

TOWER OF PISA

In Europe, Great Britain and North America, Christianity / the church has been in a steady decline for some time.

Following Christ IS the narrow way / the road less travelled--I do understand that,..... but difficulty in following Christ doesn't explain the remarkable regression.

It seems people have lost respect for the church, and thus lost the desire to be a Christian. On social media, it is common to mock Bible belt Christians for their political contradictions to what Jesus taught.

Hypocrite is an often heard accusation or... the church is just not for me; I don't fit in. Our typical response is, "Well of course we are not perfect, but we're trying. We are striving to be Christ like. We don't mean to project perfection." Yet, that defence doesn't seem to work. People don't go, "Oh okay, I understand."

Perhaps, "they" are seeing something we are not seeing?
Maybe we are the ones Not getting it / not seeing clearly???

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Are we who we think we are?  
Are we as God's wants us to be? ?????  
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Today's passage are a bit broader than what is in the bulletin. They are Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48 and I Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23, and there is the Psalm reading, too.

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The three I'm referring to present models, with examples, of who / what we are intended to be.  
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Leviticus 19 states God's command that we are to be "Holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." That's a model--to be holy.

Matthew 10 records Jesus' command, "Be Perfect therefore as your heavenly father is perfect." That's another model, and both require we take on part of God's nature / reflect who God is about--holy and perfect.

Paul uses a construction metaphor in First Corinthians, calling believers a temple build on the foundation of Christ who belongs to God. That's another model, and all point to taking on divine attributes.

Being a temple on a Jesus foundation may be doable, but being holy and perfect,.....that seems unobtainable / way out of reach.

And, no wonder "the world"--using Paul's terminology for non-believers, no wonder the world accuses us to be phonies.

Are we charlatans?

Can't we get a medal for at least trying....or appreciating such lofty standards? ?????

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Holy is a high standard; however, an important aspect of holy means to be "set apart" -- to be different.

Are we noticeably different, and I don't mean in appearance?

Do we abide by the rules and values of the secular world?

Do we blend in to our culture, or is it clear we hear a different drummer?

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The way the world ticks / operates isn't working so well.

The law of the Jungle / might makes right / brute force prevails leaves but a few at the top, albeit paranoid and power hungry for more, and the rest crushed and defeated.

The end does NOT justify the means.

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The world emphasizes the importance of money and possessions.

Yet, greed, consumption / having more and more does not satisfy / it does not work, and so I think people are looking for a better way.

Christianity advertizes a better way,..... but something is not right,.. because many searchers don't see in us what they are hoping for.

What are we missing?

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A glance at the examples in Leviticus on what holiness looks like:

The overriding theme is doing justice and humanitarianism.

Verse 9 states that we are to limit our profits to provide for the weak and poor. This is more than just sharing our surplus, and giving the hungry a fish to eat. Moreover, this does not suggest we merely teach the hungry how to fish. We must also give up part of our lake so they have room to fish.

Are Christians doing that?

Verse 11 refers to stealing and lying. In other words, this is a call to be content with our lot in life. Plus, withholding information is a form of lying. We must invite open research and the free flow of questions and information.

Many Christians assert that creation / life on this planet is 6,000 years old.

That's a lie for a stupid reason, and the rest of the world quickly walks away from that ridiculous claim and laughs at it.

Verse 12 deals with deception and using God to make a false point.

No one gets bonus points for waving a Christian flag or for claiming to be a Christian. Pretending / putting on a good front is deception.

How's the church fairing so far?

Maybe I shouldn't continue to verses 13 and 14.

13 deals with defrauding people and using the power of money for manipulation. Sometimes, threats don't have to be clearly stated; they can be implied and still be very powerful.

I wonder if the affluent people in churches give generously and freely to God through the church,..... or..... as is common in the world, they put strings on their donations?

Do the affluent have an advantage of influence in the church?

Withholding or threatening to without money to assert one's will is NOT being holy as God is holy, And, it is the way of the world.

Are we behaving differently / set apart?

Verse 14 warns about taking advantage of the weak.

Banks and businesses give perks to those with more money, and I'm sure we refuse those offers unless they are given to everyone.

Another example of this abuse is income tax breaks which help the affluent.

Verse 15 declares that we must do justice / we must be fair and that there is NO favouritism for the rich. Money may buy more material stuff / products and so forth, but money should NOT buy status or preferential treatment,... or does it?

Does the Big farmer getting better service than the little guy?

Do Christians stand out from all others because we reject the royalties and perks?

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Verse 17 talks about hate, and verse 18 proclaims that vengeance is NOT an option, and that we are instead to love our neighbour -- love all people.

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The way of non-violence / the way of peace flows easily to the Matthew text concerning retaliation and love of enemies.

Turning the other cheek and the other examples are not suggesting surrendering and submitting, not at all.

I think Walter Wink's interpretation has a lot of merit, but I won't take the time to go into that now.

Jesus is in essence reminding us that we are holy / set apart--we don't have to surrender to the way of the world / the way of brute force.

We can do better.

We can confront creatively and avoid the trap of violence.

We are empowered and called to live at a higher and better level.

We can see the big picture of the results off vengeance and violence.

The way to defuse violence is obviously NOT with violence.

We can do much better than falling into the trap of limited thinking.

Disarming guns with NO guns has been proven effective.

A power based on fear and brute force is rendered helpless / out of ammo when it is confronted with love, a mandate for justice and a confidence in the way of peace.

This is holistic thinking. It is true wisdom.

In addition, logic alone cannot sustain this approach for very long. Many peaceful protests crumble into violence when pressed hard.

Love..... true loving compassion, even for the enemy is required to overcome the evil of violence and destruction.

This why Jesus calls us to love our enemies.

Loving enemies is so out of the ordinary, so HOLY.... that the rest of the world will be made powerless when confronted with the power of love -- the power of God.

That my friend..... is seeing the whole picture.

And, the Hebraic understanding of Perfect is completeness / wholeness. When Jesus said Perfect he didn't mean flawless or without error. He meant be complete -- see / live the whole picture. Include God's love and compassion in all things / in all parts of our lives.

That is what perfect means.

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When Christians are holy and perfect the world will take notice, and will be greatly affected.

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Unfortunately, historically, we have not modeled these attributes very well.

Throughout Europe, large, beautiful cathedrals stand empty. They are reminders of when Christianity had the power and money, and chose to NOT model God's way. Instead, they neglected the weak and poor, used the power for political gains and poured fortunes into huge, grand buildings.

Could you imagine the impact it would make if a church declared, "Our building and financial security is secondary to our ministries."

There may not be beautiful sanctuaries, if that was the Christian model, yet there would be countless thriving churches reaching out in love doing justice and peace for Christ.

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Over the years, Christians have tried to stand out and be different.

However, wearing head coverings or plain clothes is just dressing.

The same was true about avoiding dancing and such things.

The world can see beyond those things.

I think the secular world does a better job at looking at the heart than we do.

We try to hold up a flawless model of piety, and the world is hoping we will radiate the love of God and the way of Christ.

The way we look or our facade are not important.

It's about who we truly are and how we really live that is important.

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Paul equates this Christian way to constructing a building.
He notes the importance of the foundation. If the foundation is flawed, then so will be the rest of the building. The foundation must be Christ, and Jesus he lived and taught God's way.

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This foundation statement has been a cornerstone for Mennonites for many years.  
It is a wonderful vision; however, like most analogies, it is a bit shallow and generalized.

The truth is the building (our lives) have already begun before we began to grasp the importance of Christ in our lives.  
Moreover, someone of us were not blessed by being born into a stable and loving home. Some people's base is pretty shaky.

Most of us didn't even give Christ much deep thought until we were well under construction,.... into our teens or beyond.

So, what do we do then?  
Can a foundation be set after the building is up?

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There is a marvelous tower in the Italian city of Pisa. I had the pleasure of seeing that impressive structure, many years ago.
As you know, that tower is leaning,.....sort of.
It is 183 feet tall on the lower side, and 186 feet on the taller side.
It has 8 floors with 7 bells in the seventh floor.

Construction on the tower began in the year 1173, and took 199 years to complete.
Regrettably, it was built on unstable soil with a foundation of only 3 metres, not enough for the soft ground--a mix of sand and loam.

By the 5th year, with only two stories finished, it started to lean.
The architect was dismissed.

Construction was stopped for 99 years because of wars and other demands.
That delay did allow for the ground to settle and compact, some.

Time can heal many things.

In the year 1272, construction resumed, and this is noteworthy.

Conventional wisdom would have dictated that it was a foolish venture, and it would be prudent to tear it down and start again.
It truly was laid on a bad foundation.

Yet, most of us don't have the best foundation.

One angle of Christian theology asserts that being a Christian means starting all over again, as if to destroy the old and begin anew.

That view has an appeal to it, but there is much of my past that I don't want to throw away. I think we are a composite of all things, good and bad. That's just who/what we are.

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Whatever the reason, they did not start again, but instead made adjustments. To deal with the lean, the lower side was made longer...taller pillars and so forth to try to turn the structure more vertical. The tower is actually curved because of the alterations. <

I greatly admire the town's devotion to keep going / to improve what is and to deal with the limitations and weaknesses as best they could. They didn't destroy it in order to rebuild a flawless tower.

They kept to their vision, in spite of setbacks, to create a beautiful bell tower. Its purpose was to inspire with splendor view and sound, and they achieved that and more.

Because of the tilt, the tower acquired a new purpose, too. It became the site of numerous gravity tests. It was easy to drop an object from the shorter, overhanging side.

It is an impressive and defiant structure that has been standing for nearly 900 years. How many 8 story buildings in Saskatchewan have survived 900 years, or even in Canada?

Nevertheless, many would consider it an architectural embarrassment, but is there more to a structure than simple following the rules and being flawless?

During, the second world war, the German army used it as an observation post, and the Allies considered blowing it up. Aerial photographs of the tower so impressed the Allied commander of its unique beauty, that he chose to preserve it.

Sometimes, being different pays off.  
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Still, the tower kept leaning to the point of 5.5 degrees, and finally in 1990 work was done to reduce the lean to 3.9 degrees. It was straightened some. And in 2008, the ground was stabilized. The leaning has stopped, yet it still stands proudly with a curve on a distinct lean. In 2008, the tower got the foundation it needed.
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There are a lot of bell towers in Italy, but I can't think of one other. The tower of Pisa stands out because it didn't fall down, because people didn't give up on it and it is still doing what it was designed to do--it plays music.

People are not inspired by a solid, flawless monolith that reaches for the sky. People are impressed by devotion and determination.

What inspires is to keep going in spite of setbacks.

What stands out is the willingness to change / to make corrections, all along the way, in order to keep to the purpose--to ring out music.

What is holy and perfect is not about how we look or what we affirm.

Holy and Perfect is growing to be who God called us to be, even if have to lean against the ways of the world.

Moreover, it is not too late to insert a new foundation.

It is not too late to claim and build on Christ's ways of peace and justice.

God is calling us to stand up,..... and it doesn't have to look pretty.

The world needs to see and hear our message, like bells from a leaning tower.