

Unreasonable expectations. 18th April, 2021.

So - I hope you're sitting comfortably, because if you were listening carefully to the epistle from 1 John, it would appear that we are all on the highway to hell. Well, I am anyway, and I rather suspect that I may have at least some of you for company.

Let me remind you of what John wrote in case it has slipped your mind; 'No one who lives in him (Jesus) keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

7 Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. 8 The one

who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. 9 No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. 10 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.'

I have to say that seems a pretty tall order to me. We might reasonably ask who can fulfill it apart from Jesus? And my answer to you

would be, 'Nobody.' So why is John making totally unreasonable demands and expectations of us?

After all, we might argue, did not Jesus teach us in his own prayer to ask for forgiveness of our sins, to be able to forgive the sins of others against us?

He knew, and we know, that none of us are without faults, without wrong-doing in one way or another, and that we struggle to avoid sin - even though it creeps up on us all the time. That is again why Jesus' prayer tells us to 'ask that we fall not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...'

Martin Luther is often quoted as having encouraged us to 'sin boldly' (Esto peccator et pecca fortiter, Be a sinner and sin boldly,) but - as always - this phrase is often taken out of context, so I will redress that presently.

Nevertheless, it has given rise to significant controversy over the years, and this injunction from John to never sin or we are children of the devil seems to be in complete contradiction to what the leader of the Reformation is saying.

I want to quote from an article I found in my researches. It comes from Erick Sorensen, a pastor at a Lutheran church in New York State.

"Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?" (Ecclesiastes 7:16-17)

The common knock against "grace people" (or to put it another way, "Christians") is that preaching too much grace will encourage licentious living. Charges of antinomianism, lack of love for God's Law or "easy-believism" abound.

These charges are nothing new. The Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther (a "grace person") constantly dealt with the same accusation from the church of his day. Though Luther defends against this charge adequately

over and over and over again in his responses, the accusation was still levelled. So you can only imagine his opponents glee when they found that he had written in a letter to a friend these words: "Sin Boldly!"

There it is! The smoking gun! Is this not all the proof you need, to see that this grace alone stuff is dangerous?

Well... Not so fast.

As most of us know from watching T.V. News shows, political debates, or hearing the latest gossip from a friend; soundbites, comments and statements can easily be ripped out of context. There is ALWAYS context. That context can either confirm what we thought the quote meant, or it can change it

dramatically. What was the context of Luther's statement?

Luther was writing to his main partner in the Reformation, Philip Melanchthon, seeking to encourage him. It seems Philip had become quite full of despair over a number of things, one of those things being his own struggles with sin. So after writing 11 paragraphs in response, addressing many problems, Luther wrote this to his old friend:

If you are a preacher of mercy, do not preach an imaginary but the true mercy. If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true, not an imaginary sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong (or "Sin boldly"),but let

your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. We will commit sins while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice resides. We, however, says Peter (2 Peter 3:13) are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign. It suffices that through God's glory we have recognized the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. No sin can separate us from Him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day. Do you think such an exalted Lamb paid merely a small price with a meager sacrifice for our sins? Pray hard for you are quite a sinner.

Reading the context changes the meaning quite a bit doesn't it? It's clear that what Luther is saying here is not to go sin so that grace will abound (Romans 6:1). Rather he's advocating brutal honesty and forthrightness before God, not being afraid to call a thing what it is.

Why all this Luther talk? (As if one needs a reason?!?)

Because read out of context, all alone, with no other verses surrounding it, the text from Ecclesiastes at the beginning of this post would seem to be a contradiction of what the rest of the Bible teaches: We are told not to be "overly righteous", or "overly wise!" We are also told not to be "overly wicked," or "fools." The end result of being "overly righteous," or

"overly wise?" "Destruction" (vs. 16). The end result of being overly wicked or a fool? "Death before your time" (vs. 17).

What is going on here? Doesn't the Bible say to strive for righteousness (The Sermon on the Mount tells us after all to HUNGER AND THIRST for righteousness!)? Doesn't Solomon say all throughout the Proverbs that we are to strive to be WISE!? I mean, we can understand the steering away from wickedness and foolishness, but how can one be "overly righteous?"

What I believe the writer of Ecclesiastes is saying is essentially the same thing Luther was saying: One can be overly righteous by not being honest and up front with God about their

sin (or as Luther said, "Not sinning boldly!"). Being "overly righteous" is another way of saying "self-righteous"; being "overly righteous" and "overly wise" is being the Pharisee standing up in the temple next to a tax collector thanking God that he is "not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." That man, Jesus says, does not go home justified. Instead it was an underly-righteous and overly-sinful tax collector coming to God beating his breast, confessing his sin and pleading for mercy that Jesus commended: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone

who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:14)

This is how Christians come to God: We confess our sins, knowing that He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9). Why? Because "He Himself is the propitiation for our sins." In other words, "We sin boldly, but let our trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his tough book, 'The Cost of Discipleship', comments on Luther's letter to his friend, and adds a slant on it that

is not actually there, but helps us to see more clearly what Luther was probably driving at. Bonhoeffer says that what Luther meant is, 'Admit your sin boldly; do not try to flee from it, but 'believe much more boldly.'"

This should make us all a lot more comfortable. As is stated in the AA programme, 'We claim spiritual progress, rather than spiritual perfection.'

I think that makes me feel a lot easier than when I read what I still feel are John's unreasonable demands and expectations.

So I can happily leave AC/DC to go on singing their hit song, 'Highway to Hell'.