

Bittersweet

by Gregory Reid

I just read a quote that has me thinking. It had to do with the difference between “salt” churches and “honey” ones. I don’t know what point the writer was trying to make, but this is what I heard: Salt churches are ones that speak truth harshly, without compromise. Honey churches always sugar-coat truth so people will swallow it-- or worse, they just feed people honey and skip the truth altogether.

Thinking about this disturbed me, because I’m constantly under self-examination about how I handle people. I used to be a Bible-basher. If it was in the Bible, I would defend it, preach and proclaim it-- which is good. But my heart grew proud in the process. I’ll never forget a particular three-hour seminar I gave in California. My teaching was stout, clear and unbending. Afterward, the pastor told someone, “He’s so holy, it scares me.” Maybe you’d feel complimented, but I was terrified. I knew pride came before a fall. Plus, I knew my own heart. I wasn’t as holy as I sounded, especially since the filth of pride and self-righteousness permeated my heart.

I’ve softened up since then. Sometimes I’ve wondered if I’ve gotten too soft. For a while, I was listening to some pretty humanistic voices. I still defended God’s Word, just less loudly. In an effort to understand people’s hurts, I got too quiet about truth. I guess that’s a typical pendulum swing. I became a honey Christian. I was afraid to tell people the truth, even in love, because they had been hurt by Bible-bashers. I put honey on kernels of truth. Sometimes I skipped the kernels altogether.

I used to be very hard on one young man who later backslid. I softened up in the meantime. We talked for a few months frequently, and he began to tell me about a sin he was engaged in that he had honey-coated into being not-sin. I swallowed, took a deep breath and told him the truth-- gently, in love. He was floored! “I thought you’d changed. Now it’s obvious you haven’t.” I told him, “My approach changed, but I haven’t changed my stand on God’s Word one bit.”

We don’t talk much anymore.

I felt later I had been a little dishonest. I hid behind being a “good listener” in order to avoid telling the truth. Why? I wanted to be liked. And, I was so sensitive to hurting people that I was more concerned with their feelings than with God’s.

I’m still midstream as God’s deals with me on this, but here’s what I’ve learned so far:

1. Truth often hurts.

As long as there is sin in us, it will hurt to be faced with it. As someone said, “The truth will set you free, but first it will make you mad.” Or miserable. Or both. But we’ve got to face facts: Man’s nature is to avoid facing himself, or God or truth. -- “Adam, where are you?” / “Hiding.” / “Why?” / “I’m naked.” -- God knew that. We run, hide, justify-- why? John said it: Because of fear. Fear carries with it the expectation of punishment. Oh, we’re so much like the little boy in the tree saying, “You can’t see me, my eyes are closed and it’s too dark to see anything!”

You know what I’m afraid of? I’m afraid we’ve bent over backwards to make people feel O.K.-- so much that we’ve buried their wounds instead of healing them. People are NOT O.K. They’re sick, sin-bent and self-destructive. But that DOESN’T mean they’re not loved! You see, when we tell people they are O.K., loved “just the way they are,” the next step is for people to think, “I’m wonderful! I deserve God’s love-- His best!” How frightening. People begin to expect from God what all saved sinners should only gratefully (and undeservedly) receive.

I've come back to the truth that only when man understands the depth of his depravity, sin and utter helplessness without Jesus can he ever know the tremendous life-giving gift of undeserved favor and love given at the cross.

The Prodigal Son didn't come back saying, "Well, I was struggling with self-image. I had to find myself. Yeah, I made some boo-boos, but I discovered the good in me and so I'm back. Sorry if you got hurt." It went instead like this: "Father, I have sinned (he accepted personal responsibility and faced the truth) against heaven and in your sight (he recognized sin is NEVER what you do to yourself; someone else is always hurt) and I'm no longer worthy to be your son (he threw himself at mercy's feet with no bargaining chips). Make me as one of your hired servants (the pain of sin had humbled him so much that he was willing to accept ANYTHING but rejection)."

The father didn't say, "It's O.K., son. You just needed to find your potential, get some possibility-thinking going. You were O.K. all along. You didn't really sin. You're not really unworthy." No. It was understood by both: The son DID sin. He WAS unworthy. The glory of it, a glory so many of us try to rob people of, is that despite ALL his sins and unworthiness, he was forgiven completely, no questions asked. He could come home. In fact, because in the slime pits of sin he faced his sin ("he came to himself") and didn't hide, he was fully restored.

We preachers don't realize the crime we perpetrate by not helping people face themselves. We rob them of the precious experience of full pardon. Instead of producing Davids by saying, "Thou art the man," we produce Sauls who run around saying, "Doesn't anyone feel sorry for me?" I'll be honest: My most life-changing moments were when God showed me my own heart, either alone in the prayer closet or through someone else when I was too blind to see. (I prefer the closet.) The truth certainly hurt me. But, oh, the release that came! The relief! Because truth is the sword that cuts just deeply enough to allow healing oil to be poured in.

2. Telling the truth is not yelling and making people feel guilty.

I've been quite devastated by some very soft-spoken words. "A soft answer breaks the bone." A loud, haranguing preacher isn't automatically a "prophet of righteousness;" neither is the anointing to be judged by the decibel level of the preaching. Such a preacher may be getting a secret thrill out of yelling at people. His very tone implies that sin is something YOU do and HE doesn't do. We've got to be full of love when we tell the truth. "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Psalm 85). The two together. Never forget, we're to be the salt, not the vinegar, of the earth. Moody said, "If we must preach on hell, we might at least do it with tears in our eyes."

3. You don't have to honey-coat truth.

Someone said you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar. I have to wonder what anyone would want with a church full of flies, anyway. We should always be sensitive to people's needs, but not so much that we slight God. If we're always honey-coating truth or just pouring on honey to make people feel good about themselves, then we're "healing slightly the hurt of His people." You don't give aspirin alone to a cancer patient. You don't give a little Band-Aid to the blind and bleeding.

4. There IS honey to be had, but it's found in the Rock. Inside the unbendable truth of God's Word is the sweetness of grace.

I guess some hard-liners will be thrilled by what I've said so far. Not so fast! Truth alone does not heal. The letter of the law can kill. Some of you kill with truth. You prefer calling people perverts to

making them converts. How wrong you are. Jesus said, you do all the right things but neglect mercy and justice. The truth needs to search, convict and break your heart before you ever point your finger at the next guy.

I hesitate to use the word “balance”, because I tend to agree that it usually is a code-word for compromise. But I believe there IS a balance between salt and honey. In Exodus, Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea and they were in the wilderness for three days without water. They came to Marah but couldn't drink the waters because they were bitter (Marah means bitter). Moses cried to the Lord, and God showed him a tree. And when the tree was thrown into the water, it became sweet (Exodus 15:22-25).

Sin has made the water of life bitter. Moses didn't say, “Oh, we'll just find sweeter water.” They had to face the bitter. They either found a way to drink it, or they died. We have to face the bitter fact of sin's destruction in our lives. But there is a tree; it is called Calvary. That tree shows us truth and the reality of sin's horrible consequences. But when we throw that tree into the bitter waters of our lives, when we come to that place of Calvary and receive His forgiveness, the waters become sweet!

We need to stop lying to people about the bitter waters of sin, stop leading them to sweeter waters. Jim Jones killed almost 1,000 people with sweet, sweet Kool-Aid-- laced with poison. Many of man's ways are sweet-tasting but poisoned waters. But when we face the bitter waters, really facing our lost-ness and sin, there is a tree where King Jesus tasted and drank the full cup of sin's bitter water. The cross is the only healing, the balm, the honey. It's only for those who come naked, “just as I am, without one plea.” If you try to circumvent the cross, you bypass the only cure, and your honey will become a bowl of vipers.

I want to be a “bittersweet” believer, a salt AND honey Christian. Sometimes people DO need just honey, and I don't want to pour on salt when they do. But I don't want to baste someone in sweet words when they need the sting of truth. I'm committed to finding that balance without compromising God's heart. I'll have to become less fearful of being disliked, more willing to be cut myself, more sensitive to what is needed most in a situation, listening for that “word in due season,” whether it interferes with my planned speech or not. I'll have to be more into God's words than man's ideas, to “cease from man whose breath is in his nostrils” and stay close to God whose breath is in ME. Truth in love-- it is one word. Separated, they become two counterfeits: truth that is pride and fear in disguise, or love that is compromise. Salt and honey, truth and grace, judgment and pardon, water and tree-- to be whole, holy and loved, you must know both. If you know just one, you'll be a proud lawgiver or weak and immoral.

God give us grace to know them both.

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