

THE VICAR OF CHRIST

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Is anybody out there pals with Pope Benedict? Talked with him on the phone lately? Had breakfast with him? Gone camping with him? Knows him personally, intimately? He could be from another planet, he is so far away. Yet many accept him as “the vicar of Christ,” God’s vice-president on earth.

Jesus is closer to you than that. Yet to many people, He seems far-distant, some great celebrity, but not one intimate with them. The Bible insists that He is *very* close to us. Hebrews 2:9-18 describes Him as closer to us than a blood-sibling, closer than parents can ever be, an Alter-ego who tapes all our intimate conversations but never betrays our confidence, Someone “made in all things like unto” us who is an Intimate so close that no English words can describe the relationship properly: “a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.” The NT high priest to you is like your physician, except you are the only patient he has. He is the physician of your soul, a divine psychiatrist, one who understands your secret feelings. Heb. 4:15 says “touched with the feeling of our weaknesses,” compassionate, but never soft with you, never excuses you for wrong doing but holds you to a high standard because He loves you. He reasons from cause to effect, is compassionate as well as firm with you. The best Friend you will ever have.

The victory that took place in Him was given to us, and it now is realized in us when we choose to exercise faith in Him. Christ died for us two thousand years ago, and stamped our debt “paid.” But did He complete His work then, so that now He is on “vacation”? Has He left us to get along as best we can?

The answer of course is No; He has sent the Holy Spirit. We are not like cars with full gas tanks so that we run on our own. We are like a trolley that must keep in contact with the power line or it stops. The Good News is that the power still flows through the line.

A great religious system involving millions of people is based on the assumption that a certain clergyman has been appointed “the vicar of Christ” on earth. The idea is that when Christ went away to heaven, He had to find someone to manage His business on earth. The supposed successors of St. Peter have usurped the honor.

It is correct that Christ needs a “vicar” on earth to carry on His business; but it is not correct to say that a fallible, mortal man can do it. Christ said that His divinely appointed “vicar” is the Holy Spirit Himself: “I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever, even the Spirit of truth. . . . You know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. . . . The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you” (John 14:16-18, 26).

In the flesh, Christ could not be in all places at the same time, but through the Holy Spirit He abides so closely with every believer that the early disciples who walked and talked with Him could not have been closer than you are. This is why He said, “It is better for you that I go away, because if I do not go, the Helper will not come to you” (John 16:7, TEV).

Alcoholics want to stop drinking but don’t know how. Thieves, embezzlers, addicts, and gluttons are terribly ashamed, and wish they knew how never to indulge again. How do we overcome the inner compulsion of evil?

We soon learn that trying to be better or making promises will not help. We are like the sons and daughters of a great king who have been taken slaves in a Roman war of conquest, and are helpless captives longing for release. Jesus says, “Everyone who sins is a slave of sin” (John 8:34, TEV). Sin has alienated us from our best Friend, making us think things about Him that are not true. “You were his enemies in heart and mind, and [thus] your deeds were evil” (Col. 1:21, NEB).

Paul said, “What I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do” (Rom. 7:14, 15). What a war to have raging inside us! “I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law [or principle] . . . warring against the law [or principle] of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law [or principle] of sin which is in my members” (verses 20, 22, 23). Another translation says, “When I want to do the right, only the wrong is within my reach.” Then Paul cries out like we all do,

“Miserable creature that I am, who is there to rescue me out of this body doomed to death?” (verse 24, NEB).

What is this “death”? “Sin pays a wage, and the wage is death” (Rom. 6:23). Who wants “wages” like that? Some do, because Jesus says, “All those who hate me love death” (Prov. 8:36). But we, like Paul, cry out, “Who is there to rescue me?”

Paul gives the answer: “God alone, through Jesus Christ our Lord! Thanks be to God! . . . There is no condemnation for those who are united with Christ Jesus, because in Christ Jesus the life-giving law of the Spirit has set you free from the law [principle] of sin and death” (Rom. 7:25; 8:1, NEB). A stronger power than sin takes over when we stop resisting the Holy Spirit—the “life-giving law of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit rules the heart and overmasters the evil that used to drag us down. If that’s not true, there is no hope for any human being. But it is true.

Paul goes on to explain that what Christ did for us two thousand years ago the Holy Spirit now does in us: “What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the [Holy] Spirit” (Rom. 8:3, 4).

If you had an enemy constantly trying to kill you, wouldn’t you be happy if he were “condemned” in a court of law and locked up? That is what happens to sin, in our flesh. Jesus was sent in the likeness of our “sinful flesh,” met temptation as we must meet

it, got under our load, and conquered sin right there within our own flesh or sinful nature. Perhaps we can illustrate.

Suppose a father tells his little child to take a hammer and drive a big nail into a piece of hard wood. The child tries, but fails. The hammer is too heavy, the nail is too big, and the wood is too hard. Where is the weakness? Shall the father throw the hammer away? No, you say, the hammer is all right; the weakness is in the child's flesh.

Now, let the father take the child's arm in his own, grasp the hammer tightly with the child's hand, hold the nail firmly—the nail is easily driven into the wood.

Let the "hammer" be the law of God. Although Paul says "the law is weak," it is not weak in itself; it is only "weak through the flesh." Whose? Yours and mine. God solves the problem by sending Jesus "in the likeness of sinful flesh," and right there "condemning sin in the flesh." The victory that took place in Him was given to us, and it now is realized in us when we choose to exercise faith in Him.

Long ago, God has already done this for us in Christ; now the Holy Spirit makes it effective in us. He convicts us of the righteousness of Christ (see John 16:8-11). But what is His "righteousness"? It was perfected "in the likeness of sinful flesh." In His flesh Jesus had a battle as we have. He was "in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). He took our nature upon Himself, "born of the seed of David according to the flesh" (Rom. 1:3).

"He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified [that is, Christ Himself and we] are all of

one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren. . . . Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same. . . . Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation [reconciliation] for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted" (Heb. 2:11, 14, 16-18).

Therefore, you are never to feel that you are on your own. No temptation can come to you that Christ has not already conquered "in the flesh," that is, your flesh. No matter how far into sin you have fallen, Christ's arm is long enough to reach where you are. From now on there is no excuse for any sin. Even this deep alienation from God that we feel, Christ has taken and abolished: "You, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death" (Col. 1:21, 22). The devil will tell you, "That's too much Good News—don't believe it."

What is our part? It is to consent to be led by the Holy Spirit. Like the little child who permitted his father to unite his weakness to his strength and drive the nail into the hard wood, so we permit Christ to work "in you what is well pleasing in His sight" (Heb. 13:21).

But Can I Really Be Set Free? Someone may say, "Please don't tell me something that isn't really true! This weakness of my flesh that the Bible calls 'the

law of sin and death' is too strong for me. Is there a 'life-giving law of the Spirit' that will really set me free?" Yes, for "the gospel of Christ . . . is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). The angel said of Him, "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Note, not in their sins. That would be a mockery, like telling a man he is free when chains still bind him.

You have seen the power of lightning, shattering a giant tree and splintering it to slivers. The true gospel of Christ shatters this "law of sin" in us.

"Yes," someone says, "I have seen how lightning strikes and what it does. But I have never felt this power strike me! How can I know there is power in the gospel of Christ to break the bonds of sin that have held me?"

"The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions" (Titus 2:11, NIV). When we choose to "walk after the Spirit," to let Him hold us by the hand, His power works within us. And anyone can come to Christ just as he is and let the Holy Spirit hold him by the hand; he does not have to try to make himself better first.

The power is in the cross of Christ. No one can rightly tell its glories. "God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me" (Gal. 6:14). What is "the world [that] has been crucified to me"? John tells us: it is "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16) which is all around us and in us. Now look at the

power of the cross: "the world" is stricken dead, "crucified," made nothing, even made abhorrent, to us. All the world's allurements are nullified by the greater glory of the cross.

You may say, "How can that be? Everybody loves the world, material-ism, money, pleasure!" Paul once loved it, but he discovered something of greater power that delivered him from it. Let us illustrate. A little child has been lost in a big crowd in the city. He can't find his mother. A kind policeman tries to comfort him with soda pop, ice cream, and candy, which the child normally loves. But even if a stranger should give him all the candy in the world, he could not be happy.

Suddenly he sees his mother. He throws away the soda pop and ice cream and comes running to meet the one he loves more than anything else in the world.

All the pleasures of sin become to us no more than soda pop to such a child when we "see" Jesus on that cross. "The greatest demonstration of God's love for us has been his sending his only Son into the world to give us life through him. We see real love, not in the fact that we love God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to make personal atonement for our sins" (1 John 4:9, 10, Phillips).

What the world calls "glory" becomes distasteful in contrast. "All those things that I might count as profit I now reckon as loss for Christ's sake. For his sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere garbage, so that I may gain Christ and be completely united with him" (Phil. 3:7-9, TEV).

Very hungry people sometimes eat leather and sawdust for want of something better. We “eat” sin because we are starved for the true love of God. Nothing else has such power to draw people. “I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself,” said Jesus (John 12:32).

A Scottish girl left the home of her shepherd father and lost herself in the sinful big city. Like some young women in today’s big cities, she became a prostitute. Her anguished father waited long for her return. Finally he went to the city and walked up and down its dark streets, sounding his familiar shepherd’s call so that his lost daughter would hear. One night while she was in a house of sin, she heard the call of her dear old father outside. With tears in her eyes, she rushed outside to meet him. She could not resist that call of love.

If we do not resist the love of Christ revealed at His cross, we will be drawn to Him. The Holy Spirit will give us the precious gift of repentance, a true heart sorrow for sin itself. God has exalted Christ with “His right hand to be a Prince and a Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31).

It is only “the goodness of God [that] leads you to repentance” (Rom. 2:4).

This is illustrated in a man who committed crime after crime in an effort to cover up his first mistake. Worst of all, he did nothing to prevent an innocent man from being sent to prison when he himself should have been the one jailed. As so often happens to a criminal, he lost his sense of fairness and kindness, and his wife and children left him. His

home was ruined. Yet that hard-hearted man would not repent. He insisted: “I cannot, I will not, I dare not, I must not!”

Finally the innocent man who was wrongfully in prison did an unusual thing. He wrote the hard-hearted man a letter, forgiving him for all the wrong he had done to him. Can you imagine? That letter broke the heart of that evil man and brought him to repentance and confession of his crimes. He said, “All the troubles that came to me failed to bring me to repentance; but when I was forgiven, I repented.” Fear can never drive you to be a better person, but realizing that you are forgiven—that does it.

Sometimes sick people need something more than medicine. A man sick of the palsy was one day brought to Jesus. His four friends had to break up the tile roof in order to lay him down at His feet. The sufferer did not ask for anything, not even healing. When Jesus saw him, He recognized that he was suffering from guilt. He said, “Son, thy sins be forgiven thee.”

Oh, how that poor man’s face shone with happiness and peace! Now he was not afraid to die, for the awful burden that had been crushing out his life was lifted. But Jesus took another step. He commanded the sufferer to pick up his bed and walk away (see Mark 2:1-12).

Being “born again” is not a do-it-yourself project. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit . . . The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it

goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:6, 8).

One cannot know when or how the Holy Spirit first began to work on his heart. The “wind” is forever blowing seeds of heavenly truth into minds and hearts. No one is wise enough to tell where they come from, for the grace of God has been working on human hearts in multitudinous ways ever since time began. What parents have said, friends, songs of praise, Bible messages heard or read, sermons, expressions of true love—all can be ways that the Holy Spirit uses to plant “Good News” ideas in the heart.

The seed of truth was sown. These “seeds” may lie there deep, unrecognized for years, but they are certain to germinate because each one has within itself the mysterious principle of eternal life. Each “seed” of Good News truth “is the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16).

Here is another illustration of how the divine word of truth accomplishes its purpose:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.—Isaiah 55:10, 11, NIV.

Christ’s illustration of the wind blowing “wherever it pleases” is a picture of God’s compassionate concern for every person. As surely as you have felt the wind blowing on your cheek, so surely is the

Holy Spirit trying to convert you. “God does not show favoritism” (Acts 10:34, NIV).

It’s exciting, for at times you can almost feel those seeds of truth germinating within your soul like a pregnant woman can feel the baby growing within her. She is thrilled with new life forming. What greater joy to experience something even more wonderful—“I’m being born again!”

But if the new birth is so easy, why isn’t everybody born again? The answer is clear: many, perhaps the majority, practice a form of new-birth-abortion. They are endlessly snuffing out the new life that the Spirit of God imparts.

This is disclosed in Stephen’s words to the Jewish leaders of his day. They were only doing what comes naturally to unconverted human nature: “You stiff-necked people ...! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!” (Acts 7:51, NIV).

It’s active alienation or enmity against God. It doesn’t make sense to do that, but let’s face reality—that’s what we do. It’s like starving people diligently uprooting every little food-bearing plant that comes up out of the ground. It’s crazy!

Jesus told a parable to illustrate the fate that most of His seeds of truth meet.

“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell

among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants” (Matthew 13:3-7, NIV).

He went on to explain His story. The farmer represents Himself, sowing His seeds of “Good News” truth in all human hearts everywhere through the work of the Holy Spirit, the “wind.” But, He says, “this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes” (verse 15, NIV). It’s no use sowing seed in earth packed beneath the tread of multitudes in the path. Even if plenty of seeds fall on hard hearts, they cannot take root.

Some “seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” This is “the man who hears the word and understands it,” Jesus explained (Matthew 13:8, 23, NIV). He is the one who believes the Good News, who receives it, welcomes it, cherishes it.

He lets it get into his heart instead of inviting the birds by the wayside to snatch it up, or letting the thorns choke it out, or leaving hidden “rocks” of cherished lust to dwarf its roots. He simply does not perform an abortion of unbelief to kill it. This is a Good News view of Jesus’ parable.

No one has yet seen what is the dynamic factor that produces the new birth, because love can never be seen. Jesus told Nicodemus in advance the story of His cross, which of course he couldn’t understand that night. But what he heard stayed deep in his mind until he saw what happened; then it all came together, and he stepped out of his closet to identify openly with Christ.

Jesus explained further: “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:13-15, NIV).

He alludes to something that happened during Israel’s wilderness wanderings. The people were journeying through the desert to their Promised Land (yes, there were hardships). But true to form for all of us humans, they had to make their difficulties worse by believing bad news: “The people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert?’” (Numbers 21:4, 5, NIV). They were not about to die, for God was leading them; this was a specter of doom that they themselves invoked, without reason (see Psalm 105:37). Their doubt became pure unbelief, borrowing troubles that were only figments of their faithless imagination. But to do so was sin.

The people’s sinful unbelief and murmuring had deprived them of God’s special protection which would have been theirs by right. Moses’ making a snake of brass and holding it up high on a pole was an acted prophecy of Christ to be uplifted on His cross.

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’ ... Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived” (Numbers 21:8, 9, NIV).

But how could a poisonous snake represent Him? Here is the answer: He was “made ... to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21, KJV). We see how close Christ has come to us. He never sinned, but He identified with us so closely that He “took” our fallen, sinful nature. He was “made” to be something that He was not. In that reality is our salvation from the “serpents.”

Note how easy the healing was: all the people had to do was look. Jesus is telling Nicodemus: there is something to see on that cross—look. But it is more than gazing at a crucifix. “Looking” is believing in the sense of a heart appreciation of what it cost the One who died there to “be made sin for us,” and save us. (It meant that He died the death that we have deserved.)

An appreciation of what He did is what brings healing to a sin-sick person. And, of course, healing is exactly the same as that new birth.

Then Jesus spoke the well-known words that have become the most loved verse of the entire Bible: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16, NIV).

Obviously, the power is in the One on that cross, not in its wooden beams. How can believing or appreciating God’s act of loving and giving do anything to change sinful hearts?

One of Christ’s followers made it clear how it worked for him. He expresses it as a principle that operates in everyone who will look and say, “Thank You” for what He accomplished. Paul was

defending himself against the charge that his all-out devotion to Christ was virtual insanity (his faith worked like that “violence” that Jesus spoke about in our last chapter). He was going through incredible hardships and persecutions for Christ’s sake, but almost incredibly, he sang for joy as he went along.

The idea that he was sacrificing anything seems not to have crossed his mind. On and on he went through scourgings (and one lethal stoning!), imprisonments, fastings, cold and nakedness, shipwrecks, hunger, weariness. His career as a missionary went on for decades, even into old age. Why not restrain his self-sacrificing devotion, and settle down and enjoy a well-earned retirement? Wasn’t it time for Paul to begin looking out for “number one”?

No, not for him. He says: “If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; or if we are of sound mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died [that is, all would be dead if He had not died for them; and so closely are we identified with Christ that when He died, we died too]; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again (2 Corinthians 5:13-15).

Here we see what it has seemed impossible to understand. Paul was not a better person than we are, nor more heroic. He simply saw something that made all his sacrifices easy: He saw that he would be in a hopeless grave if that “One” had not died in his place. He saw that even his next breath he

owed to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. He saw himself a slave bought by love, responding to the blood shed there. He saw that nothing he possessed he could count as really his.

Let it come into your heart. Let it take root. Don't practice abortion on it. Cherish it. Plead with God with all your soul for His gift of faith. He has promised to give you every tiny bit that you are willing to cherish.

There can be no such thing as bad news unless we ask for it, or choose it, and thus willfully bring on ourselves a final verdict of choosing darkness after we have seen Light.