



# RISKING TO BE REAL

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

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Philip Yancey, in a recent article entitled, "Why I don't go to a Megachurch," describes a tendency toward superficiality in many churches, especially as they get large. The tendency is to emulate a "club," not a "community." A club is a gathering of people we like or with whom we share common interests; we choose them.

A community, however, is like a family; it is chosen for us. And that can get messy. Henri Nouwen defines "community" as the place where the person you least want to live with always lives. Yancey agrees with that, saying: "Thinking back to family reunions, I must quickly agree that the institution of the family forces me into close contact with characters I would otherwise avoid. I have no choice about such encounters; we share a gene pool. Several of my family members have served stints in prison. Some carry on feuds that go back generations. A few spin elaborate tales to cover up unwed pregnancies. Geographically, my family extends from Philadelphia to Australia. It includes a professional football player and a Ph.D. in philosophy, as well as some who never graduated from high school. Methodists, Unitarian Universalists, Independent Baptists, atheists—they all come together at our reunions."

In the church, Christians are called to live in community with each other. The church is God's provision for healing and authentic connection. Yancey says: "Anyone can form a club; it takes grace, shared vision and hard work to form a community. The Christian church was the first institution in history to bring together on equal footing Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free. By forming a community out of diverse members, we have the opportunity to capture the attention of the world."

Or do we? The church can often be people who shallowly embrace the connected, the beautiful and the humorous, but overlook the disconnected, the awkward and the needy. A friend shared with me recently that his sister, who lives abroad, remarked that it must be easy to be a Christian in California, because everyone who visits from there looks so healthy, wealthy, clean and happy. But, she wondered, what would they choose in the less affluent, difficult world she lives in?

That is an indictment of a brand of cultural Christianity that has grown up in America. Too often Christians are preoccupied with celebrity, with outward appearance. We have taken a page from the world. We choose

to see as our reality the sparkling lights of the Olympic opening ceremony, but neglect to see backstage and outside the stadium the contradictions and profound problems of humanity in the city of Atlanta.

Are we content to only show the clean side, content to be superficial and ignore true community because it is too messy? In an age where the buzz word "lite" on products proliferates so much that it becomes meaningless, are we content to have "Christianity lite"?

The prophet Zechariah's message in the opening chapter of his book is to call God's people to return to a right relationship with the Lord, rather than wandering after spiritual and material counterfeits. Now, having returned to God, how do we have a faith that risks to be real, one that both holds our interest and attracts the world? Studies show that the number one thing that attracts people to a church and convinces them to remain is authenticity. But, what does that look like?

## The Ritual

Through Zechariah, God unmasks superficiality and reveals authenticity. First, he unmasks phony *ritual*; next, he exhorts us to *risk*; then he reveals the wonderful *result*. Zechariah 7:1-3:

**Then it came about in the fourth year of King Darius, that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chislev. Now the town of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regemmeleh and their men to seek the favor of the Lord, speaking to the priests who belong to the house of the Lord of hosts, and to the prophets saying, "Shall I weep in the fifth month and abstain, as I have done these many years?" (Zech 7:1-3, NASB)**

Two years have passed since the last word from Zechariah. The people have continued to build the temple in Jerusalem upon returning from captive exile. After his initial call to return, in chapters 2-6, Zechariah relates eight colorful oracles or visions from God which he received all in one night. It must have been a busy night! The oracles all share themes of God's sovereignty, grace, and power.

Chapters 9-14 give pictures of Messiah, one who is a humble King, riding on a young donkey (9:9), and a Shepherd who is struck down (13:7). There is language similar to the book of Revelation in the New Testament about the certain hope of God's ultimate rule and pur-

poses: "And the Lord will be king of all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one" (Zech 9:14).

Chapters 7-8 are a message which God gives to Zechariah's contemporaries in response to the inquiry of a delegation of Jews that comes to Jerusalem from Babylon. It seems the Jews want to coordinate their liturgical calendars with the priests in Jerusalem. (Today, we would use E-mail!) They had been dedicating themselves to abstaining from food (fasting) for seventy years, the period of time since captivity, and now wonder if they may stop. There is something more behind their question. At face value, this is a sincere, practical question, but there is also a little pride in their religious achievement.

It is dangerous to ask God a question unless you are ready for an unsettling answer to probe your heart. Verses 4-7:

**Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me saying, "Say, to all the people of the land and to priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted? And when you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves? Are not these the words which the Lord proclaimed to the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous with its cities around it, and the Negev and the foothills were inhabited?'" (7:4-7)**

God answers their question with a question—in fact, three questions. There is a problem here. Seeing their heart, God desires to strip away pretense. It is the problem of the great human capacity to be religious. By "religious," I mean a relationship with God that is preoccupied and self-satisfied by external activity and outward appearance. Our superficiality with God is like when we are speeding and we see a police officer. We automatically take our foot off the accelerator. Then, when we are out of range, we are right back to our old habits.

When we relate to God, when we worship, pray, serve and teach, are we doing these things for God or for ourselves, to feel better about ourselves and how God views us? Do we do them with a self-serving and self-promoting motive? Religious activity or ritual to feel better about ourselves before God is nothing more than self-pity or grandstanding. In Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus speaks of fasting only so the Father in heaven will see. It is not to be done in front of people for their commendation. Verse 7 even states that their motives are no more pure than the people who heard the former prophets back in the good peacetime days. They have been over this ground before, and they know what happened: exile.

Actually, God had not asked them to fast for the destruction of the temple these seventy years at all. If any-

thing, he asked them to know and reflect his character through the former prophets, which he repeats now in his next word.

## The Risk

To be different, to go below surface level with God is *risky*. But that is where the action is. So how do we become attractive and authentic? Verses 8-10:

**Then the word of the Lord came to Zechariah saying, "Thus has the Lord of hosts said, 'Dispense true justice, and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.'" (7:8-10)**

### 1. Risk to be real in our love for each other

Here are some definitions of the ways to be authentic that are mentioned here. *True justice* is restoring harmony and peace where there was conflict. It is part of our responsibility in the community. *Loyal love* is a tenacious, kind, condition-free love toward each other. *Compassion* is feeling deeply for each other; it is tender emotion that wells up from within.

This is where community comes in. The "each other" part presumes we are in a community of believers. Community is not an organization. It isn't formal. It's not something you join. It is friends, prayer groups, families and home fellowships.

And community will get messy. Marriage is a community. Ask my wife how perfectly delightful I am to live with all of the time! In the community of twelve disciples of Jesus, James and John fought amongst themselves as to who was the greatest. "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ," wrote Paul, in Galatians 6:2. I have yet to truly bear the weight of someone's suffering without it being tough.

The second place where authentic love is risked is given in verse 10: "*do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the resident alien, or the poor.*"

### 2. Risk to be real in our concern for the unlovely

Isaiah said the fast that God desires is: "to let the oppressed go free ... to divide your bread with the hungry... bring the homeless poor into the house ... when you see those in need of clothes, to cover them."

Jesus gave his precious time for three years not to the movers and shakers, but to the "moved and shaken," those who knew their need for God.

James 1:27 says: "This is pure and undefiled religion is the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Note that he says, "visit...in their distress," not "send money to an organization that does

that." We have to be in the world, in the places where the pain is, feeling the lostness, the loneliness of that place. We have to have the courage to just *be* with people.

For example, who is the resident alien or stranger? This does not mean to watch out for "close encounters" activity in your neighborhood, but rather to open your home and schedule encounters with people you aren't naturally inclined to be with. This is not talking about dinner parties with people you know well. In fact, the word "hospitality" among the early church meant love of strangers.

It is important that we don't automatically think *only* in the categories mentioned in the text, and that we do not allow motivation by guilt to drive us.

How do we oppress people? By overlooking them—by omission. We devalue the person who can give us nothing.

Who are these people in our lives? Perhaps it is a secretary at work; the checkout clerk; the dying man down the street. They are in our church, but we are all too occupied appearing together and busy for God. Dive in. Begin by praying that God would open your eyes to those in need of a touch who are already in your life. We need eyes to see and care for the people on our doorstep that we've passed over. Practicing loyal love and compassion to the unlovely begins in our neighborhoods, not overseas.

The mark of greatness, I believe, is evident in how someone treats the weak, the defenseless, and the "little people" they encounter in their life.

Richard Halverson, the former chaplain of the United States Senate, modeled for me as a young man uncommon genuine concern for the overlooked, the lowly-esteemed. Ray Stedman took me along with him to a conference outside Washington D.C., and on a day off we visited Dr. Halverson's office and the Senate. I will never forget Ray introducing me as if I was a "somebody," and Dr. Halverson's gracious response.

But what stood out even more about this man's character was, although he knew every high ranking official from the President on down, he spoke genuinely and personally to every page, elevator operator, secretary and person of no rank. He knew them by name and inquired about something personal in their lives. Richard Halverson served for decades in that place of pomp, prestige and power, yet who can measure the remarkable effectiveness of his ministry due to his honor and care of the lowly? He risked to be real in a place of great posturing. He was known for credibility and integrity, and people wanted to know his God.

It is the quiet acts of mercy and compassion which no one sees that are the strange megaphone God wants to use. St. Francis of Assisi is attributed with the quote:

"Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

But, we can refuse to yield ourselves to this kind of deeper, risky faith which reflects a soft heart for the things of God. If we do, what we will find is a progressively hard heart ending up isolated and dry. Verses 11-14:

**"But they refused to pay attention, and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears from hearing. And they made their hearts like flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent through His Spirit through the former prophets; therefore great wrath came down from the Lord of hosts. And it came about that just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen," says the Lord of hosts; but I scattered them with a storm wind among all the nations whom they have not known. Thus the land is desolated behind them, so that no one went back and forth, for they made the pleasant land desolate." (7:11-14)**

To be real means to respond promptly when truth is revealed to you.

The hardening process is incremental. It begins by simply not paying attention. Then it proceeds to "turning a stubborn shoulder," like an animal stiffening every muscle to refuse the yoke. Then the ears are made heavy or closed up. At last the hardening hits the heart, like a diamond surface, the hardest natural surface there is.

Notice the Word of God, his revealed truth, came to them through different sources over time: through the law, and through the prophets who were spoken to by the Holy Spirit. Who are the "former prophets" in your life, the times when you clearly had God's truth opened up to you? What are we doing with the revelation we have already received from God? We are responsible to what we have heard. When we select to disregard the Word when it penetrates us, we harden. Obey what you know. Hebrews says: "Today when you hear His voice..." Refusal ends up in isolation and fruitlessness.

But, we have seen that God desires us to have much more fruitful and attractive lives. He promises a different result. We must turn to chapter 8:18-19, where we are given the actual answer to the delegation's original question:

**Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'The fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth months will become joy, gladness, and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah; so love truth and peace' (8:18-19).**

God's plan is much better than they were asking for. Now the vision has been expanded to be God's vision,

which is more than a program of outward observances and depriving yourself, but inward joy, loving truth and peace. God is much more than a God who is interested in how much we have performed religiously. God has already blessed. He is at work. So instead of depriving yourself in a fast, celebrate with a feast, Zechariah says.

Now Zechariah reveals the wonderful *result* when we turn to God, cease superficial ritual, and are responsive to his Word to live in community and care for the weak in our midst.

## The Result

People will want to know the secret of this joy and authentic love. Verses 20-23:

**“Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘It will yet be that peoples will come, even the inhabitants of many cities; and the inhabitants of one will go to another saying, ‘Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts; I will also go.’ ‘So many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the Lord.’ Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘In those days ten men from the nations of every language will grasp the garment of a Jew saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’” (8:20-23)**

This is the wonderful result of being real: people will long for what truly matters in life—God himself. This was the original call of Abraham, in Genesis 12:3, to be a blessing to all nations. And they will come with a genuine interest in God: “We want to seek God with you. We see how different you are, that God is with you.”

People will have a yearning *for* God, not just *about* God.

Dr. Larry Crabb has said: “Don’t answer any questions that the quality of your life doesn’t provoke people to ask.” Are people provoked by the quality of our lives at work? at play? in our homes? how we treat our wives and our children? Or, are they just provoked by us?

We live in a day and age filled with meaningless talk—talk shows, talk radio, etc. Everyone is talking and no one is listening. Few are speaking meaningfully. And fewer still are quietly living in the mess of community and entering into the advocacy of those hurting around us. But if we are being authentic in this way, people will be drawn to God.

Being involved in imperfect community and with unlovely people is compelling. Superficial ritual is not. The result of risking to be real will be that our lives will be marked by God. They will be winsome, not abrasive, truth saying, not hypocritical.

The strategic crack in the armor to penetrate the world for Christ may not be found through a large, organized movement, but through a small decentralized movement of the heart to love the one in the pew next to you or the one serving you at lunch today.

Successful evangelism does not result in religious activity or church membership, but a hungry appetite for knowing God, which desires to dialogue about questions of the heart.

May God give us the grace to open our eyes to what is around us. May God also give us the grace to not try to do it ourselves.

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