

Daily View

“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’” Hebrews 3:13

January 28, 2021

Pat Answers and Platitudes

Mom often said something like, “eat everything on your plate” and, if I didn’t want to eat the spinach, I would always ask “why?” She would respond with something like, “you need to clean your plate — do you know that there are children starving in _____?” That was a classic pat answer that was, as I’m sure my mother knew, not an answer at all. How would my eating of everything on *my* plate help children in Bangladesh or wherever these hungry children lived? Wouldn’t it be really cool if we could reduce the population of starving children simply by eating more food? Some of

us would be especially generous benefactors (“*wait; is he saying what I think he’s saying?*”).

A pat answer is a simple, concise, or straightforward answer that fails to fully or adequately explain or

respond to something. A famous one heard in churches of Christ is the typical answer to the question: “what is grace?” You know the [pat] answer, right? “*Unmerited favor.*” While there is truth in that answer it hardly does justice to the amazing grace of God in which we stand (Romans 5:2), that came to us in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:16-17) and that saves us (Ephesians 2:8). And does it fit Colossians 4:6, “our speech must always be with grace”? “Unmerited favor?”

We have to do better than that.

(That, too, is a platitude.)

A platitude is a trite or obvious remark or statement, often expressed as if it were original or significant. Try this: next time you’re presenting (professionally or as a parent), pause and slowly look around the room and then say (the more *dramatically*, the better), “you know, there is no ‘I’ in team.” Adding a knowing nod or two will enhance the experience. I’m pretty sure, if you’re actually looking at their eyes, you’ll see them rolling into the back of their heads.

If you *stop and think about it* (there’s another one), there are several “I’s” in a team otherwise there would be no team. The point of that hackneyed phrase wore out a long time ago. There are thousands of these, it seems: “love conquers all,” “it is what it is,” “good things come to those who wait,” and even “God has a plan for you.” Then there’s my personal favorite (not really): “everything happens for a reason.”

There are thousands of [platitudes]... “love conquers all,” “it is what it is,” “good things come to those who wait,” and even “God has a plan for you.” Then there’s my personal favorite: “everything happens for a reason.”

Statements like these can leave the wrong impression and even be cruel. In both of the last two examples in the previous paragraph, the implication is that there is some larger than life force (God or something else) at work. If there is, it demands an explanation. The “why?” needs to be addressed.

“God has a plan for you” is patently true, but there is a wide divergence of opinion on how that plan is implemented. I would argue that God has a plan for everyone and it’s found in the good news about Jesus Christ. Some think it’s

a personal blueprint for each individual. Either way, “God has a plan for you” needs to be explained.

When someone says, “everything happens for a reason” the speaker seems to be suggesting, again, that there is some force at work (God?) that caused the thing to happen for a reason that is not revealed to us. I have a hard time with that. Is

he suggesting that if a loved one dies in an accident that the accident was *caused* (by God?) for some unrevealed reason? Platitudes can be cruel. And this one seems to fly in the face of common sense — and Ecclesiastes 9:11-12:

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

Pat answers are probably less dangerous in the short term. Saying “unmerited favor” as a definition of grace is not going to cause any harm by itself. But a steady diet of pat answers can cause spiritual stupor over time. If I can answer a question with a quick, one-off, fill-in-the-blank response, that makes me feel good, smart even. But without a healthy, open discussion of what those answers mean and how they apply my “education” will prove to be superficial.

As one who speaks for a living, I’m aware that I have used both of these and will again. I repent in dust and ashes (*did he just use a platitude? At least it’s biblical*). Platitudes and pat answers leave people empty. The way to avoid them is to ask yourself, “what am I trying to say? What do I need to explain? How will my audience hear this?” Do that and there will be some learning going on because we’re speaking with clarity and purpose and that’s a good thing.