

Introduction

Some have enjoyed the best of times; others have experienced the worst.

I have seen both. People who have walked through the doors and joined up and in with smiles on their faces, only later to be devoured ... sucked up ... and then spit out like a warm glass of salty water.

My grandmother called the fish who did that to her worms, trash. Little fish that would not grab the hook. They would only suck the worm off. After a few times of this happening, she would say to me, "That's nothing but trash. Throw your line in a different place." She didn't want to waste the worms she had spent time cultivating.

I can't remember all the names, but I can see their faces. The ones for this reason or for that reason—or for no reason at all—who sullenly walked out the same door they excitedly walked through months ... years ... before.

But not all were newcomers. Some comprised the pillars of the church. Charter members even. Mad over some silly thing. Angry because someone or a group didn't respond as they thought they should have. So, they threw up their hands and went somewhere else...or nowhere at all.

Some got mad at the preacher, me included. After all, we can't please all the people all the time. Some chose to hang around and cause further problems, while others chose to leave until the preacher did. Then they returned.

But the news isn't all bad. For each one who doesn't have good experiences, there are many more who have great experiences. Wouldn't trade their church for anything. Wouldn't think of going anywhere else, no matter how bad the preaching or singing is. They hang in there through thick and thin ... through the good times and the bad times ... through the decisions they agree with and the ones they don't. They tolerate preachers and deacons and elders and Sunday School teachers they don't like. They adhere to the principle that one older gentleman once shared with me: "There's always room for common ground."

Jesus once told Peter something vital about the church: "Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means 'rock'), and upon this rock, I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it" (Matthew 16:18 NLT).

Jesus envisions his church on the move, advancing against the kingdom of darkness, ruled by Satan, the prince of darkness. But not a church hunkered down, trying to survive attacks against Satan and his demonic hordes. Rather, a church on the move. And with a march so grand that the powers of hell will not be able to stop her efforts to take God's love across the world.

Then, in 2020, COVID-19 arrived—something we could never have imagined. But God knew of its arrival. Some say he sent it to wake people up, including those of us in the church. If we can't picture God sending such a world catastrophe, at the very least, we have to say he allowed it. Either way, he controlled it.

Covid changed the world...and the church...in ways we could not have imagined. Churches closed for long periods of time to help stem the spread. Some never recovered and remained closed for good. Most reopened after we learned how to control the spread. But things were never the same. Chairs were separated. Pews were cordoned off. We were told not to shake hands or hug. To social distance from one another. To wear masks. To do things that seemed to destroy the essence of the church: *koinonia*. Fellowship.

Like many other things, the church will doubtlessly never have the same face post-Covid as it did pre-Covid. Many will choose the at-home version. Sure, we could always find a church service on the television and later, on the internet. Usually, those services came from churches with larger memberships. Covid brought live-streaming to any size church. Churches with less than twenty people broadcast their services live on Facebook and found their congregations swelled in size.

As a PK (preacher's kid) and as a preacher myself, I've witnessed the good, the bad, and the ugly in church. When I informed my father that God had called me into the ministry, he looked surprised. I knew why. He wondered—with all that I had seen—why I would want to enter the battlefield. His scars were evident. I had heard about them...and seen them. I witnessed church people act in unthinkable ways. I saw friends take the proverbial knife and stab him and my mother in the back.

My journey proved similar. Backstabbers. Gossipers. Hinderers. Complainers. Not outside the church, but inside it. The bad and the ugly. The only ray of hope was the many good found there also.

But I survived, and so did my dad. He trudged on until his death. I plan to as well. We both emerged alive and well. Yes, a few battle scars here and there, but Jesus had them and so have all his followers.

You, too, can survive the church—the bad parts—and learn to see the good parts God has placed within it. The attitudes that promote love and harmony. The part that will take it to the uttermost edges of the earth and into eternity.

Chapter One

Purge the Prejudice

Cedric was a good man; Cedric just didn't know Jesus.

Cedric and his family lived in the community where the first church I pastored was located. He and his family didn't attend church, nor did their parents. Yet, all of them held religious principles and loved God the best way they knew how.

Mostly elderly people populated our church, so we tried to attract younger couples, knowing the future of the church depended on younger blood. Cedric's brother-in-law happened to be a distant relative of mine. Once I persuaded my cousin and his wife to attend, Cedric and his family naturally followed.

In time, Cedric asked me to come visit him. He had some questions about God and salvation. So, I did. After a long talk with Cedric, he decided he wanted to become a Christ follower. Right there in his living room, in front of his family, he

prayed to receive Jesus as his Savior. I watched a smile such as I had never seen on him before crease his face. His entire attitude changed immediately. From that moment on, he and his family faithfully attended our church. Until...

The pastor of another local church invited the men of our church to join an interdenominational men's group they had begun. The group met once a month at a different church, enjoyed a meal together, and had a Bible study. Several of the men from our church joined in. After all, who doesn't enjoy a good meal and fellowship?

Things went well for a while—until the leaders of the group suggested we invite the African American churches in the area to join. The suggestions seemed like a no-brainer, but it wasn't to all concerned. Word got back to the deacons in our church just before our turn came to host the next meeting. Now that the group was interdenominational and interracial, this would entail persons of color coming to our church.

How did I know this would be an issue? Early on in my ministry at the church, the subject had arisen prior to revivals—which they had two of each year—and Vacation Bible Schools. Interestingly, they didn't mind who came to VBS, but revivals were another matter for some reason.

At each deacon's meeting prior to our spring and fall revivals, the following questions erupted: "What are we going to do if a _____ person shows up?" I remember when this happened the first time. I had not been there long at the time. When one deacon asked the question, another answered: "Well, we have a policy that the preacher will close the service as soon as possible." I also remember my response: "Well, you better get someone else to do it because I won't."

In that same meeting, I heard something I would never have imagined hearing from a deacon...and especially a Christian. As the discussion continued, one deacon stated: "Well, I work with black people, and I sometimes even eat lunch with black people, but I want to have one place I can come where they are not present."

Of course, he meant the church. I couldn't help but wonder what he thought heaven was going to be like. I didn't respond to his comments. I wished later I

had. I could only pray God would change his attitude. I also thought of the Bible verse that says, "If someone says, 'I love God,' but hates a fellow believer, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see" (1 John 4:20 NLT)?

In the years that I pastored that church, we never had a person of color show up. I figured word had circulated that they weren't welcome. But back to Cedric and the men's group.

Prior to the month when our church would host the next men's meal and fellowship, the matter came up at our monthly business meeting. Cedric was present. Would our church continue to support this group now that they were interracial? A heated discussion followed. Cedric expressed his opinion. He also listened to the prejudiced opinions. As I listened to the heated back-and-forth discussions, I watched the disbelief on Cedric's face. I had been in church long enough and in enough churches to know how this would end.

The church voted not to host the next meeting...or any future meetings. They knew they couldn't tell our men not to attend the monthly meetings, but the church would not be a part of the group. The decision devastated Cedric. I talked with him and shared my opinion and sentiments, but he never returned to church.

I'm not sure how Cedric fared in his faith journey after that. I resigned the church shortly thereafter and lost track of him and his family. I can only hope he weathered this faith storm and continued his journey with God.

I thought of Jesus' words, "But if you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone hung around your neck" (Mark 9:42 NLT).

But prejudicial attitudes are not confined only to race. They are often found in the economic area, too. Unfortunately, I have also witnessed this in churches.

One church I attended decided to test the social waters one year during their annual Vacation Bible School. Well...not the church...but the person who directed VBS. This was a barrier they had never tested before, and it would change the church.

The older lady who had directed VBS for many years decided to give up her role. A younger lady in the church took over. Although the church owned a van, they rarely used it. The new director decided she would take a drive around the community and see what happened.

What happened was that she discovered children no one in the church knew existed. They came from low-income settings and broken families, but they abounded in number. None of them attended church anywhere, even though several churches existed in the area. I suppose no one had invited them.

Attendance at Vacation Bible School broke records that year. The church witnessed numbers they hadn't seen since the church's heyday back in the 1970s. But what would happen when VBS ended? Would the church abandon the children? And what about their families?

Fortunately, the church pianist stepped in where the VBS director had left off. Without permission from the church leaders, she decided to take the van out each Sunday morning and pick up any kids who wanted to come. They came, all right, and with them came challenging situations the church had never encountered before and wasn't prepared to face.

Although the children came, no parents came with them. I suppose the pianist thought at least one parent might show up for the worship service to watch their child. None did. She faced a dilemma. Who would watch the little ones during the worship time?

Many of the children took medicine to keep them calm and focused during the week at school, but parents hadn't given it to them before they got on the van. They almost literally bounced off the walls. Sunday school teachers threatened to quit if church leaders didn't do something. The challenges multiplied, but the church pianist continued to pick them up.

The capstone of what the church was dealing with happened when several men returned from a meeting one Monday night. The same week the church was holding its annual Vacation Bible School. As one gentleman prepared to get into his truck, he and the others watched as a young boy raised up in the seat. Since one of the men was a policeman, he began questioning the boy. As the young boy emptied his pockets, the men noticed things from the church. He had taken the

church keys from the man's truck and pilfered through the church, even stealing money the classes had taken during VBS for missionaries. The men asked him: "After all we've done for you, how could you do this?" He had no answer.

Later, the same church faced the social status issue again during one of its annual revival meetings. One night, one of the moms of one of the children the church picked up in the church van for Sunday services showed up. She was a young mother with another toddler clipped to her hip. The church didn't have a nursery scheduled during revival because they had no nursery-age children in the church. Perhaps, they didn't anticipate anyone but home folks coming.

As the revival preacher foamed at the mouth, ranting and raving about the love of God and the perils of sin, the mother's young child grew restless and began whining. She did her best to quiet him, but he continued. Not loudly, but noticeably. Heads turned, but no one offered to take her child to the nursery so she could listen to the sermon she obviously wanted to hear.

Finally, the child's whining presented more of a challenge than the preacher could handle. He stopped preaching, gazed intently at the young mother—with no smile—and waited until she got up and took her child out. She never returned to the church. She may never have returned to Jesus either. After all, if the preacher represented Jesus, and he didn't want crying toddlers around, did Jesus want her and her children around?

What the preacher did after services on the last night of the revival only made things worse. He presented the pastor with his bill of particulars. His expense sheet. The cost of dry cleaning his suits. The cost of staying in a motel. The church leaders simply deducted this from what they had already agreed to pay him.

- **Prejudicial Perspectives Usually Form at Home.**

Murphy once taught at a small private school located in a rural region. Prejudicial perspectives were rife here...and Murphy knew why. He knew many of the parents of the students that he taught. Although nice people who would do anything in the world for anyone, prejudicial perspectives tinged their lives—attitudes that had been passed down from their ancestors. When Murph heard their children express similar views, he wasn't surprised.

Confronting those attitudes took caution on Murphy's part. He needed the job, but he also wanted to break the chain of racial misunderstanding they carried in their hearts. Teaching in his subject area gave him many opportunities to do so. He hoped his instruction would change their manner of thinking—if not then, perhaps later.

Every family has the option of continuing to carry generational sins or putting an end to them. When we choose to keep carrying them, we and others bear the consequences. God addressed this matter when he warned his people what would happen if they chose to worship foreign gods instead of—or in addition to—him. “You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me” (Deuteronomy 5:9 NIV).

I once took issue with these verses, but only because I did not understand them. I thought, “How unfair for God to punish generations of children for sins their parents had committed.” But the verse talks about the natural flow that takes place in families as children observe the actions and attitudes of their parents. We learn by instruction, but we also learn through the environment we live in and by the example of others who live in that environment with us.

This verse explains what studies have shown: that children usually pick up the habits of their parents, good or bad. Children of parents who abuse alcohol and drugs are more likely to pick up those habits themselves. Mimicry, genetics, and abuse help explain this. All children want to grow up to be like their moms or dads. Unfortunately, bad habits get caught up in this desire. Scientists have also proffered some evidence that there may be a genetic link to some of these abusive habits. And children who grow up in homes where their parents struggle with substance abuse are more likely to endure mental, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse—types of abuse they often then carry into future relationships (<https://substanceabuse.org/why-do-kids-pick-up-their-parents-bad-habits.html>).

My parents held attitudes they had received from their parents, but some of them were perspectives I chose not to pass on to my children. I wanted to break

the chain of some aspects of their thinking, which I considered unhealthy thinking—and I hope I did.

Jesus encountered a similar situation when he encountered the woman at the well in Samaria. As he left the area of Judea and headed for Samaria, the gospel writer, John, says Jesus had to go through Samaria. Taken at face value, this assessment was incorrect. In fact, many Jews...perhaps most Jews...did not have to go through Samaria to reach Galilee. Instead, they crossed the Jordan River, passed by Samaria, recrossed the Jordan, and entered Galilee. A reason existed for such action.

Samaritans were a mixed race of people and hated by most Jews. When the Assyrians captured the area in 722 B.C., they had deported most of the inhabitants to the region of their empire. They left only a few poor people in the northern region of Israel to farm and tend the land. In turn, they brought some inhabitants of the Assyrian Empire into the region and settled them. These foreigners intermarried with the remaining Jews, thereby producing a mixed race of people—a race hated by purebred Jews.

As Jesus journeyed through the region, he became tired. He came to the village of Sychar and to Jacob's well where he rested. A Samaritan woman arrived to draw water, and he asked her for a drink. Jesus broke at least two traditions by doing this. One, he as a rabbi talked with a woman in public. And two, he conversed with a Samaritan, even asking her to provide him a drink.

The woman's response makes evident that Jesus fractured a long-held tradition: "The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, 'You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink'" (John 4:9 NLT)?

When Jesus' disciples returned from buying food, their reaction also evidences that Jesus bucked cultural norms: "Just then his disciples came back. They were shocked to find him talking to a woman, but none of them had the nerve to ask, 'What do you want with her?' or 'Why are you talking to her'" (John 4:27 NLT)?

Jesus wasn't interested in continuing long-held traditions; he was interested in replacing them with new ones, which he did. He told the woman where she could find living water—a reference to a relationship with him. The woman accepted

Jesus' invitation to change her lifestyle and to put her faith in him. She, in turn, went into her village and told them about Jesus. Many chose to imitate her decision.

A part of maturing entails examining the perspectives we learned in our home of origin and then measuring them by the Bible's teachings. Just because our parents and grandparents followed Christ and faithfully attended church does not mean they did not adhere to wrong beliefs or that their beliefs were not influenced by accepted norms of the time.

In churches, we will find faulty beliefs that have originated in people's homes of origin—beliefs that members still espouse through their teaching in the church and through other forms of fellowship that occur in any body of Christ. Being aware of this equips us not to be shocked when we encounter it, and it also prepares us to combat such false teachings when we do encounter them.

- **Prejudicial Perspectives Can Cultivate Through Similar Peer Relationships.**

As a middle school teacher, I often heard students express beliefs I knew had come from home but that were also cultivated through relationships they held with their peers.

One class I taught held strong political beliefs. I like to think I was a thoughtful child at ten or eleven years of age, but I knew I did not know what these kids spouted off at the same age. They may not have known it—and were not mature enough to realize it—but they merely repeated what they had heard at home. Their attitudes bloomed by interacting with peers who felt the same way. Although they did not discuss prejudicial perspectives, the same conclusion applies.

Peer relationships prove vitally important in our younger years, but choosing the wrong peers can lead us in errant directions. During these important years, we are generally more interested in aligning with and pleasing our peers than we are in challenging them. We want acceptance, not rejection.

Peer pressure isn't always bad. In fact, we can gain friendships, positive examples, social skills, advice, encouragement, and new skills from our peers. But the pressure isn't always positive. What happens when the pressure entails things the teen isn't comfortable with? Such as shoplifting, doing drugs or drinking, having

sex before they are ready, or driving irresponsibly. Some teens are more likely to give in than others.

The apostle Peter was influenced by his peers, and it took a direct encounter with God to change his thinking. Cornelius was a God-fearing man who lived in Caesarea. One afternoon, an angel appeared to him in a vision, telling him God had accepted his worship. The angel also told him to send to Joppa for a man named Peter.

As the messengers neared Joppa, Peter climbed to the roof of a house around noon to pray. God, too, sent Peter a vision of a large sheet descending from heaven. In the sheet were all types of animals Peter could not eat as a devout Jew. Peter heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat them” (Acts 10:13 NLT).

Peter protested. As a faithful Jew, he had never eaten anything God had forbidden his people to eat. Unknowingly, Peter had perpetrated wrongly held views through interaction with his Jewish peers who believed as he did. God corrected his thinking: “Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean” (v. 15).

Unfortunately, attitudes of prejudice can be found in churches. Acquainting ourselves with those who hold such attitudes within the church—to the point that we want to please them and therefore we adopt similar attitudes—only serves to perpetuate those attitudes in the church. Like wildfires, those attitudes can spread.

Although we can find the same attitudes outside the church—and these are devastating as well—we don’t want to give free reign to such attitudes inside the church. If we allow them to fester in the church, they will seep out and infect our other areas of influence.

The company we keep matters. And while God wants us to influence others in a positive way, we must be cautious lest we become the ones influenced. As Paul writes, “bad company corrupts good character” (1 Corinthians 15:33 NLT).

Jesus commands us to be salt and light in a world that needs both. Although salt can kill and light can blind, Jesus has in mind their positive aspects, not their negative elements. “You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has

lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless. “You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father (Matthew 5:13-16 NLT).

- **Prejudicial Attitudes Are Broken by Slowing the Spread.**

Although we’ll never obliterate the presence of prejudicial attitudes in the church, we can slow the spread. However, leaving a church because we experience racist attitudes may do the opposite. We can exert a permeating influence if we are present but cannot do anything if we’re absent. As difficult as it might be, combatting prejudicial attitudes is one thing God calls us to confront.

The world heard the phrase “slow the spread” often beginning in 2020 when Covid-19 appeared. Expert after expert gave us instructions. News reporters repeated the instructions. So did our employers, as well as business owners. We saw flyers hung in every imaginable place. “Wear a mask.” “Face coverings required.” “Do not enter without a face covering.”

Schools and churches found themselves immersed in the mix. Many schools closed initially, but when they reopened—whether fully in-person or in hybrid models—students, teachers, and all other employees were required to mask up.

Although most churches did not mandate mask wearing, most did suggest it. Some members complied; others refused.

The message of the mask—along with social distancing and hand washing—entailed slowing the spread of a highly contagious disease. One that brought a pandemic across the world.

Once most people complied—whether voluntarily or because officials forced them—the case numbers and deaths dropped. And when scientists developed a vaccine, the spread slowed even more. But until a majority of the population was vaccinated, officials warned us not to relax our efforts completely. If we did, the monster might reappear. In fact, it probably would—and did in some countries like India where the monster ravaged with a fury such as no one had witnessed. Thousands died daily and hundreds of thousands more were infected. Cases also

rose in places where officials allowed people to use their good judgment, which in many cases wasn't good.

Knowing we won't annihilate racial attitudes this side of heaven doesn't give us an excuse not to attempt it. We can slow the spread, just as we did with Covid. Remembering what Jesus taught will help. When asked what the greatest commandment was, he responded, "You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: Love your neighbor as yourself. The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40 NLT).

Prejudicial attitudes appear in many forms, not simply racial—although that area seems to draw the most focus. They may extend to social, gender, and economic areas. This may be why churches tend to populate with many of their members from a similar economic background. Churches that represent a good mix have done a respectable job of slowing the prejudice spread.

The Outsiders, a book by S. E. Hinton, which was later developed into a movie, reveals how to slow the spread of prejudicial attitudes. Hinton introduces us to Ponyboy, a fourteen-year-old who belonged to the Greasers—a gang of boys and young men from the wrong side of the tracks. The name fit them well, for that is how they wore their hair. Slicked back with enough grease to fry a pan of pork chops. Should it fall, each had a comb at the ready to move the loose strands back to their rightful place.

Although Ponyboy appeared bold and rough, he had a sensitive side. His loyalty was to his brother and to the gang—and had been since his parents had died.

One day, Ponyboy and his friend Johnny were walking through the local park when a car loaded with Socs—a rival gang—pulled up. Ponyboy and Johnny sat carefully on the monkey bars as the Socs approached and ridiculed them.

Shortly, a fight erupted. One of the Socs grabbed Ponyboy and tried to drown him in the water fountain. Seeing what was about to happen, a dazed Johnny pulled out his switchblade and killed the attacker. When Ponyboy and Johnny awoke

from their stupor, the other Socs had vanished, but the dead one lay where Johnny had stabbed him.

Afraid of what would happen to them, Ponyboy and Johnny approach a fellow gang member named Dally. Dally knew what it meant to be in trouble. They assumed he would know how to help them. He arranged for them to stay at an abandoned church far away. He gave them money to buy food and told them to remain there until the heat was off.

Johnny and Ponyboy disguised themselves by cutting their hair. Ponyboy even dyed his hair blonde. Later, Dally returned to check on them and took them to town for a meal.

While the trio was away, a group of children with a few adults held a picnic at the old church. Johnny and Ponyboy had smoked at the church and had not completely extinguished one of the cigarettes. The church caught on fire while some of the children were inside.

When the three gang members returned, they saw the church engulfed in flames. Instinctively—and with no thought for their own lives—Ponyboy and Johnny raced from the car into the burning church and began rescuing children. Johnny was almost out of danger when a huge ceiling beam fell on him. Ponyboy and Dally escaped with only minor burns and smoke inhalation.

Dally—not one to care much for anyone else—scolded Ponyboy for pulling such a stunt. They made their way to the hospital to check on Johnny, whose life hung in the balance.

Ponyboy would visit Johnny again—just before he died. Johnny told Ponyboy that saving the lives of those children was worth his life. Their lives were worth more than his. Then, he told Ponyboy to tell Dally because he didn't think Dally knew.

The heroic efforts by two kids from the wrong side of town made the newspaper headlines. One day, while Ponyboy was at a store, Randy, the leader of the rival gang, confronted him. He called him to his car and asked him why he had saved those kids. Then, he admitted he would never have done such a thing. "I would

have let them burn to death," he said. He could not understand what would make a Greaser perform such a feat.

What made Ponyboy and Johnny risk their lives is the same thing that made the Good Samaritan do what he did (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus tells of a certain Jew (this little fact would make the story more interesting to his listeners.) who made his way from Jerusalem to Jericho.

The priests resided in Jericho when they were not working at the temple in Jerusalem. Thieves and robbers haunted the road between the two cities. Although the road only meandered seventeen miles, it was unsafe. Robbers and thieves probably didn't bother the priests and Levites because of their profession, but everyone else was fair game.

The traveler might have been a merchant, but, nevertheless, the thieves descended upon him. They stripped him of his clothing, beat him, and left him for dead.

The first person to pass him was a priest. Priests were servants of the Law of God and were supposed to be dedicated to God. He had completed his work at the Temple and was returning to Jericho. No doubt, he sought rest after his course at the temple. He knew what God's word taught about loving other people. But he turned his head when he saw the wounded man and passed him by.

A Levite strolled by next. He belonged to an inferior branch of the Pharisee sect. Levites performed servant duties at the Temple and ministered in religious worship. They also interpreted God's law. He, like so many others of his time, had allowed his religion to become formal, heartless, and compassionless. He, too, passed the wounded man without giving him any attention.

The final would- or could-be helper was a Samaritan. He belonged to a mixed race of people. The point Jesus surely wanted his listeners to grasp. The Jews hated Samaritans. Full-blooded Jews considered them rascals and renegades. By the time of Jesus, the hatred between the two groups had escalated to the degree that a devout Jew who wanted to go to Galilee would cross the Jordan River on the east side to avoid passing through the region of Samaria.

This person from this hated race stopped and helped the wounded man. He felt pity for the man. He knelt beside him, poured medicine into his wounds, bandaged them, put the wounded man on his donkey, and took him to an inn where he cared for him.

The following day, the Samaritan handed the innkeeper money and told him to care for the man while he continued his journey. When he returned, he would pay any cost that exceeded the money he had already given him.

Jesus ended his story by asking, "Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits" (v. 36)?

Ponyboy and Johnny worked to slow the spread of prejudicial attitudes, whether they knew they were or not. So did the Good Samaritan. So, can we, and it's what Jesus expects of his followers.

Having poverty of spirit helps us slow the spread. Ponyboy and Johnny had it. As well as did the Good Samaritan.

In his matchless Sermon on the Mount—and in the part known as the Beatitudes—Jesus taught this principle when he said, "Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3 NKJV).

Having poverty of spirit doesn't equate with a poor self-image. God doesn't expect us to think less of ourselves than we should—but neither should we think more highly of ourselves than is appropriate. We are created in God's image. This gives us worth and value. It gives all people worth and value, regardless of their race, social standing, economic standing, gender, or family of origin.

Racist attitudes are found in the church just as they are outside the church. They shouldn't be, but they are because the people who inhabit churches are not perfect even though they are believers. In Christ, God forgives us of all our sins and clothes us in Christ's righteousness, but we must grow into that position, which takes practice throughout our lifetime. God does not magically make us perfect in every way. Our imperfections that we should be working on—prejudice among them—follow us into the churches we belong to.

Perspective proves to be the major culprit that keeps racist attitudes where they should not be. If God created everyone in his image, then everyone is equal in his

eyes. We should treat each other the same way. God doesn't have heaven sectioned off by race, gender, or social standing, and he doesn't plan for earth to be either.

Poverty of spirit entails realizing we are nothing without God. We can do all things through Christ, but we can do nothing of spiritual worth without him. We cannot save ourselves, regardless of how much money we have or what genealogical heritage we herald. We stand equal at the foot of the cross.

Christian history demonstrates that even the church is not immune from prejudicial attitudes. The first denomination of churches my father pastored was formed during the Civil Rights era because they wanted segregated churches. Many of the private schools that raised their heads during this same time did so for the same reason.

But when we see others from God's viewpoint, we can help slow the spread—and maybe one day, eliminate it.

- **Prejudicial Attitudes Are Broken When We Allow God to Give Us a Better Focus.**

My vision blurred. I knew it was time to see the eye doctor...again.

At ten years of age, I received my first pair of glasses. Since that time, every few years, my vision worsened. In my mid-fifties, I found myself at the eye doctor yet again for a checkup that I knew would end in new lenses. Things at a distance had turned blurry again.

Sure enough, I needed new lenses. But what he said next concerned me. The pressure was high in both of my eyes. He recommended I see a specialist. He wrote down the name of a good one in the next town over.

My visit to the specialist entailed a detailed examination and several tests. I didn't have glaucoma...at least not yet...but he planned to treat me as if it lingered in my future. The treatment entailed placing drops in my eyes several times a day. This was a challenge since I had never used drops before. Try as I might, I couldn't hit my eye. After a while of missed targets, I got the hang of it.

But that wasn't the worst of it. I also had dry eye disease—and evidently had had it for a while. Many of the little cones under my eye that produce fluid, which

lubricates the eyes, were either severely damaged or nonexistent. And the worse news? No cure for that existed. I would need to put special lubricant drops in my eyes several times a day for the rest of my life. All this thanks to too much screen time. This was the culprit that led to my blurry vision even after I had my lenses corrected.

Putting drops in my eyes now consumes my day. One drop in each eye twice a day. Another drop in each eye before bedtime. Another drop in the left eye in the morning. And then the dry eye drops as often as I need them, which is about four times per day. Drops, drops, drops. All in the name of clear vision.

But the alternatives don't appeal to me: damaged nerves which could lead to blindness or continuous blurry vision.

Prejudicial attitudes also relate to focus—focusing on the wrong things. Such as skin color, economic background, gender, religious affiliation, heritage. The townspeople focused on Johnny and Ponyboy's social status and where they lived. The revivalist focused on a poor woman with a whining child—a child that interrupted his sermon. On and on the list meanders like a winding trail that never ends.

As mentioned previously, this focus normally begins in our home of origin and is then nurtured by associating with folks who think the same as we do. Since people populate churches, churches are not immune from having members with an errant focus.

As a middle school teacher, I see focus issues each year by some in all middle school age groups. Some focus well, which leads them to follow directions on assignments, quizzes, and tests, while others struggle to focus for various reasons. Their lack of focus leads them to miss points on assignments of all types because they do not read the directions entirely or because they do not listen well as I give them orally. And, of course, there are always a handful of students whose focus is affected by their detest for all things related to school.

I remind my students regularly that they have the power to change their focus. Even if they have been diagnosed with ADD or ADHD and take medication, they can do things to help them focus. And if their lack of focus is due to their not enjoying school, they can change their attitude. Just as focus is the key to good

grades in school, so it is also essential to survive prejudicial attitudes within the church.

Although with great effort, we might change our focus as it relates to prejudice, doing so is rare without help from God. Only God—through his Word and by the conviction of his Spirit—can convince us we are focusing on the wrong things.

Even Peter, the leader of the early church, had a focus problem. God had called him as an apostle to the Jews, but he preached to Gentiles as well. Paul relates the situation in his epistle to the Galatians. “But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile believers, who were not circumcised. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn’t eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision. As a result, other Jewish believers followed Peter’s hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy (Galatians 2:11-13).

This involved a matter of hypocrisy, which I will address later, but it also entailed a matter of focus. Paul could have focused on Peter’s exclusion of the Gentiles and gotten caught up in his error. Thankfully, he rebuked him and put his focus on what was important.

Focusing on everyone—regardless of their race, color, or creed—is easier said than done. The baggage we carry fights against it. The baggage of family. The baggage of peer pressure. The baggage of societal example.

Jesus provides an admirable example in his ministry. He loved everyone, regardless of what the religious leaders thought he should do, especially if he claimed to be the Messiah. He focused on the poor, the marginalized, the rejected. According to them, he traveled in areas he shouldn’t have. He touched people he should have avoided. He ate with people from the wrong side of the tracks.

If I focus on the wrong thing—people in church who hold such attitudes—I’ll never attend church anywhere, at least not for long. I’ve witnessed people with the wrong focus in every church my dad pastored and in every church I’ve either attended or pastored.

The good news is that those with such a wrong focus never comprised the majority. Because they were vocal with their attitudes, they appeared like a majority, but they weren't. Often those in the minority carry large voices—and depending on the issue, they may have to—but not with prejudicial attitudes.

Our responsibility is to follow Jesus by putting our focus on everyone because everyone is important to him. And when we bump against wrong attitudes in the church, remember they represent people in the minority, people who aren't where they should be spiritually, and people God is still working on. We are all human, and we all have our flaws.

- **Prejudicial Attitudes Must Be Nurtured with Love.**

The section-eight apartment complex rested less than one-half mile from the church, but for some, it was a lot farther than that.

When John took the senior pastor position at a small-town church, he soon discovered he had accepted a position at a mission-minded church. No sooner had he begun his tenure there than one deacon urged him to plan a mission trip.

John set the wheels in motion, made a few phone calls, and before long had a trip planned to several states away. A small church there needed help fixing a few things around the church and hosting a backyard Bible school at a nearby apartment complex—like the one near John's church.

A fair number of members signed on to go. They bought and loaded construction materials, packed their belongings, and prepared to stay in the open worship center of the church. In addition to the construction and Bible club, John would host revival meetings at night.

Everyone loved the experience. They worked during the day, repairing a large platform under an outside tent used for revivals, and readied items for the backyard Bible club, planned for later in the week. Their experience with the children and adults at the Bible club excited everyone. The group felt as if they had made a difference when they packed up and headed home.

But the next year, as the church considered whether they would plan another mission trip, someone asked why they didn't do home missions at an apartment

complex near the church. That's when the prejudicial attitude reared its ugly head.

One previous mission team member said, "But what if some of them come to our church and want to join?"

This same woman had traveled hundreds of miles to work with children and adults of all colors and economic statuses, but she wouldn't do the same for the same type of people if it meant they might want to belong to her church.

John's wife—not one to mince words—asked the woman if she thought heaven would be cordoned off in areas by race, denomination, and economic standing. Sadly, the church determined not to reach out to the apartment complex but to continue traveling hundreds of miles to minister to the same type of people who lived in their community.

To say John was disappointed is an understatement. But he didn't resign as pastor or stop being friends with the lady. She had an ingrained attitude that had been passed down through her family.

Thankfully, one of her relatives—who had also traveled with the mission team—had shed this attitude. Traveling on mission trips and seeing God work in all types of people and in all kinds of situations had changed his viewpoint...had extinguished his prejudice.

John could only pray that the same would one day happen with this lady. God would have to change her heart. He couldn't. He chose to love her despite the weak spots in her outlook. John also remembered that he wasn't perfect. Prejudice had never been a sin he struggled with, but he had others. And God had been gracious and patient with him. He would be with her.

After hearing Jesus silence the Sadducees, one Pharisee approached Jesus with a question: "Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses" (Matthew 22:36 NLT)? Jesus told him the first involved loving God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and being. The second entailed loving others as one loved themselves. Jesus concluded the discussion by saying, "The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments" (v. 40).

Love will do what force cannot. Famed Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., said several things relating to love. “I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.” And, “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.” And again, “Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

King was right—and so was Jesus before him. When we encounter people—in and outside the church—who have prejudicial attitudes—or any other seedy attitudes—we must love them. If Jesus could love those who crucified him—and even ask his Father in heaven to forgive them—we can love those who have attitudes they shouldn’t. If King could encourage his followers to love those who beat, imprisoned, and hung others like him, we can love those in the church whom God is still working on. Leaving the church won’t solve the problem. Staying gives us the opportunity to exude a permeating influence.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house” (Matthew 5:14-15 NLT). Sometimes that entails lighting up the church we belong to.

I have a missionary friend in India who loves away bad attitudes. I met him years ago through a devotion I had written that he had read. When he first contacted me, I wondered if he was a scammer and just wanted money like others who had contacted me. But he wasn’t. He was a former Communist party leader whose heart God had transformed. Now, he worked with widows and orphaned children. His support came mostly from people who chose to donate to his ministry.

Periodically, he sends me pictures of the mission projects he does in a country that is hostile to Christianity. Authorities have killed and persecuted some of his ministry partners, but God has protected him. I remember the video he sent where authorities stopped a car full of missionaries and burned the Bibles they carried in the trunk of their car. I also recall the video of people stoning one man who claimed Jesus as his Savior.

Despite his circumstances, my friend and his family continue to love. One act of love involved constructing a tube well for a village that had no pure water. They drank from a stream that was contaminated because it was used for various other

sources. Through my friend's acts of love, instead of hate, many listen to his story of Jesus' love and choose to follow Christ.

Love wins every time, even when we must show it to people inside the church walls who have unChristlike attitudes.

We will never eliminate all attitudes of prejudice in society or in our churches. People inhabit churches, and people are imperfect. And one of those ways is our tendency to hold prejudicial attitudes against others. We focus on the things that divide us rather than on the things that can unite us.

Although we shouldn't find such attitudes in a church, we will. Our duty is to love those with them despite their imperfections, to spread the message that God loves all people, regardless of their religion, creed, color, or economic status, and to remember that we are not perfect either.

My grandmother was accustomed to saying, "If I found a perfect church, it wouldn't be perfect after I joined it."

If we struggle with prejudice or are discouraged because we experienced it in a church, the following can help:

- ✓ Remember everyone struggles to a degree with some form of prejudice, but it doesn't make it right.
- ✓ If you struggle with prejudice, examine your history to discover why you do. More than likely, the attitude has something to do with what you were taught or experienced passively in your younger years.
- ✓ Prejudice is taught, not caught (other than through the transference of our sinful nature).
- ✓ Don't try to justify prejudice with remarks such as, "That's just the way I am," or "That's the way my parents were."
- ✓ Confess and repent of any prejudice in your life.

- ✓ The future of any church will be impacted by the decision we make as it relates to prejudicial attitudes.