

**HOW THE  
GOSPEL SHAPES  
THE SANCTITY  
OF LIFE**



**R U S S E L L M O O R E**

*How the Gospel Shapes  
the Sanctity of Life*

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A few years after my wife and I adopted our oldest two sons from Russia, we noticed that we were spending a lot of time in the emergency room. Our visits to the hospital had nothing to do with follow-up care from the orphanage. It had nothing to do with the adoption. It had to do with the fact that our oldest son turned out to be more of a daredevil than we ever imagined to be the case. Before he even started walking, we turned our attention away from him and he scurried up a tree until he got to a branch that couldn't support him. He fell and got a concussion.

And then a little while later, I noticed that he had climbed up on the house next door—a two-story house that had raised brick with crevices in it—like Spiderman. He was dangerously high on this house. I couldn't yell, "Get down!" without startling him, so I had to calmly walk him down, crevice by crevice and then say, "Benjamin, what were you thinking?" And he said, "It seemed like a fun thing to do."

Another time he was on a bicycle going off of a ramp that he constructed with two Super Soaker water guns. He hit his head, had a concussion, we're back in the ER, and he said, "It seemed like a fun thing to do."

We had been in and out of the emergency room so many times that I was afraid Child Protective Services was going to come and start investigating my house. I said to my wife, “I’ve just written this book *Adopted for Life: The Priority of Adoption for Christian Families and Churches* and I’m afraid if we go to the hospital one more time, I’m going to be writing a book on prison ministry called *Indicted for Life.*”

One day my wife asked Benjamin to go out to the garage to get some ice cream. He walked outside and knocked a glass vase off of a shelf and it shattered. He was barefoot and his foot hit a shard of this glass. And so, I had to take him back to the emergency room, where I knew everyone on a first name basis. I had been pastoral and very fatherly and tender the previous times. But this time, I was exasperated.

On the way home I said to him, “Benjamin, we have been to the emergency room five times this year for you. Zero times for your brother. So I don’t want to hear, ‘It seemed like a fun thing to do.’ What are we going to do to keep things from happening?”

And he said, “I guess not put the freezer outside in the garage.”

Well that did not help me at all.

After I sent him to bed, I went out to deal with these shards of glass. I noticed that there were bloody footprints. And I thought, “Perfect, just one more thing to clean up.” Until I looked and saw that the bloody footprints went *to* the freezer, turned around, and went up the stairs.

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I was melted in all my frustration. This little guy, even hurt, even bleeding, still carried out the little mission that his mother had given him. I realized that no matter how irritated I was, if he had that sort of impulse and that sort of instinct and followed through on that for the rest of his life, he would be in a much better position than I am when it comes to carrying through when there is hardship and pain.

We live in a world of divorce courts, abortion clinics, and gas chambers. We live in a time filled with pain and suffering. And in all of that, we have been given a mission to be a gospel people. We cannot think about the sanctity of human life and we cannot minister in an abortion culture if we do not keep, at the forefront, the cross of Jesus Christ.

What we have to offer to the world is not our voting bloc, our cultural influence, or our philosophical arguments. What we have to offer to the world is the gospel of freedom from condemnation. If we lose sight of that, we have nothing else to offer.

The writer of Hebrews 2:9-18 is writing to people gathered in these churches. He says to them, "You'll notice that the Scripture says God has put all things under the feet of humanity. But if you look around, you'll notice that it does not seem as though all things are under his feet. We do not see everything under the dominion of humanity, but we see Jesus, crowned with glory and honor."

We live in a world where we have to argue for things that should not have to be argued. We should not have to travel to Washington, D.C., to argue that every life is sacred and should not be violated by anyone else. It ought to be unnecessary for us to stand and say that we should protect vulnerable children and their mothers. It should be as unnecessary to say these things as it is to say that gravity is real. Yet we live in a fallen world where even that has to be asserted and defended.

And the writer of Hebrews tells us that we see Jesus crowned with glory and honor. Where do we see Jesus crowned with glory and

honor? It is not in a moment of evident power. It is not in an explosion of visible light. We see Jesus crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death.

This is critical if we are going to be a pro-life people. The moment that the Bible identifies Jesus as bearing glory and honor, as being crowned with authority, is the moment in which he is the most dependent, the most seemingly powerless, most seemingly useless to the rest of the world. It is the moment in which our Lord Jesus had to be helped with the carrying of his own instrument of torture. It is the moment in which our Lord Jesus was having his beard ripped from his face as he was being beaten up by Roman soldiers. It is the moment in which Jesus is lifted up, not by his own power, but by the power of those who are killing him; when Jesus, as he says, 'I thirst,' cannot even give himself water, but has to take it from a sponge being held on the end of a stick. It is the moment where Jesus seems to be displaying anything but glory and honor. He seems to be displaying anything but a crown. The Scriptures tell us that here we see Jesus sharing with his brothers the flesh and blood that they bear.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was an embryo and a fetus. When John the Baptist encounters Jesus for the first time, it was not at the Jordan River. It was in utero. John the Baptist was filled with the same Holy Spirit that prompted him to say, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." The baby within the womb leaps in the presence, not of his *potential* Lord, but of his Lord. And Jesus bears this humanity all the way to the moment of death in the form of the most shameful execution imaginable until he is placed in a borrowed grave.

We often hear the rhetoric that abortion ought to be acceptable until the unborn child is viable. What this typically means is that until the unborn child is able to survive on his or her own outside of the womb.



And yet, none of us are viable, if we mean by that that we are able to exist without being connected to a larger world. The infant within the womb is dependent upon his or her mother for nutrition, sustenance, and for an ecosystem and environment. You and I are dependent right now. We need air. We need water. We need food. We need the world around us. None of us are gods. And none of us are machines.

Jesus, in identifying himself with his people in their humanity, in suffering, and in death is doing something so that he can partake of the same things that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, the devil.

The ultimate issue is a matter of spiritual warfare. What we are facing right now in a culture of death ought to demonstrate to us what we should already have known as Christians: Money and power abstracted from the kingdom of Christ always turns violent.

Slavery existed in this country because slavery propped up the wealthy planters who believed that they could use the labor of other human beings to their own benefit, and they were willing to act violently for that.

Human traffickers ship women and children all over the world because they think that they can profit from that.

The abortion industry is more than willing to receive young women who are in a moment of vulnerability and crisis because they believe that they can profit from that.

Jesus warns us about this when he says that you cannot serve both God and mammon. He uses the language of mammon, not in dead, abstract terms; he personalizes it. This is not just something, but it becomes someone. Mammon is a jealous God, and mammon is armed to the teeth.

In every generation, we will have to face this. And Jesus, standing in his solidarity with those that the world would consider to be the least,

is demonstrating to us that one's worth and dignity does not come from one's usefulness. It comes intrinsically from the image of God.

If we are going to be the people that follow Christ, we cannot just assert the sanctity of all human life in our sermons, teachings, and voting guides. In our advocacy, our churches should demonstrate this. And we as Evangelicals have often been the worst at taking the standards of the outside world and using them within Christ's body.

Why are we constantly drawn to the testimonies of celebrity athletes, celebrity beauty queens, and wealthy people who have found the gospel of Jesus Christ? It's because we believe that somehow these sorts of testimonies will be more influential because the rest of the culture and the rest of the world values the things that those people have. And yet, our witness is not in our sameness with the rest of the culture. Our witness and our power come in the differentness of the kingdom of God, which has an entirely different set of priorities. One of the small things that you and I can do to advance the pro-life witness is within our own churches.

What if in our churches we had the Scriptures being read by a woman in the early stages of dementia with a shaking voice, and we are not sure whether or not she is going to be able to finish it on her own? That might cause our services to go a little longer. That might cause a little awkwardness in the service. But it would signify that the power that comes from the gospel of Jesus Christ is not a self-generated power. The power of God is found in what the rest of the world calls weakness.

What if that child with Down Syndrome within our congregation was viewed not as a charity project, but we viewed him as a future king of the universe and we cultivated the spiritual gifts that he has, not only to be ministered to, but to minister to the rest of the body. When the world says, "Why would you have a child who is going to have a life of such difficult and suffering? Why would you not abort him?" our

answer is that he is not an idea, he is not a project, he is our brother, and he is a gift from Jesus Christ who is indispensable to us, because Jesus put him here, and gave him a calling and a vocation.

If our churches reflected the fact that the power of God and the priorities of God are different from the power and priorities of the outside world, we could cut through the heart of what is behind the culture of death. The idea that somehow people who are deemed to be problems, crises, stumbling blocks, useless or disposable are no such thing. They are part of the kingdom of God and, Jesus says, those who lead the kingdom of God.

What empowers the culture of death is invisibility. That's the reason why so many people don't want to look at the sonogram screen. They don't want to think about what is on the other end—that this being that they are encountering technologically is not a thing but a person. But we must ask, who is invisible to us? Who are the people around us that we are shielding our eyes from? Who are the people that we do not want to encounter because we are afraid of the burdens that they will bring upon us? If we recognize that every single child, born and unborn, bears the imprint of Jesus Christ—that he shares flesh and blood with them—then we are going to be willing to risk. It is risky to welcome that unwed mother into your home. You don't know if you're going to be able to adequately care for her. You don't know if she's going to make the right decisions. You don't know what the end of her life story is going to be. It is risky to welcome that child with fetal alcohol syndrome into your children's ministry because you don't know how many of your church's resources are going to go into keeping things going for him or her. It is risky to welcome orphans into your home and allow them at your table as beloved sons and daughters.

These things can disrupt your life and the way you view it. But these things are worth it. Not because the investment pays off the way the

world sees it, but because the kingdom of God gives us a different perspective on who they are and who we are.

The cross defines God's mercy. He says Jesus shares flesh and blood so that he can destroy the one who has the power of death. The devil has a power that comes in two ways: deception and accusation. The forces of this present darkness will say to us: whatever you do, including acting violently toward another, you can keep secret and there will be no long term consequences. And then the devil pivots immediately toward that with a word of accusation. He says, "I know who you are, and I know what you've done." There is no one more pro-choice than the devil on the way into the abortion clinic, and there is no one more pro-life than the devil on the way out of the abortion clinic. He deceives and then he accuses without mercy.

But the word of hope that we have in the cross is that the Scripture tells us here that because our Lord Jesus offered up himself for his brothers and for his sisters as a high priest to make propitiation for the sins of the people, that we have the freedom that comes through the kind of mercy that does not excuse sin but atones for sin.

In 2011, Kermit Gosnell, the infamous abortion doctor in Pennsylvania, was arrested. The account of what he had done, even to the point of keeping "trophies" from the lives of the children that he had destroyed in his office, was all starting to be revealed. During that time, I said we should pray for justice for Kermit Gosnell and that he would come to faith in Jesus Christ. I immediately heard from Christians who objected to that, because they said, "Don't you understand how saying something like that trivializes the monster that Kermit Gosnell is?"

And my response was to say, "Who do you think you are?"

Who do we think we are? If the way that we are evaluating our standard before God is simply by measuring ourselves against people

that we consider to be respectable to fall within what is expected with the grace of God, we have no idea the standards of the holiness of God. Every single one of us deserves to be exiled from the presence of God. What has reconciled us to God is not that we are less sinful than Kermit Gosnell. What has reconciled us to God is that we are hidden in Jesus Christ. There are many people who are going to sit in our congregations who, when we say, “Whosoever believes is forgiven of all sin,” assume that the “whomsoever,” is for someone other than them—that the types of sins we are mentioning are the sins we use in our sermon illustrations. The sins that don’t shock. The sins that are not going to cause people’s children to ask them what it is when they’re driving home from the church service.

Our message must be standing with Jesus in solidarity so that we stand up and speak for justice for all those who are vulnerable. For all of those who are fatherless. For all of those who are annihilated. And yet we must speak to those who are guilty. Jesus has called us to sinners. And that means the kind of forgiveness that is coming with the gospel is not the kind of forgiveness that we often give. “I’m going to let you go on that. I’m going to let you by on that. But I’m watching you.” No. The Scripture says that Jesus offers himself as a propitiation for the sins of the people, that Jesus is standing and interceding for his people so that we have the boldness to approach the throne of grace. The message we have for a woman being accused because she had an abortion, for

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the man who is accused because he paid for the abortion, or for the man who performed the abortion is not to say “it’s okay.” The conscience knows it’s not okay. The conscience testifies to the standards of the justice of God. The message that we have to give is far more liberating than that.

Everything your heart accuses you of right now is true and more so. But you have already been arrested. You have already, in Christ, been indicted. You have already, in Christ, been executed under the curse of the law, and you cannot re-execute a corpse. Your identity has been crucified with Christ, so that you have already been through the judgement of God. When God sees you, a faithful and repentant sinner who is united to Jesus, he does not see you as that woman who had the abortion. He does not see you as that man who enabled the abortion. He sees you hidden in Christ. When he looks at you, he thinks of you exactly as he thinks of Jesus—his beloved child in whom he is well pleased. When moments of condemnation come, those are the moments when Jesus is loving you the most tenderly. He has sympathy. He intercedes. He prays for and he stands for you.

The message that we have for the people who have been harmed and injured and even complicit in the culture of death is a message that ends with, “For there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ.” If we cling to and understand that gospel of the cross, then we are going to be the people who speak for justice. We are going to speak of justice, and we are going to be the people who speak of the justifying grace of God at the same time.

As we do that in all of our various ministries, we’re going to fail. We are going to make the wrong decisions on how to minister and how to advocate and how to speak. We are going to need grace. We are going to find ourselves in spiritual warfare, because anytime that

you advocate for the vulnerable, there are forces invisible to you that will strike back. But we will find ourselves entering into the mission of Jesus himself.

When I looked at those footprints, I realized that ice cream was a really small thing. Obeying your mother to go get something she needs is a really small thing, but in the context of my son's little life, it was not such a small thing. In the great sweep of cosmic history, all of the things that we do—no matter how important we think they are, no matter how impactful we think they are—they're all just a blip. But Jesus tells us that if we are faithful in the small things, he is training us in those small things to have responsibility over great things. And so wherever we are in all of our ministries, we identify with the crucified Jesus Christ, who counted himself among thieves.

And so we stand up for the unborn. We stand up for the aged, the disabled, the persecuted, the immigrant, the orphan, the widowed, the addicted, the prisoner, and the poor. We stand up and say, "The image of God is more significant and more important than anyone's definition of usefulness."

And when we do that, we will get in trouble. We will get in trouble in ministry because we will be ministering to all sorts of people who aren't easily ministered to and some won't like it. We will get in trouble politically because we will be loving and caring for people who don't fit into whatever political program of whatever our ideology is.

But are we servants of man or are we servants of Jesus Christ? And if we are servants of Jesus Christ, then we do not have fear of man, but we instead are looking for a different sort of acclimation, and we are informed by a different set of priorities. So when the rest of the world wants to dehumanize and depersonalize by saying "fetus" or "embryo" or "fetal tissue" or "products of conception" or various ethnic slurs or "anchor baby" or "loser", our response is to stand up

and say, “We believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We believe that life is better than death, because death is dead and Jesus is alive.”

And we go into hard and difficult places. Which means we will hurt. Caring for the vulnerable means the risk and the sacrifice of oneself. That’s part of what it means to take up a cross and to follow. We will hurt in ways that we can’t even imagine now, but it is worth it. We will find ourselves limping toward a city that we’ve never seen except by faith, and behind us, in a world like this, there will be a trail of blood. But if we notice, it’s not our own.





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