

By Grace

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Introduction:

This sermon comes out of the events of the past few months and the reading that I have done over that time and probably has more questions than answers. After reading the Better Together book that Jonathan Dove recommended about church mergers I moved on to read two books about recognising and changing church cultures, then on to Oswald Sanders book Spiritual Leadership. He was a New Zealander as an aside. Then I reread Holiness by J.C. Ryle and more recently Ashamed No More, the story of a Tom Ryan, a pastor who was caught up in sexual addiction for the nearly 20 years he pastored a growing congregation and the struggles he went through.

This mishmash of reading and events sent me down many threads – what is leadership? What is the church in the context in which we find ourselves? How has the culture influenced the churches view of itself and it's mission and whether it is successful or not? What is a pastor and how is the call of God determined – is it something purely the individual determines before God or is it determined by the community of believers before God? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the church? Even down to more fundamental questions like, Am I a Christian or am I fooling myself? Or am I just a second rate Christian who hasn't yet discovered really what loving Jesus is all about?

The Biggest Threat:

Tom Ryan in his book Ashamed No More writes this: *“The biggest threat facing the church in America isn't the erosion of “moral values” in our culture. It isn't the rampant drug use or the growing divide between upper and lower classes or encroaching relativism or foreign terrorists. The biggest threat is the hiding and pretending of those who make up the church. We aren't honest about our failings. We aren't honest with ourselves, with each other, with God or with the world around us. We pretend to be people we aren't.”* (Ashamed No More, T.C. Ryan, pg 193-194).

So how respectable are we? Even in a small congregation like ours there are going to be people that are dealing with real, hard issues. So do we say that we don't want to know and you need to go and see a counsellor or a psychologist? It's not that going to see them is wrong. But if the church is not a place when they can find community, love and hope in spite of their failings, then something is wrong.

In Ashamed No More Tom Ryan tells the story of two youngish ladies who joined a particular congregation. Then the leadership discovered that they were exotic dancers, or more bluntly, strippers, that was how they made their living. And after much discussion in the leadership these two ladies were asked to leave the church – the leadership was worried about the influence they would have on the younger people. It's very easy for us to judge and say that was wrong. But what if two prostitutes joined our congregation? What would our reaction be? Would they find a place where they were treated as human beings or would we reject them because of their profession.

The story of Tom Ryan himself is also interesting. He became addicted to pornography while he was still quite young, but eventually ended up as a pastor of a church and that church grew under his leadership for the 19 years he was there. And yes, he was married. So we have someone leading a “successful” church who was by his own admissions dealing with sexual addiction. How does that tie in with our ideas of God and God's blessing on a ministry? We probably have to look no further than to people like Samson and David. For Tom Ryan it took him many years to get to the place where the pull of pornography was less but like most addictions, whether to alcohol or pornography,



it doesn't take too much of a push to get someone to relapse. Hence why we always have fruit juice these days at the communion table rather than real wine.

Before you think this is only a male problem – think again. A 2006 poll of Christian women showed that 20% of them were addicted to porn. Many of those women go from porn to sex related chat rooms and from there 80% of them will make contact with the people they have met in the chat room. If you include women addicted to soap operas and romance novels that climbs higher. Why is that an issue? They become dissatisfied with their lives, their husbands and their families because they don't match up to what they read or see.

For men in America the addiction rate is estimated at 40%. Tom Ryan in his work with pastors estimated that it's probably around 60% for pastors, probably about what it is in the computer tech industry in which I work. One Promise Keepers survey showed that 53% of the men there had viewed internet pornography the previous week. About 10 years ago pornography was a 57 billion dollar world wide industry. 12 billion of that was spent in the USA, and 2.5 billion of that 12 billion went to Internet pornography. Those numbers are even higher today.

And as for our children. 90% of 8-16 year olds will view pornography. Some will grow up in households where it is lying around. Most of the children in our church have computers at home, if not in their bedrooms. Some even have televisions in their bedrooms.

So why am I telling you this? Is it to shock you? It probably should but that is not the reason I'm telling you. If we look at the States we see a lot of large, “successful” churches. Yet overall church attendance is declining in the US, same as it is here in NZ. The pornography industry on the other hand is growing. And if we are saying that 1 in 5 women and 2 in 5 men are dealing with sexual issues in their lives why are we as a church not addressing it? It's not going to go away just because we would like it to, because it embarrasses us. What would our reaction be if we found out that our pastor or one of our members of the congregation had a sexual addiction issue? Would we shame them even more and ostracise them? If so why? Why are sexual sins greater than any other?

Woman caught in adultery:

1 Jesus returned to the Mount of Olives,

2 but early the next morning he was back again at the Temple. A crowd soon gathered, and he sat down and taught them.

3 As he was speaking, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They put her in front of the crowd.

4 “Teacher,” they said to Jesus, “this woman was caught in the act of adultery.

5 The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?”

6 They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger.

7 They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, “All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!”

8 Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust.

9 When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman.

10 Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, “Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?”

11 “No, Lord,” she said. And Jesus said, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.” (John 8:1-11)

Interestingly, both the man and the woman were suppose to be stoned according to the Old



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Testament law but “somehow” the man escapes and only the woman is bought before Jesus. The Pharisees are shaming this woman publicly in order to make a political point. Jesus didn't condemn her and if Jesus didn't then I would suggest that neither should we. However, he did say go and sin no more. So was Jesus letting her off easily? I don't think so. She knew she had done wrong. She didn't try to deny that she had committed adultery. Jesus's words probably sunk deeper into her than anything anyone else would or could have said to her. That's grace. And to do it ourselves is hard, really, really hard. We tend to either come down on the side of being “nice” and ignoring the issue or going to the other extreme of attacking and verbally beating the poor person. And yes, in case you're asking, I've done both. The former is easier because you don't feel too bad about yourself afterwards but both are wrong and neither is actually loving.

Grace:

The reality is that as much as that woman caught in adultery we need grace as well. All of us have things in our past and sometimes even our present that we wouldn't want anyone else to know, things of which we are ashamed. But even if we don't go around declaring all our sins to all and sundry, pretending they never happened and blocking them out with church as entertainment is no way to deal with them. We look around at the church around us and say God is moving. But we are not seeing that reflected in our society so we have to ask ourselves the really hard questions. Is it actually God? Or are we justifying our own behaviour? Do we need experiences to deaden the pain inside? Does our need to be “victorious” lead us to not be authentic? I don't have the answers but I do think they are questions we need to be asking ourselves.

We really need to recognise that we are all sinners. Yet sinners saved by grace. No matter how hard we try, there is nothing we can do to justify ourselves before God. We are all broken. We are all reliant on Christ.

Sanctification (and Justification):

There are two big words that theologians, people who study God, use about all this – justification and sanctification. Justification is what Christ has done for us. There is nothing we can do to make ourselves right with God. So Christ died in our place. We are made right with God, justified, because of what Christ has done. So every single person who truly believes in Christ is justified. Completely. There is no half measures here because we are talking about what Christ has done. So when God looks at us he sees Christ and because He sees Christ we are safe.

Sanctification on the other hand is something we work at with God's help. Each Christian is in a different place in their sanctification, in their being made like Christ. Everyone is completely and utterly saved, they are just at different points on the journey towards being made more like Christ. So Paul can say:

12 Dear friends, you always followed my instructions when I was with you. And now that I am away, it is even more important. Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear.

*13 For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.
(Philippians 2:12-13)*

God gives us the desire and the power to be more like Christ. But we need to do it. Sometimes we know what we need to do. At other times we don't. Either way God is working in us. But we have our part to play.

The balance between grace, love and responsibility:



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So then, does showing people grace mean that we let people do whatever they like and not hold them responsible for their actions. They are after all sinners, just like you and I. They will get things wrong, the same as we do, that is one thing of which we can be certain.

No, I don't believe so. Find the balance however is hard. Paul could write in 2 Thessalonians:

6 And now, dear brothers and sisters, we give you this command in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: Stay away from all believers who live idle lives and don't follow the tradition they received from us.

7 For you know that you ought to imitate us. We were not idle when we were with you.

8 We never accepted food from anyone without paying for it. We worked hard day and night so we would not be a burden to any of you.

9 We certainly had the right to ask you to feed us, but we wanted to give you an example to follow.

10 Even while we were with you, we gave you this command: "Those unwilling to work will not get to eat."

11 Yet we hear that some of you are living idle lives, refusing to work and meddling in other people's business.

12 We command such people and urge them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and work to earn their own living.

13 As for the rest of you, dear brothers and sisters, never get tired of doing good.

14 Take note of those who refuse to obey what we say in this letter. Stay away from them so they will be ashamed.

15 Don't think of them as enemies, but warn them as you would a brother or sister. (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15)

So those who do not work should not eat. Paul's comment about his example to the people in Thessalonica reminds of something that Karen was reading recently – an article about how the world's definition of success has migrated its way into the church. In it was a quote from one church's vision – “The congregation is there to serve the church and the leadership.” And we read that and go, what happened to Jesus' words in Mark 10:

42 So Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them.

43 But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant,

44 and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else.

45 For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

In a similar vein we have Matthew 7:

21 "Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter.

22 On judgement day many will say to me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.'

23 But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws.' (Matthew 7:21-23)

And I go, am I one of those people?



So yes, we all need grace:

It is my belief that one of the things the world is desperately crying out for in this entertainment soaked world is authenticity. The psalmist says, '*be still and know that I am God*' (Psalm 46:10) but often today there is not a moments silence in a service. In a lot of churches there is music playing while people pray. People have forgotten how to just be. I wonder if this why some people rely so much on religious experiences. It may dull the pain and may make things seem better for a while, it may even allow us to pretend that somehow we are now better, but most people will see it for what it is, shallow. That is not to say that some people don't find a great comfort, and even healing, through it. But I do not believe that being an authentic church, one that is reflecting the holiness of God, is what will ultimately show us as being "different".

So do I have the answer, the solution to how to make this all happen? I'm afraid not. Like you I'm on a journey of discovering more about what it means to be a Christian in the 21st Century and how to reflect Christ in our culture. But what I do know is that we need to try. Yes, we will make mistakes but mistakes are not the end of the world. It's how we learn, how we grow as people in Christ. But try we do need to.

