

Rejecting the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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1 Corinthians 7:29-31

“For the resent form of this world is passing away.”

Movement 1 – People are Strange

Some groups seem strange. They seem odd, weird, and different. Some groups just don't fit in with society. Think of the cults that are pervasive in our world. Groups like *Heaven's Gate* in the 90s that live in the world but really don't fit in. Even before their jump onto the comet's tail they were seen as different and odd. Those people must be really different.

The ones that I really enjoy are the “End Times” groups. These are the individuals who are standing on the corner, yelling, “the end is near,” expecting a sudden and drastic change. These are the groups that invite you to sell all that you have and devote yourself to one individual. William Miller predicted that Christ was going to return some time between March 21 1843 and March 21 1844. He had people in a frenzy following him, waiting for the glorious return of Christ. After March 21, 1844 passed and no sign of Christ, Miller conceded that there was a flaw in his calculations and he then named October 21, 1844 as the actual end date. There is still no sign of the end that Miller predicted. These are the strange people I am very interested in; these are people who are desperately looking for some hope, some sign, and some escape from the here and now. Sometimes I wonder if there are conventions for “End Times” groups. It would be a great place to compare signs, beards, growl, and items that call for repentance. I wonder what it would be like on their 50th anniversary. “We now gather for our 50th annual ‘The End is Near’ conference.”

What is it that makes such groups so strange is that they do not fit in this world, nor do they want to. The allure of the Amish, the curiosities of the people who have turned and rejected the world is what catches my attention. What indeed could drive someone to reject all that he or she has for an empty promise? These are people who have completely turned from the world. These outcasts, pariah religions, these groups of people are indeed strange.

Movement 2 – Early Christianity Crisis Mode

Early Christians also seemed strange to many other people. They were people who would often meet at night, in the dark and in secret. They weren't quite Jews, although they came from the Jewish religion, but they weren't quite a part of any other religious leaning group, Gnostics, epicureans, stoics, or others. There were rumors that they got together to eat bodies and drink blood. That was weird. There were rumors that all who joined had to participate in corporate sharing, like living in a commune, and those who didn't ended up dead (see Acts). That was weird. In some of these Christian communities, there were a lack of morals and values especially in the areas of sexual activity. These were a people that dealt with the dead and believed in human resurrection. They separated themselves from the world.

The Christians were looking to the end; they were getting ready for the return of Christ, so there was some truth to the rumors. They did live with a kind of “end time” expectancy. There were some who felt that their salvation was so assured and that the end was so near that they did not have to live with any kind of morals, standards or ideals. These are the ones who embraced the good and the bad and the ugly of society,

claiming that grace would be enough to grant passage into heaven. There were others who felt that they had to live completely moral lives, and needed to separate themselves from a fallen and broken world. These were the ones who rejected the good the bad and the ugly of the world. One commentator described the ethos of the community as a crisis mode. The end was near, they were in a kind of eschatological crisis, and they did not know what to do, how to live, and how to act. They were in a crisis mode, one where they felt that Christ was returning any day, one where there were people standing on the corner with signs claiming, “the end is near” and they believed it. They were in a crisis mode. So these Christians did seem a little strange, they did perhaps look like a gathering of Chicken Littles running around waiting for the sky to fall. Prayer and devotion coupled with debauchery and living life as if there were no tomorrow. This is the community that Paul was serving, helping and trying to lead. It was a strange group of people set apart from the world and trying to understand what it meant to expect Christ.

Movement 3 – Our Christian Normalcy

Today, it is not a strange thing to act and live as a Christian. We no longer claim that the end is near. It is not that strange to wear a cross, and claim to be a follower of Jesus. We don’t wait for a gasp when we claim to be a Christian; we don’t wait for the puzzled look when we admit that we went to church on Sunday. Our culture even schedules its time around our faith, stopping on Sunday mornings, giving us Christmas off, and even a day or two around Easter. It has become normal, dull and sanguine to be a Christian in our society; we have become a cog and a gear in the process and movement of the world. We no longer claim that the end is near.

Many people don’t even realize that we are here because we are such a non-threatening presence. We have lost our feeling and ambiance of crisis. We are no longer expecting the imminent return of Christ. We are no longer running around with our eyes in the sky looking for Christ’s triumphant and amazing return. We no longer live our days towards Christ’s entry into our lives. We no longer claim that the end is near. Our faith is scheduled in our books; it does not take over our books. Our places of worship consider how to stay afloat for centuries, not how to prepare for the end. We no longer claim that the end is near.

Some may criticize this Christian lifestyle. Some may observe how easy it is to follow Christ and to live a normal life in the world. The hour at church, the obedient prayers, and the occasional meetings just seems to be lacking something passionate. Laurence J. Peter said “going to church does not make you a Christian anymore than going to the garage makes you a car.” There must be something more than just sitting in the pews and thinking nice thoughts about God. There must be something deeper than planning Christmas, the annual meeting, lent, Easter, children’s day, summer and repeat. Time for the church is stuck in its cycle, and the faith can easily lose its passion and focus. We have been waiting for 2000 years for Christ’s return, and it is no surprise that things have become routine. The first fire drill is exciting and scary. But after time, the fire drills become a part of the rest of the day. So it seems to be with Christ. At first we were excited for Christ’s return, but it has been a long time, and we are routine. The crisis is lost, the expectancy is gone and we muddle through our faith as a part of our lives. We even have gotten to the point where we tend to hush those who might live as if Christ is returning tomorrow. They are too weird, too different and too strange. It is no longer strange or odd to act as a Christian.

Movement 4 – The Crisis Mode

Paul suggests that we should be living as if things were different. Isn’t it odd that we should still give some credence to a passage that suggests we live as if the end were near? Isn’t it odd to think that we should let

go of our worldly attachments and look for Christ? But that is what Paul is suggesting. Some were thinking about getting married, and Paul said, “why, when Christ is coming soon?” Some were thinking about financial comfort and Paul said, “why, when Christ is coming soon?” Some were grieving the loss of a loved one and Paul said, “why, when Christ is coming soon?” For Paul, the end was near, and he called Christians to live towards that end. Paul was writing to a community that did expect Christ to return any day and were trying to live with that anticipation. Should we be so quick to scoff at such an idea? Should we not expect that Christ could very well return any day? Maybe we should follow Paul’s advice and live in a crisis mode. Imagine you were visited in a dream and told that Christ was coming. Wouldn’t you leave the focus of buying and selling, of weeping or laughing, and even the details of your domestic life and focus on preparing for Christ? Wouldn’t you look to reject the good, the bad, and the ugly of the world and call everyone you knew to look only towards the beauty of Christ’s face, the beauty of the divine to shine down? Can we return to that crisis mode? Can we imagine that change in life?

Maybe you would look at the world, and lament how far we are from the people and the creation God has called us to be. Maybe you would go into Philadelphia, to the Mayor and shake him, saying, Christ is returning tomorrow; we need to help the poor, the children, and the marginalized today! Maybe you would go to the other churches during worship and run down the aisle in the midst of the bells, the organ, and music crying, “Christ is returning tomorrow, we need to leave these walls and go into the world to share the gospel today!” Maybe you would go to the United Nations, run past the security guards and cry, “Christ is coming tomorrow, the violence, the greed, and the evil of this world needs to stop today.”

Or would you turn inward and focus on your own life? This is where our response to Christ has to start. We can’t run to the poor if we are still avoiding Christ in our heart. We can’t offer the gospel if we haven’t given our whole life to the cross first. We start with ourselves and then we go to the world with the news of Christ’s immediate return.

Start by asking yourself, what would hold you back or is in the way? In the very beginning of *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, London is being bombed and the four children and their mother are running out of the house to the bomb shelter. Just before the door is closed, Edmund, the younger boy, runs back into the house to grab a picture of his father. He was in crisis mode, but could not let go of his father’s picture. He was still attached.

This is what Paul is getting at. If Jesus were to return today, what are you still attached to that would get in the way. What would you run back for? Would your concerns for things or relationships get in the way? Would you be mourning, would you be too focused on your relationships with others, or would you be looking at your own economic well-being? Where would you be attached? We have become so established in today’s society that it is difficult to know what might hold us back. It is difficult to conceive even in the crisis mode, because for many of us that possibility seems so far and distant. We are in the routine and stuck, and Paul suggests that we should be living as if things were different.

Movement 5 – TIME vs. time

For us, things are already different, and at the same time, they are not. It seems harsh to suggest that we should live in such a way that we reject all aspects of the world. It seems demanding for me to call all of you to let go of whatever it is you hold dear and look only to Christ. Especially if Christ does not return imminently, then I may be accused of going too far. Yet the urgency of the crisis seems so much more attuned to the Christian lifestyle than the one that slips into society. We don’t concern ourselves with appearance, with finances, or with power because the kingdom at hand is not about finances, appearances or with power. Yet we still live in the world. We still interact in the world. We still have to pay bills, vote, and be an active participant

in the world.

Perhaps we are walking in two times. We are in a time of crisis because Christ is indeed coming, and at the same time we still live within the secular world. Paul is looking to a new time with the Corinthians – a time when Christ returns and all is made new. But in other letters, he speaks of time as if the new life is here and now. In other letters such as the one to the Philippians, he speaks of the salvation that they have already received. The scholar, and my professor, Paul Sampley described it as an “already not yet” in time. Christ had already come, but at the same time, Christ had not yet come. So we live as if we are walking in two worlds, we live as if we are living in the times and the routines of the world, but also in the time and the salvation of God. In the highly referenced movie, *the Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, there are two times occurring. One is the time of the gun-slinging western and the other is the time of the Civil War, and it is awkward when the two intersect. But that is how it is for us, except that we often easily forget that we are living in the already of Christ’s return. It is the time of newness, of opportunity and possibility. It is the time when Christ is at hand, in the here and now, and everything has changed. We pay our bills, we go to work, we live out the routine day to day – we are still in the world’s time. But we are also constantly looking for Christ, for Christ’s time is now. We are looking for Christ in the way we live in the world. We are looking for Christ in the way we worship in the world.

One of the criticisms of Western European Christianity in Central America was that the focus was too heavy on the “pie in the sky,” and lacked any focus on the here and now. Theologians like Gutierrez and Boff suggested that we look to the work that Christ is doing now. We go to the poor and say, now things are different because Christ is here. We look to our own lives, the mundane, and fallen and claim that now things are different because Christ is here. We are living in Christ’s time in the world. It is a crisis mode and it isn’t. Christ is returning, and Christ is here. Things are being made new and things are new. We mourn, but grief is changed through Christ. The new day, the new time is on the horizon, and the shafts of the sun’s rise are already falling upon our lives, showing us how life is going to change. We are living already in the kingdom of God and not yet in the kingdom of God. In reality, things are already different, and at the same time, they are not.

Movement 6 – Living the Hope in Time

God’s time lifts us out of the world’s time. God’s time can give us hope and peace and grace in the here and now. We are walking to a different beat, to a different drummer, on a different path going towards God. Our worries, our anxieties and our concerns will be different through the new day of Christ. It will make us seem a little different, a little strange, and a little odd to the world, but we will be walking with God.

I have another friend who saves and hoards and saves and hoards because “some day he might need it.” He is the person who saves everything. He worries about his possessions. He worries more and more that he might not have the right thing for tomorrow, so he stopped focusing on today to prepare for tomorrow. But God’s time is here and God’s time is now and that is what we focus on: the here and the now and the place where God can be experienced. When we live with Christ everything changes, even death itself changes through the presence and actions of Christ.

This is where Paul was trying to lead the people of Corinth, and where we are led as well - to view time in each moment, to live in time as a new moment, and to give all your moments to God. The time is indeed now to share the gospel. Christ is here now, and we are living in a crisis and we need to bring the world to Christ. But the time is not ours; it is not in our control, so at the same time we can’t force it. We can only live in it. God’s time is not about long-term survival, but about experiencing the grace of Christ in the here and now. Our relationships change because each moment looks to experiencing the grace of God. Our work changes because we go to be led by God’s spirit and we work towards the kingdom of God. Our lives change because we no longer live to serve the values and the desires of the world, but we live to serve the kingdom of God in each moment.

And that seems to be the key, to stay in each moment. We live to experience each moment at the present reality of the kingdom of God, and live out those moments. The time is God's and we can only live in the moments of that time. So when you greet someone during coffee hour, don't think about who you are going to talk to next, stay focused on that person, because through Christ your relationship with that person will be made new. When you spend time at work or play, don't think about what is next, stay in the now because through Christ the time you have at work will be made whole and new and holy. Your relationships change; your days change, and everything will change because through Christ, even time is made new. Even with our church. We cannot be the church God calls us to be when we are concerned with keeping our doors open for ten more years. We need to stay focused on being a church and nothing more. If the doors were to close tomorrow, but today we can love, care for, and hold each other up, then we are being a church.

And the hope is that we do not have to look to tomorrow. We only need to stay focused in today. With this church, I can say right now that today we are blessed and we are God's children. I can say that the people who showed up today are the ones who are right for this church. I can say that today we are God's people. Tomorrow holds tomorrow. Tomorrow we will experience Christ. Tomorrow is in God's hands. Let's keep the time today in the hands of God.

AMEN