**The Sticky Gospel**

**FBC Albemarle**

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It was an awkward conversation. “Bailey” had grown up in church and had been an active part of my ministry. Matter of fact, she was one of the strong student leaders in the group. But like 40 to 50 percent of students just like her, upon graduating high school Bailey shelved her faith during her college years. Herfaith failed to stick. She found the bars and campus parties early in college. Though she was a committed follower of Christ during high school and was a highly respected student leader while in the youth group, Bailey gave it all up to fit into the party scene. She drank excessively many nights, even to the point of passing out.

In addition to drinking alcohol and occasionally smoking marijuana, Bailey also found herself in sexually active relationships. While partying, she would have one-night stands with complete strangers or with guys she hardly knew. She enjoyed living what seemingly was a carefree life.

In her third year of college, Bailey found a boyfriend. Her partying on campus declined as their relationship deepened, but the drinking and smoking marijuana continued. It now persisted with her boyfriend and a small group of friends. Soon she and the boyfriend moved in together. For the first few months, it seemed everything was blissful but circumstances quickly changed. The boyfriend started to become physically and verbally abusive. He was controlling and tore apart Bailey’s self-image and self-confidence. Though she knew it was not a good situation, she believed she had nowhere else to turn. She loved him and did not want to give up on the relationship.

In her state of low self-image, she turned to alcohol to deaden the pain of self-loathing. She drank to hide her feelings and soon became reliant on alcohol to make it through each day. In the midst of the destructive relationship, Bailey ironically landed a clerical job at a rehabilitation facility for addicts. She checked patients into the facility and cared for their basic needs while they went through the difficult stage of withdrawal. She saw the patients struggle as they tried to break their dependence on alcohol or drugs.

After witnessing the painful scenes day after day of patients fighting through the withdrawals, Bailey began to reflect on her own life. She gathered enough courage to finally leave her abusive boyfriend. She found a place of her own and started to focus on making better choices. As part of her job at the rehabilitation facility, she sat in on the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings held for the residents. She learned about the core principles and the steps to breaking the cycle of substance abuse. Bailey decided to go through the program herself.

After working through the first three steps of admitting her powerlessness over alcohol, believing only God had the power to help her overcome it and deciding to fully rely on God, Bailey fearlessly completed a personal moral inventory. She systematically wrote down everything she had been through, critically judging her feelings, intentions and actions. After her thorough search of self, she was ready for the fifth step, which is to share her findings with another person.

This is when the awkward conversation occurred. After eating lunch together and catching up on everything that had happened on the surface, Bailey shared her moral inventory with me. Her tone was matter-of-fact, and she did not make eye contact. She just looked down at her journal and read the list of what she considered to be her moral failures. I simply sat as still as I could and listened.

I was amazed at the courage she had to share all of her struggles and dark moments in life. I was stunned by her candor and truthfulness. My heart ached for her for having to endure the brokenness and pain of choosing self over God. I wished Bailey had not shelved her faith. However, at the same time, I was encouraged by the emotional and spiritual growth she had experienced. I was proud of Bailey’s turn back toward God and seeking wholeness through total surrender and trust in Christ. I was encouraged by how self-aware she had become how her faith had deepened through the difficult times.

Unfortunately, the gospel Bailey (and many like her) placed her faith in as a teenager was based on her outward behaviors. She believed that if she came to church, read her Bible, prayed, went on mission trips, got good grades, stayed out of trouble, obeyed her parents and was generally a good kid, God will be pleased with her. Like so many others, Bailey viewed the gospel of Jesus Christ like a jacket she could put on or take off. When she was at church or hanging out with her Christian friends, she just slipped on her gospel jacket. If she was headed to a party or to a bar where she didn’t want Jesus to follow her, she threw her gospel jacket in the corner of her room.

Dallas Willard called it the “gospel of sin management.” Interestingly, Our teenagers and young adults who grow up in church are not picking up the gospel of sin management on their own. Unfortunately, they are learning it from the adults – from the gospel we believe, talk about, teach, and model for them. We have allowed the gospel of Jesus Christ to become a list of virtues, a list of accomplishments, or a list of things to avoid. We have intentionally and unintentionally taught them that Jesus suffered and died on our behalf to just forgive us for our sins and failures. We have failed to teach them that Jesus lived, suffered, died and was resurrected to prove that he is trustworthy of placing our faith in him and trusting him for all of our needs.

In today’s text, Paul is trying to set the record straight for Galatian Christians. In the church in Galatia, the Jewish Christians were at odds with the Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians had a difficult time of letting go of their traditions and their deep desire to follow the laws of their faith. The Gentile Christians didn’t have the same baggage. But, the Jewish Christians believed that the Gentile Christians should follow the traditions of their heritage including being circumcised. However, Paul declared that Christ has set all of his followers from the laws that bind us to the lists of do’s and don’ts. Matter of fact, Paul goes to the extreme to make his argument…if you are going to follow some laws of the tradition, then you must follow the whole law. You can’t choose to follow some while discarding others.

Paul then tries to bring light to how ridiculous this argument really is. He essentially is telling them that Jesus did not rise from the grave for things to remain the same. Rather, the only thing that matters to Jesus is our faith that is expressed through love. When Paul wrote, “through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope,” what he was trying to convey is that it is God’s job to work in us and to present us as righteous in his sight; our job is to learn to trust God and to be patient in the process. Rather than being focused on the outcome (righteous living), we should be focused on how we can trust God more in every aspect of our lives.

So, how do we better understand the real Gospel of Jesus? It first begins with placing our trust in Jesus daily. In verse 5, the Greek word translated as faith is *pisteuo*. It is used throughout the New Testament and is translated as faith, believe or trust. These translations are interchangeable. So when Paul says “by faith,” it can also be translated as “by placing our trust in Jesus we wait with great hope for the Holy Spirit to work within us to turn our hearts to God and in turn change our outward attitudes and actions.” The primary calling for adults, youth and children is to trust Christ more and more each day. As we better understand what it means to have a faith that lasts, every thought, every decision, and every action comes down to this: Where do I place my trust? Do I trust my own instincts, desires and convictions, or do I trust Christ? This is not a one-time decision. Trusting Jesus is an everyday decision, maybe even every moment! We must trust that God desires for us to experience life to the full; life as it was meant to be. We must trust that God knows the plans he has for each of us, plans for us to prosper in spirit and in relationships.

Second, our understanding of the Sticky Gospel is also dependent on repentance. There is no doubt we fail. We experience failure daily. We say things we ought not to. We think things we shouldn’t. We do things we should avoid. We develop habits that are destructive. We allow hatred to guide our thoughts and actions toward others. We loathe ourselves when we look in the mirror. When we experience failure, what do we do with it? When Paul said “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free,” what did Jesus set us free from? Did he just set us free from having to follow the Jewish laws? No, Jesus has set us free to be more like him. Therefore, Jesus did not sacrifice himself for us to simply receive forgiveness from our sins. Rather, he died and was raised to life so that we can truly experience forgiveness AND repentance (changing of our minds/hearts). The changing of our minds/hearts will lead to the changing of our actions but this process takes time. We must not only be patient with our teenagers and young adults in their failures but we must also be patient with one another as adults.

Finally, Sticky Gospel places spiritual disciplines in the proper perspective. Daily Bible reading, prayer, meditation, service to others and other spiritual disciplines do not make us a better person. The disciplines do not make us righteous because we do them; instead, they put us in a position to be drawn into trusting Christ more fully. In verse 6, Paul says, “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision or uncircumcision has any value.” In other words, following prescribed rituals or any other attempts to become righteous are useless, including doing spiritual disciplines believing God will be pleased with us. If we read our Bible or spend time in prayer because we think it will make us more righteous in God’s sight, then we are missing the point. The point is that spiritual disciplines should be practiced because it places us in a position where we learn to trust God more today than we did yesterday.

It still breaks my heart that Bailey experienced so much hurt and brokenness while in college. It is disappointing that a teenager who had such vibrant faith would shelve their faith as a young adult. It also reminds me that the Church must do a better job of conveying God’s extravagant love for his creation and his desire for us to place our trust in him. However, I am grateful for the way God continually pursues us with his grace and love. Just last week, Bailey texted me to tell me that she was going back to college to pursue a degree in religion with the thoughts of seminary after graduation. I am glad the people around Bailey remained patient with her just as I am glad God is patient with you and me.