

"MORAL PAGANS AND IMMORAL CHRISTIANS"

(Romans 11:1-14)

(Chuck Swindoll)

After more than fifty years in pastoral ministry (and counting), two problems continue to challenge my confidence in the gospel: the moral pagan and the immoral Christian. The first, I admit, doesn't try my theology all that much. It makes sense to me that humanity, though lost, continues to bear God's image; so, I should not be surprised to see glimmers of His glory peeking through the crusted layers of sin clinging to nonbelievers. Christians, on the other hand, frequently tip my confidence in the gospel out of balance. More than once, I have put great confidence in someone I thought to be a rock-solid believer in Jesus Christ only to discover later that it was all an act. And, frankly, I find churches their favorite places to hide out. These people say the right things, quote the Bible expertly, lead others effectively, and some even preach and teach with conviction, but beneath this impressive Christian veneer there is nothing. Glittering examples of hypocrisy. Morally hollow moralists. Living monuments to the attractiveness of sin—and its deceptive, deadly consequences.

Are they truly Christian people simply struggling to outgrow their depravity? Or are they misguided imposters hiding among the truly faithful? Long ago, I gave up trying to sort them out. I must remain a pastor to all who self-identify as Christian and leave the rest to God.

But those moral train wrecks would be enough to send me sulking into retirement were it not for a precious few who return to Christ, broken, utterly empty of pride, finally at peace with their need for the Savior. Thank God I am not God! I would have lost my patience, crumpled them up like scrap paper, and tossed them into the flame.

In such impatient moments, I call to mind one of the great psalms of grace. In it I read,

*The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.
He will not always strive with us,
Nor will He keep His anger forever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.
Just as a father has compassion on his children,
So the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him.
For He Himself knows our frame;
He is mindful that we are but dust. (Ps. 103:8-14)*

When I begin to lose confidence in the gospel because of the unpredictable nature of humanity, I do my best to remember that the remedy is obvious. Or it should be. I must turn my eyes from the horizontal and gaze vertically into the rock-solid faithfulness of my sovereign God, for whom there are no surprises and who assures me at such times that everything is under control. What wonderful reassurance!

