

HARD WORDS FROM THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Can Nice Pastors Do the Same?

By Paul Anderson

Listen to the first word Jesus spoke as He started His ministry: "Repent." That won't get you votes—not even a smile. It means, "Change." Not the best way to open a preaching career. Jesus was not inviting people to get comfortable; He was commanding them to put their life in reverse, to correct their bad habits, to get out of debt, to quit abusing others. He followed in the stream of His austere cousin. Instead of a declaration or a promise, a call for an internal make-over.

And it gets harder. A chapter later people with a wandering eye are told to take a knife to it. Not a word about forgiveness. He regards sin with chilling seriousness. Instead of easing the burden of the law, He moves it to the level of the impossible, branding the second look as adultery. Then he calls people who divorce illegitimately as guilty of the crime that could bring stoning. And the next time He addresses the subject of divorce, the disciples conclude that single living would ease the pressure rather than getting stuck for life in a bad marriage. He won't get many followers if He continues this way.

Jesus names the persecuted as the truly blessed. He tells His listeners to love their enemies. It sounds saintly, until it is attempted by people who are poorly treated. Easy to say—hard to pull off. Then He says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Who's He speaking to?

Jesus continues in the beloved Sermon on the Mount, saying, "If you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." No trailers like, "Heaven understands if you've been abused and need some time to heal." Where's the Good Shepherd in all this?

Then Jesus says, "When you fast..." Do I think to myself, "Right on; my next time is Wednesday?" He calls us hypocrites if we see our brother's faults as bigger than our own. When He finishes with the message, "the crowds were amazed at his teaching." Call it an understatement; they were shocked. When we sing, "Make me more like you, Jesus," are we prepared for what that means? The one who came full of grace and truth was extravagantly gracious—and astonishingly truthful. No one is let off the hook.

Jesus doesn't tell would-be followers who struggle with priorities to take a week and think about it. He says bluntly, "Let the dead bury their own dead." Do I know this Person? He tells bold fishermen, scared by a killer storm, "You of little faith,

why are you so afraid?" On another occasion He asks Peter why he doubted, not even complimenting him for walking on water.

Jesus says that if we disown Him, we will be disowned in heaven. He announces to those who thought He was coming to bring peace: "I am bringing a sword." Then He says that in order to be His followers, we need to hate our fathers and mothers. He denounces the cities where He spent most of His ministry, saying that Sodom would come off better in the final judgment than they. He reminds us that careless words will be accounted for at the judgment, if not here.

We know that Jesus speaks harshly to the Pharisees. It comforts us, because we see ourselves as miles away from their religious pretension. But a few of His remarks land dangerously close to home.

Jesus doesn't run after a prospective convert with a money problem when he turns away at the thought of liquidating everything and becoming a poor follower of Jesus. No talk of perks, no promise of peace, no ongoing dialog. At least get his address in case he changes his mind. Jesus answers questions only when He chooses to. He changes the subject at will, even when others start the conversation.

A Friend—yes; but much more—God Incarnate! Jesus is shockingly intrusive and unavoidably confrontational. His opinions about my behavior are much more than ideas—they are laws. What He commands is absolute. He isn't looking for a discussion; He is calling for an obedient response!

Then Jesus dies, backing up every word with blood. His Passion gives Him the eternal right to say anything and to expect a response.

I know Jesus less than I thought I did. I know one side of Him. I know Him better as the Good Shepherd. I have found it easier to offer comfort rather than challenge. I have not represented the Lion of Judah well in my teaching. Paul testified that he preached the whole counsel of God. I cannot say that. Could this be one reason for the church's weakness? Jesus asked, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). Has my preaching helped to establish the unconditional Lordship of Jesus Christ? Have I let people off too easy? Have I misrepresented the King? Humor, friendliness and a "take it easy" outlook can take the edge off passion and render us harmless chaplains of the status quo.

Many churches have power brokers who control them, and "nice" won't get the job done. Honest does not always mean nice. It may mean helping some people find another church. Minnesota nice sometimes means Minnesota fake. Do I sacrifice truth for peace? Peace at any price is not the highest priority—truth at any cost

is! Bill Easum, in *Leadership on the OtherSide*, wrote, "I'm convinced that most church people think that one of the tenets of Christianity is being nice. Too many church people think pastors should be nice people and churches are supposed to be nice places where people live harmoniously together." This opens the door for intimidators, people who are not nice but hope others are, so they can continue controlling. "Nice" opens the door to phonies, to unreal fellowship, and to the loss of courage when it comes time to confront. "Courageous" is not always nice. Nice people play it safe. Many people out there are not looking for "nice"; they are looking for fighters, warriors—like Jesus, those who live by grace and walk in truth.

Some of us are so nice that we won't remove an organist who has been there for twenty years and deserves to take a long leave of absence. We need to make decisions based on the whole rather than one of the parts, but it may kill them when we can't be nice. Parents cannot always be nice, nor can they always be friends to their children. Parents who try to be their children's buddies rather than their protectors and leaders are undercutting their parental responsibilities. Truth without grace is brittle, but grace without truth is sentimental and unimpressive. Being nice can be a cover for wanting to be accepted. We cannot make our children (or the members of our congregation) bolster up our low self-esteem with comments about how caring we are. Such parents and pastors may need to get healed—and get tough.

Those who have grown up in a home with much conflict may especially be prone to keeping the peace and sidestepping hard issues. Leaders can't do that, and we look to Jesus as our prime example. He didn't give Laodicea a pep talk—He soundly rebuked them. Weak priests in Israel were preaching, "Peace, peace," while prophetic voices were sounding the alarm.

So is our answer getting mean once in a while? We all have felt the frustration of trying passionately to change the world because we have failed at changing ourselves. Our exhortations are then delivered with an unhealthy edge. On the other hand, being nice is what was modeled for most of us. As a professor of mine liked to say, "Practice doesn't make perfect; it makes permanent," and pastors have been practicing this pastoral role for centuries. Yes, we need to balance exhortation with encouragement, truth with grace, challenge with comfort. Coaches who only know how to comfort will not produce winning teams, but they will at least feel good about their losing team. Humor used properly brings grace to people but, if misapplied, can cover up cowardice or emotional imbalance.

However, bottom line is that we desperately need the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth, including truth about ourselves, so that we walk and minister in the Spirit, not in what we have learned, right or wrong, or what we need to add to our pastoral

skills.

Perhaps you wish to join me in praying: "Jesus, Son of David and Son of God, my insecurity in the ministry has caused me to back off from challenging people. I have given people options when You might have given them a final call. I have tampered with the truth, adulterating it to ease the sting, more for my reputation than Yours. Am I nicer than You are, more understanding, more priestly, more patient? In fact, I am afraid, cowardly, uncommitted, disobedient, and selfish. I am sorry for my silence when I should speak, especially when I need to confront the darkness. I am sorry that I have poorly reflected the side of Your character that people need most to love righteousness and hate wickedness. Forgive me, Lamb of God, and fill me with Your Spirit, Lion of Judah. I trust that Your Spirit can not only refresh me but can also empower me. Amen."

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