Recently a pastor asked me to speak in his church. I have felt inadequate speaking anywhere this summer, but I wasn’t sure why. The fact is that I do have some strong things to say which have been well-received when I spoke, garnering lots of compliments. I couldn’t think of a good reason to say no. I told him I would do it.

Yesterday morning I got the reason why I have not felt prepared to speak.

When I got up to go pray, my wife/prophet was telling me how Charles Finney prepared to speak where he had been invited. Through prayer or investigation, he would identify the strongholds in that town or church—some Christian doctrine, fleshly sin, pride, whatever. Then he would go to prayer over that topic as he prepared to go to that place. He would pray until the Holy Spirit showed him that he had found the key to repentance for the people. Then it would be time to preach. People’s prevailing sin would be identified, the Holy Spirit would convict of sin, many would repent, Christ would be exalted, and revival would break out in that place.

Trish said, “Ask the Lord to reveal their sin to you. Then, when you go preach to them, you will be able to help them find a place to repent; you will help them to change.” What an efficient strategy!

Jesus also used that strategy. When the Pharisees came along, he exposed their hypocrisy built on their worship of the law and of their own holiness. Some like Gamaliel and Nicodemus, and certainly Saul of Tarsus, probably repented when their legalistic pride was exposed (Â“Paul, Paul, why are you persecuting me?Â”—PaulÂ’s zealous enforcement of the Jewish law was actually persecuting the Lord of glory Himself!). ChristÂ’s strategy worked so effectively. He saw their sin and exposed it in his preaching to them.

But something about my wifeÂ’s words stuck in me like a sharp little thorn. Â“Ask the Lord to reveal their sin to youÂ…Â” Am I like Ham who laughed and judged NoahÂ’s nakedness and drunkenness when he saw it, or am I like Shem and Japheth, who refused to look when they had the opportunity and chose to cover NoahÂ’s sin until he could recover.

How easy it is to harangue and condemn people with the truth of their sin. Indeed, a mark of the backsliding church is that they are first judgmental of, and disgusted by, the sins of others (later on a backsliding church will join the world in its sin). But preachers of revival have pure hearts. They are not disgusted by sinners; the hearts of such preachers are like the LordÂ’s—weighted and broken over sinÂ’s bondage. They have paid the price in intercession. They have spent their emotional capital on their knees before the Lord asking Him to set the people free. The responsibility for such preaching is as heavy for the preacher as is the weight on sinful listeners to repent. Woe to the preacher who sees the sin of those to whom he preaches and does not have a heart made sorrowful by their suffering.

Another weighty truth followed that one. I thought about the hostility which inevitably accompanies such preaching when you stir up devils like that. Some of the listeners repented, but others killed Jesus. And who was it who killed him? The most honored and successful believers of all, the Pharisees and Sadducees. As Watchman Nee said, Â“Show the world the fruits of Christianity, and it will applaud. Show it Christianity, and it will oppose it.
vigorously. If you preach against the chief strongholds in a crowd of people, you are attacking their security, success, and reputation. You are asking for trouble.

If you are going to preach this message, you must already have counted the cost—you stand to lose your own security, your success, your reputation, perhaps your life. When Jesus preached exposing their sin, He knew he was giving up these things—he was entrusting them to these sinners. I like to say, “Never trust others with anything you are going to need later. They will take it from you.”

Early in his ministry, Jesus did lots of healing, feeding, and turning water into wine. John 2:23-25 says, “Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.” Jesus refused to trust His Lordship, His Kingship to this crowd who was looking for a warrior to defeat Rome, a miracle worker to heal all their aches and pains, a magical winemaker to supply their cabernet. They would prove later they did not want a God who would convict them of sin and deliver them from it. They would kill that man.

Jesus refused to trust them with His Lordship. He would need that later. But sure enough, he did trust them with his reputation, his physical welfare, and his very life blood. He didn’t need any of those things.

Are you hungry for revival? Do you want to be its agent? Then you must also ask yourself, “Do you need your life? Do you need your reputation? Do you need to be successful? Or do you truly believe that “you are dead and your life is hid away with God in Christ Jesus.”

If you wish, you can give people what they want—a big church, popular and attractive ministries, an inspiring message that makes them feel good about themselves, keys to wealth and success. And for that you will be paid well. But you will be like King Hezekiah, whose end-of-career disobedience brought the judgment of God against Israel. Yet in his compromised heart, this judgment was acceptable—as long as it happened after he died so he would not have to deal with it.

That early morning I pondered what my wife and the Holy Spirit were telling me, I realized why I have not felt comfortable taking speaking engagements this summer. As I inspected my own heart, I did not like what I saw. I am not that man who can be trusted by the Holy Spirit for such a task. I called the pastor and begged out of the engagement. “I really have nothing to offer your people right now. I might end up doing them more harm than good.”

-M. Woelk.