

A Redeemed Culture #3 – Culture and the Cross

Introduction – If a man wants to be a Christian, then he wants to die. Jesus teaches us that His vocation of suffering and glory is directly linked to our vocation of suffering and glory. While we believe that the glory of the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth, and while we believe the scriptures teach that this glory will manifest itself in a redeemed culture, we must be careful not to think that this teaches a “health and wealth gospel”, nor any overly simplistic optimism that refuses to recognize that suffering is an essential part of the Christian’s life and the church’s history.

The Text – “...Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me... (Mark 8:34-38)”

A Brief Overview – This passage immediately follows the confession of Peter that Jesus is the Anointed One, the teaching by Christ of His suffering to come, and His rebuke of Peter (Satan) to tempt Him away from His vocation (8:27-33). The passage is immediately followed by the witness of the Transfiguration of Jesus, a preview of His glory and the kingdom of God present with power (9:1-8).

The Wisdom of God – Man in Adam had sought knowledge in rebellion. True wisdom from God comes in humility. A man who wants to be a follower of Jesus is a man who wants to die (v34). But a man who rightly wants to die is a man who desires to live (v35). Those who seek to save their own souls will lose them. Those who seek to lose them for the sake of Christ will save them. Jesus makes clear that there is a horrible rate of return for one who strives to gain the world at the expense of his soul (vv36f). He then warns us that when He returns in glory, those who were ashamed of Christ now will find that He is ashamed of them then (v38).

The Precondition for Dominion: Christ-likeness – Adam was created in the image of God, and Christ, the second Adam, was God. Adam was to enter into his vocation of dominion through obedient living by faith before God. Christ succeeded in doing so. Faithful obedience towards His Father meant that Christ was to suffer and die. The same pattern exists for all of us (Col 1:24, Mark 9:33-35).

Personal Piety and Dominion – As God grants greater biblical dominion, with it will come deeper piety and a deeper awareness of our own sinfulness. This is because the nearer we draw before God the more obvious our own sin is revealed to us (Isaiah 6:5). Paul, who could boast of a great ministry, said that “*when I am weak, then I am strong*” (2 Cor 12:10). Early in his ministry he wrote that he was “*the least of the apostles*” (1 Cor 15:9). Later, he said he was the “*least of the saints*” (Eph 3:8). Even later, in greater maturity in Christ, he regarded himself as the “*chief of sinners*” (1 Tim 1:15) and commended this attitude to us all.

The Pattern of Fiery Trials – God brings trials to His children. He does so for the purpose of building, maturing, and purifying His bride (James 1:2-4, Rom 5:1-5, 1 Pet 1:3-8). Additionally we can see that, historically, great persecutions of the church have been used by God to spread the gospel to the corners of the earth (Acts 8:1, 11:19-21).

Even From Within “the Church” – Moses, David and the prophets of God experienced their greatest trials from within the community of God’s people. Jesus was attacked by the Jews, and more importantly, the highly respected Pharisees. Schisms divided Corinth within the church and Paul was attacked by so-called fellow believers. Throughout church history there is a constant splintering of the church from within. And through it all we are to see the hand of God (John 15:1-2). Eyes of faith know the difference between cutting that destroys and pruning that produces greater fruit.

And So –

1 – Do not set yourself up for disappointment. We may wish to correct the pessimistic view of the reign of Christ upon the earth (Psalm 2:8-9). But we should not fall into a false sense of *Utopia-on-the-way*. The sun we see on the horizon is rising in the east; don’t confuse it for a setting in the west. We may still be the “ancient” church.

2 – Accept and expect fiery trials (2 Tim 3:12). God puts His people and His church through great trials to refine them and to bring greater kingdom dominion upon His earth. But often, and especially in the midst of the trial, one cannot judge why God has brought some particular trial – and that may be the heart of the trial itself.

3 – Practice Thankfulness. Over and over again, the Lord gives you opportunity to give thanks in all things. And this command is not given for times when thankfulness is easy. Christian contentment is a rare jewel, and it is a gift from God to His people. Let us ask Him again for this gift.

4 – Groaning for Final Redemption Is Faithful (Rom 8:23) – At the same time, in the midst of those trials and in the midst of an eschatological optimism, it is faithful to join with saints who have longed for the fulfillment of our adoption, the redemption of our bodies, and the final glory of heaven itself. This is ultimately why we deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Jesus.