

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

9.8.15

No Condemnation - Joss Bray

It was the start of the football season yesterday. This may be of extreme importance to some but of absolutely no relevance to others.

Maybe cricket is your thing - apologies to any Australian supporters among us though.

For us in Gateway Church we have a wide range of sporting interests - and golf. We even run a badminton club - which is in no way competitive at all and never causes marital upsets...not.

Anyway, in organised sports there is usually a hierarchy - a way of classifying teams and individuals so games can avoid being too one sided. Let's just look at one example, football:

So for football teams in England we have the Premier league, the Championship, League 1, League 2, the National league, the National league North, the National league south, the Northern Premier League Premier Division, Southern Football League Premier Division and Isthmian League Premier Division, then , the Northern Premier League Division One North, Northern Premier League Division One South, Southern Football League Division One Central, Southern Football League Division One South & West, Isthmian League Division One North and Isthmian League Division One South

Then there are hundreds of teams below that as well - running to 23 levels - right down to the Mid-Sussex Football League Division Ten in which there are still 11 clubs! And that's not even counting Scottish, Welsh and Irish leagues and Women's football - who seem to have more international success than men's football.

So what is the illustration I am trying to get across here? Each of the 23 levels has strict promotion and demotion rules and teams work hard to get promoted and not demoted. Competition ensues and the outcome is a judgement of how good - or bad the team is - or perhaps how much they can afford to spend on players....

We can however, get the idea that being a Christian is like this. Or that even to become a Christian in the first place there is a league ladder of goodness to climb. So if we are good enough we can become Christians and join the church. And once we have done this we enter into a hierarchy of ever more impressive Christians who do amazing things, and who we can be in awe of and aspire to emulate. This can be all the way up - depending on which church it is - to the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury - or even Terry Virgo!

Sadly these are fundamental misunderstandings which can bring misery and self condemnation. Because we are somehow not living up to the mark that we perceive is the next step up, or better, or more spiritual, than where we are ourselves. This can be disabling and can even put us completely off getting into the game as it were - or leaving it early. This is extremely sad.

We must remind ourselves that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” - that’s in Romans 5. We did not deserve to be died for or forgiven. There was nothing in ourselves that God thought - “that one is worth saving”. No - it was because God loved us first. He loved us when we were living blind to him, blind to our lostness, or perhaps desperate for help from a God who we didn’t know but something inside us cried out to him. He reached out to us, well before we even believed in him.

God loved us whilst we were still far off from him - with a love that was all giving - and that didn’t hold back. He reached out to us and picked us up. It was this undeserved grace - this amazing mercy that brought us into his kingdom.

Going back to the football analogy, we didn’t get promoted out of the mid Sussex football league Division Ten as it were because we were any good! God promoted us because he loves us - and loved us just as we were. He took us from being under the law and sentence of death, and set us free from that condemnation:

RO 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man,

Notice, that he still condemned sin - that is not living for God, and not obeying him. But because we are in Christ Jesus - we as his people, are not condemned any more.

So as Christians, being in Christ - if God does not condemn us why do we so often condemn ourselves or each other. Why (if you are anything like me) do we tend to judge and criticise others? Why do we also judge ourselves and our lives by comparing them to others? As Christians it can be tempting to look at people and either think - I wish I was like him or her and do those amazing things. Or we can judge others because they do not seem to be living up to the dizzy heights of holiness that we have achieved!

Jesus was never in the comparison business - nor were any of the New Testament writers. On the contrary, each person has their unique part to play, where God has put them. And, we are designed to be together - in a body of people called the Church. And no one is more important or needed than any other.

And we are not supposed to be lone Christians - it is not good for us or for the Church - it is not how God wants us to be. We then miss out on the blessings others have for us and the blessing we can be to others. We miss out on being built up and helped by other's gifts from God and they miss out on what God has given us to build the church and build them up.

And some of us may think - "I don't have anything to offer" "I am not good enough" "I don't pray enough" and so on. Remember - there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus! That is not what God thinks of you! He loved you so much he gave his Son for you - when you were still sinners! Remember, we did not choose God - he chose us - amazing though that is. God sees us differently from how we can see ourselves. See what Paul says:

2CO 5:16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

He took us straight from the lowest division to the top of the Premiership! That's all of us who are in Christ. Remember there is no condemnation any more - no demotion. There are no league divisions to work through either up or down - that is the worldly point of view. The old has gone and the new has come.

Note that Paul says we once saw Christ in a worldly way but do so no longer. Jesus has been seen as a good teacher, a leader, a moral example, even a miracle worker, but now we do not see him merely like that. His death and resurrection brought a completely new understanding of who he actually is. He is the Son of God now seated at the right hand of the Father. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Far above, in fact, all rulers and authorities. And he is coming back - and the good news is that he will be back with the sort of glory that leaves no doubt at all. The glory that means every knee will bow before him. He will usher in a new heaven and a new earth where there will be no more crying or pain, where there is no death and decay - how good will that be! As well as us being new creations, the good news is that the whole of creation will be renewed.

But we don't have to wait for then - Paul writes in Ephesians:

EPH 2:4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions....

We are made alive in Christ - we were dead - now we are alive and new creations. Whatever went before - whatever condemned us or whatever we were guilty of, whatever shame we had - Jesus paid the price for it on the cross, so that we don't have to. When he says that we are new creations, he means it - we are born again - starting afresh. We have new life - not an improved version of the old one - but a new one. We may not realise this but we need to.

Anything less devalues who Jesus is and what he has done for us and what he is going to do. We need to take hold of this good news, this gospel and live it. How do we do that then? Well, once again, Jesus provides all we need. He expressly said that he would send us his Spirit - to both set his seal on us - his stamp of ownership - and also to fill us up so that we have the power and wisdom from above to live for him. That is why Jesus told his disciples to wait in the city until the power from above came. The Holy Spirit is essential to us and we need more of him!

And just in case we fall into the other error, that since we have been saved by the grace of God - then it doesn't really matter what we do then Paul has something to about that in Romans 6:

RO 6:1 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

There's that new life again, following the death and burial of the old one. And, when we are born again, we are born into a family - the family of God. In this family there is absolute security, there is absolutely no fear and there is absolutely a loving Father:

RO 8: 15 For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

Once you are born again, in the family, recognised as a child of God - that's where you are - whatever you feel like. You may feel that you have given up, left the game, got demoted, or even been sent off! Our loving heavenly Father does not see you like that. His heart still burns with love for you.

Remember the parable of the prodigal son. The father waited expectantly and with love. He was overjoyed when his son returned. Even though the son had completely treated his father as if he was dead - asking for his inheritance - and had then gone off and spent it all. He came back in repentance to his father. But actually his father seemed to be much more interested in having him back and celebrating, rather than extracting a grovelling apology. It was enough that the son had repented and literally turned around and come back and confessed his sin. That was enough for the father.

That is enough for our heavenly Father. We all fall short, we all go our own way and we all need forgiveness. There is no condemnation, no demotion, no harsh words - just an infinite amount of love and joy and forgiveness from a God who is proud to call us his children.

If we can grasp who we are in God and live in his power - then our lives will be transformed. And so will the lives of those around us inside and outside the Church. Then we will see the kingdom of God come on earth as it is in heaven.