

Growing in Jesus vs. religious moralism

Isaiah 1:10-18

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Introduction: New fall season getting under way ... are we ready for it? As we begin this new season, I'd like to encourage us to remember the Lord is with us, our Shepherd; the Holy Spirit, our Comforter, is our Teacher; His Word, our compass. So we're not lost, though we do tend to get distracted, off key, out of sorts, sometimes selfish and grumpy, always broken beyond everything that we could ever imagine. It's why we need a Savior who's bigger than all our needs, understanding when it seems all we can do is gripe and complain, and whose goal for us never changes: to rescue us from ourselves and conform us to the image of Christ. He's always ready to do that – you can count on it! But it's a process and we have to stay at it ... all the way to the end! **Keep your commitment to growth!**

So as we start off this new fall season, we don't want to fall into the same old ruts and patterns of our carnal mentality. We want to make a new beginning that genuinely takes into account God's truth: we've been invited to follow a *living Savior*, not just rules, habits, and traditions (= Christian moralism). Someone may ask, "Is there a difference? Doesn't Jesus want us to be moral?" Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow Him, to learn from Him, to seek first His reign over our lives – *He* then takes care of *shaping our lives* according to His truth and grace. So remember it's not first of all about rules or rule-keeping; our first problem in life is not legal, but relational, which is why the solution was relational: Jesus living out that perfect relationship of love with His Father and with us. *That's* what saves us (from our egotism and idolatry): it's what redeems our imagination!

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a 19th-century Romantic poet and critic who defined the imagination as the *imago Dei* at work in every human mind, helping us first to perceive the world around us and then to creatively *reimagine* it. Coleridge believed people *think in images* because we were first "thought into the image of God" by God Himself. So as creatures made in His image, we are intended to be "**spiritual thinkers**," recognizing the true needs of our own lives and of the world around us, then creatively reimagining how to meet those needs and honor God in the process. But when we don't cultivate "**thoughtful faith and faithful thought**", the image of God in us languishes and our imagination latches onto superficial junk, i.e., idols, which corrupt us. I had a chat recently with an up-and-coming young psychologist who grew up here at IBC (named Hayford). He's investigating the subject of "**cognitive restructuring**": "cognitive" because it relates to our thinking processes, reasoning, remembering, imagining; and "restructuring" all of that has to do with identifying self-defeating beliefs, unhealthy thought patterns, and intrusive imaginings that need to be rebutted with truth. We want to see what light today's Scripture can shed on this topic.

1) Isaiah the prophet was a deeply spiritual thinker who perceived the world around him according to God's truth and recognized its true needs. So he called Israel to some serious *cognitive restructuring*,

identifying those self-defeating beliefs that had crept in, thought patterns that desperately needed to be challenged with truth. What he saw in Jerusalem's religious practices was deeply disturbing, so he began his preaching with shocking words that sounded really harsh; he called Jerusalem "Sodom and Gomorrah"! Absolutely appalling! But he was pointing to Israel's rampant religiosity that was utterly bereft of passion for the Lord Himself. Their multitude of sacrifices were therefore meaningless, because God doesn't take pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs, and goats. They had drawn this totally erroneous conclusion from the law of Moses – *it's not blood* that God *needs* in order to be able to forgive them (cf. Is. 43:25, 44:22). God was weary of their rituals with incense, celebrating New Moons, Sabbaths, special convocations, solemn assemblies and feasts. God was sick of it all. "But didn't God command it?", someone asks. It was *never an end in itself* – did we miss those passages that insist God did NOT want sacrifice, that His Soul did NOT delight in holocausts and burnt offerings? (Ps. 40:6, 51:16; Hos. 6:6). The law was full of parables and metaphors, pointing beyond themselves to what God really wanted and what *He* would ultimately do about our problem.

"Spreading out their hands in prayer," which was a standard Jewish practice, God said He would hide his eyes from them; He wouldn't look or listen because their hypocrisy was too much for Him to bear! The violence in their hearts, in their minds, on their hands, was too contradictory. Their selfish ways – their failure to stand up on behalf of the oppressed, the fatherless, and widows – meant that their priorities were so far from reflecting God's priorities that He was repulsed by them! What an indictment on Israel's religion! The best religion in the world – because it was revealed by God Himself – but they had turned it into a scandal, just for show – they'd lost the essence. Yet it was actually a prophetic and ominous foreshadowing of *how they would act when God came personally among them*.

2) History suggests the natural tendency of all things human is toward atrophy, degeneration and deterioration, wasting and crumbling away, dropping your guard, getting off track, distracted and corrupted, losing the essence ... even in spiritual things. So it was in Isaiah's time, also in Jesus' day, and so it is now. Sociologist Christian Smith did a study at the beginning of this century, together with Melinda Denton (*Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, 2005), in which they concluded that "a *significant part* of Christianity in the U.S. is actually *only tenuously Christian* in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity's misbegotten stepcousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" [CMTD]. I.e., what churches *think* they're practicing and teaching, and what they're *actually* getting across don't match up. God is perceived as something like a combination between a Divine Butler and a Cosmic Therapist: always on call, taking care of any problems that arise, professionally helping people feel better about themselves, and not becoming excessively involved in their personal lives and preferences. All adapted to today's popular philosophies – "no absolutes, everything relative, don't step on anyone's toes, just live and let live, whatever others believe is ok." I.e., *society is permeating the church with its ideas much more rapidly than the church can permeate society with the gospel!* After all, says CMTD, God basically wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, like the Bible teaches and most world religions too. "The central goal of life is just to be happy, feel good about yourself, and if you mess up, you just say you're sorry and go on and don't worry about it!" As if God's primary interest were simply nice behaviors and good feelings, instead of all our relationships being dominated by Christlike sacrificial love! So when we observe the tendencies of modern society, we discover that we are subject to the same kinds of temptations as those that the Israelites of Isaiah's day suffered from! It's actually a process known as "reductionism": "Let's make this more manageable!" Take the average prayer life, for example. Isn't it primarily about asking for things? And material and physical well-being usually get top billing! There's always a lot of focus on petition, specifically, for everything to go well, not to have any problems, for everyone to get along and to have a nice time ... Sound familiar? Contrast this with the apostle Paul's prayer life; that will tell you how far away we have drifted from the original paradigm of Christian faith!

3) In *The Evangelical Imagination: How Stories, Images, and Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis* (2023), Karen Swallow Prior examines the history of the imagination alongside the history of evangelicalism, exploring how the two converge. Victorian mores, ideals, and developments, she contends, play major roles in the evangelical imagination. She considers that the most powerful motifs feeding the current evangelical movement date back to the Victorian period and before, having to do with “rapid change, optimism, prosperity, and progress” that marked that time. But it was also shaped by an increasingly influential evangelical faith inherited from the previous century. So Prior argues that many defining characteristics of today’s subculture may be less Christian than Victorian, and in some cases, less Christian than Medieval! We’re always being influenced by what surrounds us – often in our blind side, and our tendency, even as Christians, is often to accommodate and drift away from the center.

By the early Middle Ages, the essence of Christianity had become a set of doctrines and laws articulated and controlled by a hierarchy that saw these as a divine deposit of truth. So in the Medieval period, people developed patterns of “dealing with God” that detracted from the uniqueness of Christ as the only agent of salvation, and a multitude of saints rose up to fill the role of intercessors. So there was a fashioning of a “Christian culture” that both enhanced and complicated the faith; Christianity became as much a cultural tradition as it was a faith tradition: e.g., its cathedrals, illuminated manuscripts, religious artwork, sculpture, architecture, literature, etc. As Christian culture grew ever more complex, the essence became more obscure. There also arose a constant stream of individual reformers who wanted to take the faith back to what they thought was its original essence: Cluniac reform (10th century), Gregorian reforms (11th c.), Bernard of Clairvaux (12th c.), St. Francis of Assisi (12th-13th c.), St. Dominic (12th-13th c.); Peter Waldo (12th-13th c.), John Wycliffe (14th c.), Jan Hus (14th-15th c.), Martin Luther (1517), Balthasar Hubmaier (1521), Ulrich Zwingli (1522), John Calvin (1533), etc. For all their differences, these reformers were united across the centuries in their critique of how they thought the church had complicated the essence of Christianity. Subsequent to Luther and Calvin, of course, Protestantism would give rise to a multiplicity of debates over the essence of Christianity. They made it increasingly difficult for anyone to claim a monopoly on the custodianship of that essence, try as they might. Each new sect offered a partial discernment of the essence or a different way of speaking of it. But the vast majority of Protestants agreed that the essence of the faith could be retrieved only through recovery of the central message of Scripture: stick to the essence – get rid of the accruals, the appendages, the excesses that had nothing to do with the true purpose of the faith! So what is the central message of Scripture? How do we get back to its essence and continually restructure our “cognition” according to God’s Word?!

Conclusion: In spite of all Israel’s unfaithfulness, hypocrisy, and disloyalty, God followed up Isaiah’s incriminating charges with an amazing invitation to come and learn His reasoning: **“Come now and let us reason together, says Yahweh. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be like wool”** (Is. 1:18). Herein is the cognitive restructuring we need! He’s so ready to forgive, to cleanse and restore, to set us on the right course and keep us in the center of His will. And this invitation to a better way of reasoning was not just empty words, but it came to us most powerfully in the **Logos** made flesh (Jn. 1:14), the “Logic” of God made human, **His** way of reasoning made accessible: He came to us personally, the only Holy One, the only Whole One not broken by sin; yet He allowed Himself to be broken by us sinners, all the way to death, & for our sakes He did not resist or retaliate in the face of our awful aggression, but forgave us in person, all the way to death; and thanks to His resurrection, He offers us that same power to overcome if we will submit to Him as our true King and **learn His reasoning** ... so that we learn how to recognize the self-defeating beliefs, resist the unhealthy thoughts, overcome the intrusive imaginings, face down the irresistible temptations, stand strong in the trials, answer the doubts, expel the darkness ... in the name of Jesus, the only One who can keep you on course through all of that! So stay focused on growing in Him!