

*Praise Yahweh, for it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant and fitting to praise him. Yahweh builds up Jerusalem. He gathers together the outcasts of Israel. He heals the broken in heart, and binds up their wounds.*

When we lived in Arkansas, we went to a fairly large church and the pastor was one of those old-school guys who had gone to seminary right out of college and who had always been a minister of some kind. He had been an evangelist most of his ministry before coming to pastor our church.

Sometimes, when he was preaching against vices or preaching about purity, he would stand up really straight and say, “liquor, beer, nor wine have ever touched my lips...”

First, as a Baptist from the mid-south, I need to say congratulations to him for never having indulged—because where I come from, not drinking is a big part of being a faithful Christian. Kind of a marker or litmus test, you might say.

But Vonna and I talked about that some and though it was a good thing that he had been faithful to his beliefs, it seemed that holding himself up like that created a pretty wide gap between him and us sinners. And maybe created some issues when he was trying to counsel or to help those of us who were much more imperfect.

That concept—or the opposite of it—came into play when we were at Smyrna. Y'all know that I felt a strong sense of calling and went back for an education when I was in my mid-30's. I was NOT an angel in any sense of the word when that call came.

When we were at Smyrna, some of the people in the community were “anti-minister” in that they didn't respect someone who had no life-skills and who couldn't relate to their lives and circumstances. I had been a commercial artist and I had been a cop in the Air Force and had done a lot of mechanic work along the way, so I DID know what it was to work.

One of our neighbors—who didn't go to church—came by not too long after we moved in and I was up inside the hood of Vonna's truck with the front off of the engine, changing the timing belt. He stopped and watched for a minute and said, “well, Bobby said you were a regular person, and I guess he was right...”

He had been hurt by a minister who couldn't relate to his circumstances and instead had condemned him during a visit when he was sick. What he wanted was someone who could care for him where he was and as he was—someone who could understand and relate. A “real person” if you will.

As I sit writing this message—if I could see through it like a crystal ball and look into your lives, I would see—in most cases—some combination of mental, physical, and spiritual broken-ness. But it is not just you—when I look in the mirror, I see the very same thing.

How about that—even if you call yourself a child of God—you are imperfect What do you think about that, how does it make you feel? How about knowing that there is no perfection in the professional/called-out clergy either?

In our religious culture, it feels strange to admit, openly, that we are imperfect—and really mean it. Oh, we always SAY we are imperfect, but then we often go on and pretend. We Christians are a proud people. After all, we are called of God and we have accepted that call. It took a lot of personal ability and a lot of work to get where we are, right? It took a lot of work to deserve our salvation and we ought to be proud of ourselves, right? The answer, of course, is “no” because the bible says that God resists the proud.

Paul tells us that salvation is not by works, but by Grace—and that we are not to boast of our goodness—or our God-ness (our salvation) because it is not “of” us, not from anything we did or anything we are.

Pride creates special problems for us. If we take pride in anything but God’s love and his salvation, then we risk being fakes and hypocrites. Deep down, we know we are imperfect, but sometimes we feel that we must project an image of perfection to others so that they will see we are worthy of our special status before God. Are the people around us fooled by that ruse? No!

God’s purpose is better served if we admit that we are not perfect, shoot for the moon (with the help of God’s Spirit), and then be humble and candid with each other and with our friends in the world when we fail to get to the moon.

We also need to be honest with God. First of all, it is the silliest thing to think that we can hide who we are and what we do and what we are from God. If we are so proud as to try, then we will prevent God from healing us and putting us back on the right path.

If, instead, we will allow our failures to break our hearts then God will heal us.

Let's read today's verses again.

*Praise the LORD! For it is good to sing praises to our God; For it is pleasant and praise is becoming. The LORD builds up Jerusalem; He gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds.*

Later in that chapter, it says that God sustains the humble. If God resists the proud and sustains the humble, then what camp should we be in today?

In Psalm 34:15-18 we see that God seeks out and saves those who are broken.

*The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous And His ears are open to their cry. The face of the LORD is against the evildoers, To cut off their memory from the earth. The righteous cry and the LORD hears; And delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD is near to the brokenhearted; and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

If we are, as Paul said he was, pressed and pounded and crushed—but not destroyed—then we are in a perfect place to receive healing and blessings and help from the hand of God.

As we talk about ministering to others, is especially important—that as we examine ourselves and renew our commitment to God and to each other—that we admit, even embrace our brokenness before God, seeking humbly his restoration and his healing. It is more important than anything that we will do today. It is more important, he says, than our very worship.

*Psalm 51:15-19 : O LORD, open my lips, that my mouth may declare your praise. For you do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A contrite and broken heart, O God, you do not despise.*

In the New Testament, we are told by Jesus himself that we are to leave our sacrifices on the steps of the temple and go, instead, to our brother or sister and make things right between us—that is real brokenness, isn't it—swallowing pride? Those are the kind of things God declares more important than any sacrifices we bring—any worship we can offer today

BUT, in our pride and in our blindness to who we were and who we are, we can fail to reach out properly and completely to “those people” out there in the world—in our world around us.

We may fail because we don't want to go to the trouble.

We may fail because we know that THEY know that we are unworthy and imperfect and we don't want to have to admit it.

Sometimes we fail because we are too busy practicing religion (By the way, I wonder, when are we going to quit practicing it and DO it—even better, BE it?)

I fear that many Christians today risk God's wrath and losing God's hand of preservation and power because they have not met the needs of the lost sheep around them. When you and I are not being what God wants from us, sooner or later, God he will up and try another way to get his will done. I pray that it will not happen to us.

Christians—we are the leaders of our communities when it comes to religious things. We are the light. We are the salt. We are the guides. Let me read what God says about the religious leadership during the time of Ezekiel.

*Thus says the Lord God, “behold I am against the shepherds, and I shall demand my sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves any more, but I will deliver My flock from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.'Behold,' says the Lord God, I Myself will search for my sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so will I care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places from which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day. And I bring them out from among the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams, and in all the inhabited places of the land.”*

On this day that we are celebrating the laity—those of you who minister and share and work for the kingdom in your daily lives and walks—let me tell you why I have talked so much of how we are broken and imperfect.

Let me tell you the advantages of being a broken people—of being less than perfect, physically, mentally, and spiritually. First, as the scriptures say, we are in a position to be held and helped by God himself. We are in a position to be guarded and tended by God. We are also in a position to understand those around us and for them to understand that we are like them—just recipients of God’s grace and love.

When we come along side our neighbors or our friends or our families—they know that we are not perfect and that we are not full of pride and we are not standing on a “high horse” but our lives are similar to theirs and our struggles are like theirs and that we know what it is to fail—and yet still try to serve God.

Some people need that connection before they can trust us.

When I was a resident at UNC hospital, my supervisor told me about one of her students who was on call and she went to help a family who had experienced the death of a loved one there in the hospital.

When they arrived, she and the family talked a bit and finally someone said, how old are you? “I’m 21.” Have you ever lost anyone close to you in your family? “No.” They said, Go and send someone who has lived.

I find that as my arthritis has gotten worse through the years, I understand and can identify with people with depression and who have chronic pain and who have illnesses that are not healing and which affect their lives. I may not understand everything, but I understand those things.

As we broken people go out into the world, all the while receiving God’s love and healing, the people we meet will see themselves in us—with a difference—since we are in the process of being saved and transformed by God. Since we have the peace that passes all understanding in our hearts. Since we are blanketed by God's grace no matter what.

I like to think that I am WAY better at identifying with the people I meet than the two pastors I mentioned earlier.

Still, I promise you that as you go out and as you minister and lead—in this church and this ministry, that each of you is better qualified to meet the needs of those you come in contact with and to know and accept them as they are—AND—to be known and accepted as you are.

I thank each of you for what you do. In this church and in your world when you leave here. You are truly building the kingdom of God.

Today the invitation is open. It is open to salvation through the work and the grace of Jesus the Christ. It is open to re-commitment to the work of Christ here in this place. It is open to membership here at Zion—that is if you don't think, after the video, that we will work you to death. Even if we do, I'm pretty sure you will die happy...

As we sing.