

## Called to the extremes of love

By Matthew R. Ozment

A few years ago, I spent a week in Paris by myself. When a friend asked about my trip, in a poor attempt at humor I said, "Paris was great, but it would be better if it wasn't full of French people!"

Unfortunately, people often say the same thing about churches. They may agree with many of the teachings of Jesus, but they do not see those teachings being acted out in the lives of Christians. As a result, many people are turned off of the church and Jesus. Turn on the news and you will see a pastor buying a Gulfstream jet or a Christian PGA golfer chewing out his caddy every time he makes a bad shot. The *Post and Courier* in Charleston recently had an article about the many emails Nikki Haley received after her call to remove the Confederate flag from the statehouse grounds following the shooting at Emmanuel AME Church last year. Many of the emails condemning her invoked the name of God and reminded her that one day she would be judged for her "evil deeds."

At the same time, most of the visible social justice movements today are led by progressive secular activists. Millennials see more good in the world being done by secular organizations than being done by Christians. Millennials see the church as acting like a private club rather than a force for love and justice. Major social issues regarding race, gender and systemic poverty are not seen as the cause of the church. Christians are seen as hypocrites.

A Christian does not necessarily act in a more moral manner than a non-Christian. Romans 3:23 states that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Unfortunately, we as Christians often try to hide our sin and look down on those who do not hide their sin. That is what makes us hypocrites. As Christians we are called to abstain from judging our fellow man. Jesus stated in Matthew 7:1-5: "Do not judge, or you will be judged. For with the same judgment you pronounce, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

"Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but fail to notice the beam in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while there is still a beam in your own eye? You hypocrite! First take the beam out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

The Gospel states that God is the only judge of man. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4:3-4: "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me."

A friend of mine, who is the leader of a large downtown Charleston church, often states that the sanctuary is like a busy operating room where open heart surgery is performed every time the doors are open. Jesus did not tell people to get their life in order and then he would



IMAGE BY CAROLINA COMPASS STAFF

Matt Ozment.

accept them. The Gospel message is the opposite. Jesus accepts and loves people where they are. The message of Christianity is love, not judgment.

In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr. described his initial disappointment at being labeled an "extremist," but after further reflection, Dr. King realized that being an "extremist" put him in good company. Dr. King wrote:

"Was not Jesus an extremist for love: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.' Was not Amos an extremist for justice: 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.' Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.'"

Dr. King then asked two questions that still resonate today: "So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?"

Christians fall short just like everyone else. We need to remember that. God loves every individual enough to suffer injustice and die on the cross. Jesus died for the sins of every person, no matter the sins' quantity or quality. Our challenge as Christians is not to be perfect; our challenge is to be extremists for love.

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### Finding God's strength in the greatest of challenges

By Debbie Martinez

The dreaded four words, "I want a divorce," when you were hoping to hear four different words, "I love you more." Not a good day in anybody's book and you wonder, "Where is God?" As the days turn into weeks and the weeks turn into months of the divorce process, you become frustrated, fearful, angry and bitter, and at times hopelessness creeps in and you wonder yet again, "Where is God?"

God has not strayed; He has not moved from your side. He is right where He has always been; it's just that your emotions have clouded His presence. You might not see or feel Him, but Psalm 73:28 tells us that God is always near to the broken-hearted and saves those whose spirits are crushed. It is at this time in your life that you need to look up and not down and you pray harder than you ever have before. Oswald Chambers said, "We have to pray with our eyes on God, not on the difficulties." If you put your focus on your troubles instead of on God's word, then that is what you will have. Psalm 34:4 says, "I sought the Lord, and He heard me and delivered me

from all my fears." Psalm 34:17 goes on to say, "The righteous cry and the Lord heareth and delivereth them out of all their troubles."

The breaking up of a marriage is devastating to your emotions, your finances, your family and your soul. There are days you can't get out of bed or even think clearly because you are so distraught and paralyzed by fear of the

I promise you, you will be able to rise up and build a new life for yourself, but only with the strength of God. Divorce is too hard to go it alone or even with just your family and friends. Psalm 31:1-3: "In You, O LORD, I have taken refuge; Let me never be ashamed; In Your righteousness deliver me. Incline Your ear to me, rescue me quickly; Be to me a rock of strength, A stronghold to save me. For You are my rock and my fortress; For Your name's sake You will lead me and guide me."

God is bigger than any problem, obstacle or divorce and by the way, those four words that you were hoping to hear, "I love you more," God is saying them to you everyday.



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Debbie Martinez.

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unknown. Those are the mornings you recite 2 Samuel 22:2, "And he said, The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer" and you look in the mirror and say "bring it on" because you know that God has a plan for you and that this is only a growing season. "To every thing there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven ... a time to break down and a time to build up" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8).



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