Cleaning Fish

"And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.'" (Matthew 4:19, ESV).

A friend once described evangelism with a simple observation: "We don't clean our fish before we catch them."

Anyone who has ever fished understands the picture. Cleaning comes after catching. Yet Christians can easily reverse that order when dealing with unbelievers. We sometimes expect people who do not know Christ to begin behaving like people who do.

Stop doing this. Start doing that. Clean up your language. Change your habits. Improve your relationships. Go to church. Become respectable.

Some of those changes might be good. None of them can make a spiritually dead person alive.

Paul does not describe the unbeliever as spiritually untidy, morally underdeveloped, or merely in need of improvement. He says he is dead in trespasses and sins. Dead people do not need rehabilitation. They need life.

That is why the next words in Ephesians are so important:

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved." (Ephesians 2:4–5, ESV).

Notice who acts.

God makes the dead alive.

The gospel is not an invitation for sinners to make themselves presentable enough for God to receive them. It is the proclamation of what God has done in Jesus Christ for people who cannot rescue themselves.

This does not mean evangelism ignores sin. Quite the opposite. A person must understand something of his guilt before God if he is to understand why he needs a Savior. Repentance is not optional. Christ did not come merely to improve difficult lives. He came to save sinners.

But repentance must not be confused with cleaning ourselves up for God. Repentance is not a sinner repairing his life sufficiently to qualify for grace. It is a turning from sin to God that accompanies faith in Christ. Even repentance therefore gives the sinner no ground for boasting. He comes to Christ because he needs cleansing, not because he has accomplished it.

That distinction matters because behavior can change without the heart changing at all. An unbeliever may stop getting drunk, become faithful to his spouse, improve his vocabulary, begin attending church, and become a much better neighbor. Those are worthwhile changes, but none constitutes regeneration. We can produce a respectable person who remains spiritually dead.

Jesus confronted precisely this problem among people who appeared remarkably religious. He said, *"For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence."* (Matthew 23:25, ESV).

Cleaning the outside does not give life to the inside.

Christianity begins with something only God can do. He takes the sinner who is dead and makes him alive in Christ. He gives a new heart. He grants faith and repentance. He unites the sinner to Christ. The person who once belonged to darkness now belongs to God.

Then the cleaning begins.

Sanctification follows regeneration. The person God has made alive is called to put away sin, pursue righteousness, obey His Word, and increasingly live according to the new identity God has given him. That process may be long, difficult, and sometimes painfully slow. But it is the consequence of new life, not its cause.

Perhaps we should remember that when speaking with unbelievers. Our first task is not to make them behave more like Christians. Moral improvement cannot accomplish what only the Holy Spirit can do.

They need Christ.

We don't clean our fish before we catch them.

Just a thought.

JOSHUA HOUSE BOOKS

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