

A Fear of Commitment

Although I can't know for sure, I suspect that many of you have never read "Pilgrims Progress" by English Puritan pastor John Bunyan. Of all the books ever published in the English language, this one ranks second in sales behind the Bible. This 17th century classic was written over a period of years while John Bunyan was languishing in prison for the "crime" of preaching the Word of God. The book is a Christian allegory which depicts the trials and temptations of the Christian life. In the narrative, we follow the protagonist, Christian, as he initially goes from non-belief to believing in Jesus Christ for salvation. We then follow him through the joys and trials of life until his death and then on to the Celestial City. Along the way he meets a number of interesting characters which we learn—by their respective names—what they're like and how they'll either help or hinder Christian on his journey. Early in the first part of the book, Christian is told by Mr. Good-will that he must stay on the narrow road. Interestingly, Christian realizes how easy it would be to get confused; to stray off of the narrow road and follow the wide road—at least for a time. Mr. Good-will encourages him to go to the Interpreter's house and he would be shown "excellent things" to help him on his journey. In the allegory, Interpreter represents ministers of the gospel and the house of Interpreter is the local Church.

In Interpreter's house there are a number of rooms that he shows to Christian. In the first room Christian is shown a picture of "a very grave person." This picture is a minister of the gospel who's serious about caring for others and who pleads with men and women to believe in Jesus for eternal life. The Interpreter tells Christian to listen to this man. Why? Bunyan writes, "I have showed thee this picture first, because the man whose picture this is, is the only man, whom the Lord of the place whither thou are going, hath authorized to be thy guide in all difficult places thou mayest meet with on the way...." Sadly, any of us—at least for a time—can be drawn off the narrow path which is good and right and true. There are a number of ways in which people are drawn away from fully committing to the visible church and the people of God in our day, including, fears that there will be expectations placed on them that they're not willing to give. We have a fear of dying to self—that is to say, dying to what we want for ourselves—and living fully committed to Christ because of what it might cost us. Keep in mind, commitment to Jesus Christ cannot be separated from commitment to his church—those whom he died for.

Room two gives us a look at the Law, represented in the allegory by dust which can choke someone when it gets stirred up in the room when the room is swept. This is contrasted with the gospel which is pictured when water is sprinkled on the dust. The Law cannot cleanse the sinful heart and yet, many people think that they're right with God because they externally obey certain biblical rules. The Law by itself can only tell me what I need to do, or not do, but it won't give me the proper desire or power to do it or not do it. Only the gospel penetrates the heart with a sweet, precious influence from the inside out (Galatians 3:1-29).

In room three Christian sees two little children whose names are Passion and Patience. Passion represents those who want all that the world has to offer now with no real thought of eternity. In contrast to this, Patience represents the person who lives their life with a view toward godliness and an eternal perspective to the glory of God. In other words, God's people can fall

into the trap of wanting everything immediately, e.g., we want immediate answers to our prayers; we even want immediate growth in godliness—and we can fail to understand that the Christian life is a life of dying to self, faithfully plodding along, regularly placing ourselves and our families under the word preached and taught, living for and serving God and others. Jesus said that, “Whoever loves his life, loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (John 12:25) As we begin this new series in John 19:38-42, we’ll be introduced to two men who have lived much of their adult lives in fear. They’ve been unwilling to die to self which has kept them from fully committing to Jesus Christ.

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.