into a world of darkness.

Conclusion

The Bad is a life that is faithless, lacking all trust in God despite repeated acts of divine mercy and warning. This was Israel in the wilderness. The Ugly is a life that is faithless, but presumes to be faithful and God-approved, though nothing of God's character and the personality of Jesus Christ is shown to the world. This was the Corinthian Church, and Paul spared no words to get them to wake up to their folly. The Good is a life centered on Jesus Christ in the Spirit of God, empowered to do what God wills while shining the beautiful light of the gospel into a world of darkness. This was Paul and his team, and the saints and heroes of our faith. And then there is good – with some warts. This I discern of ourselves at Elgin Covenant.

Elgin Covenant inherits a legacy of faithful saints now several generations deep. Yes, we have had our ugly moments in the distant and not-so-distant past. We have our warts. I believe that a healthy church with a healthy light shining into the community and the world, can be honest about its warts, and work on treating them. That is why we keep going after 126 years of ministry; our predecessors had to tackle some tough issues. Some choices they made were better than others. The best choices were those made in the Spirit of Christ, following in the example of the scriptures and the apostles; those choices are why we are still here.

One way to begin to effectively shrink our warts right away, is to allow Christ to change our attitudes about ourselves and each other, in the ways that we have promised to do in our mission statement and in our affirmation of values. In these statements we promise to have hope in Christ for our future, and we promise to think the best of each other as servants of God. Let's do less talking about this or that person's shortcomings or unreliability or whatever, and more

talking about how we are blessed by what this or that person brings to the mix to complete this body of Christ, warts and all.

Faithlessness not only kills a church, it makes it ugly in the process. Clint Eastwood gave his surviving nemesis another chance. Today the term used to describe such a character as this “ugly” man, is the new word “Frenemy,” which means, both friend and enemy at the same time. It appears that Eastwood will leave his Frenemy, the Ugly man, literally hanging, as his judgment on the faithlessness of his erstwhile and inconstant partner. Eastwood does not leave him hanging. From a distance, in mercy, he spares his Frenemy’s life. But now that man must take heed of the warning and prove his character.

These things are written to warn us. So let us heed them, and let us live faithfully in the goodness of God by God’s power in Christ. Amen.