

When I was growing up, commercials on television were typically introduced by the phrase, “And now, a message from our sponsor.” In this sense, a message is considered to be an important idea someone wants to communicate.

I would like to suggest that there are two basic messages in the world today: the true message that comes to us from God through his Word, and the twisted message that is communicated to us constantly through television commercials, programs, movies, the news, and even the way many organizations are structured.

The Twisted Message

Although there are many variations of the twisted message, the essence of it is this: “You can be somebody special—even a hero—if you know how to take advantage of the resources and abilities at your disposal.” So we are told, “If you drink this beverage, or brush your teeth with this toothpaste, or drive this car, you will find people thinking of you as someone special.” Many of these messages imply that by using a certain product you will find the fulfillment of your dreams.

This is the same message with which the evil one tempted Adam and Eve. “You can become like God by taking advantage of the resources in the Garden. You don’t need a relationship with God to become like him. Everything you need is right here.”

The sin of Adam and Eve was not necessarily their desire to be like God. After all, God made us like himself—in his image—and we are to become even more like him. Even before the fall, the Tree of Life held out the promise of somehow becoming more like God. Our first parents were not created with glorified

bodies, and as we see from God’s Word, glorification is much more than a return to Eden. It is the greater life to which the Tree of Life was a pointer.

Longings for Glory

Since God made us not only like himself, but also with the possibility of becoming more like him, it is natural for all human beings to long for glory. Our longings for glory can be seen in the desire for love, friendship and intimacy, for riches, control and power, for knowledge, wisdom and authority. Sin twists these longings for glory so that we seek their fulfillment in the resources and abilities God has given us rather than in God himself. We were meant to find the fulfillment of these longings for glory as we love and glorify God. Sin twists these longings by making them self-centered instead of God-centered. God offers the hope of reflecting his glory in a brighter way, as the moon reflects the glory of the sun. The twisted message says you can become the sun.

Societal Point Systems

Although all people have self-centered longings for glory, each culture develops its own set of priorities as to what it is that makes people special. I call this a “societal point system.” Although there is a lot of overlap among different point systems, each one tends to have its own flavor. In Chile, for example, if you have a last name that has a double “r” in it (like Larraín, or Errázuriz) this gives you lots of points. Also, the lighter your skin, the more points you have. The ability not to lose your cool when being criticized is also highly valued. Such a person is said to have “personalidad.”

In our own culture, the focus on Hollywood and sports shows how much we value physical beauty and ability, as well as wealth. Probably the people in our society who have “earned” the most “points” are successful movie stars, singers and sports players. Advertisers take advantage of this societal point system to sell their products. They imply that if you purchase their product, you will move in the direction of those who have the most points.

Small Dreams

Bombarded as we are by this societal point system, it’s easy to begin believing the lie. We develop what I call a “small dream” that is based on our societal point system. A small dream involves an inadequate but strongly tempting way to find the fulfillment of one’s longings for glory by attaining points valued by our society.

The True Message

This twisted message is a distortion of the true one. What is the true message? Well, it’s really the whole Bible. However, the Bible is often misunderstood as a collection of spiritual sayings or principles, much like the sayings of Confucius. It is often thought of as a spiritual encyclopedia in which one can find guidance for life. I believe that reading the Bible this way will sooner or later distort its message.

A God-centered Story

The Bible is a story, with a beginning, a development of the characters, a climactic struggle between good and evil, the final triumph of good, and the denouement or final clarification and untangling of the issues. What makes this story unique is that the

main hero is not you or me—not even as a possibility. In contrast, the storyline of our society is one that says, “Look at this hero.... If you get enough points you can also become one.” In the story of the Bible Jesus is the central character and hero. Luke 24:25-27, 45-49 makes it clear that he is the primary topic of the Old Testament, which looked forward to his coming. He is also the hope of the future. Although we can and should become like him, he always remains the great hero whose character we should strive to emulate but to whom we can never become equal. It is a story that is clearly God-centered and not human-centered.

A Romance

The story is a romance between the hero and his bride-to-be. It is about the growing up and preparation of the bride for her wedding. The institution of marriage in Genesis is a pointer to this greater reality of the marriage of the people of God to Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33),

An Adventure

This romantic story is a great adventure. The preparation of the bride involves her journey from the Garden to the great City of God. Along the way she learns about her hero and groom as she faces and must deal with challenges along the way. The journeys of Abraham and later of his descendants to the promised land are foretastes of this greater adventure and journey to a heavenly country and city (Hebrews 11:8-16).

A Romantic Drama

It is the dramatic story of the hero whose bride is deceived and stolen away by the villain who hates the hero and wants to take his place. The villain

casts doubt on the motives of the hero and convinces the bride to believe his lie (Genesis 3:1-5). Little does she realize that the villain only wants to use and abuse her, and ultimately to hurt the hero. The villain holds her in his power through the fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15). He says, “His justice requires your death. You can’t go back to him.” Then he offers his own version of life: he dangles points in front of her, trying to make her believe that if she accumulates enough points, she will find the fulfillment of her longings for glory.

The hero, however, sends word saying he loves her and, though she deserves death by his own law of justice, he will take care of her rebellion. Throughout the story he is wooing her to himself, proving his love and power, and making clear the consequences of being in league with the villain. The question is, will she trust him? Or will she believe the lie represented by the point system of her society?

An Action Story

The villain is constantly trying to prevent the coming of the hero, twisting his words and trying to kill him. Again and again, through amazing feats of power, the hero manages to rescue his bride. But her trust is so weak. She disbelieves his love, or his power, or his faithfulness to his promises. Or she believes for a short while and then falls again in to disbelief. Or she “believes” only when he seems to give her “points.”

A Mystery

The story is a mystery. If the bride-to-be by law deserves death, how will the hero be able to marry her? He is the one who must put her to death! How will this happen? When will the hero finally come to

solve the mystery? Even the angels were itching to find out how it would all work out (1 Peter 1:12).

Tragedy and Triumph

When the showdown between the villain and the hero finally comes, the bride becomes hopeless when, contrary to all her hopes, the hero is put to death. His motives are now clear—he was willing to die for his bride. But apparently he didn’t have enough power to fulfill his promises. Then, in an incredible twist, the hero shows his power is greater than anyone expected. He comes back to life, thus showing his power over death itself! His death turns out to be the legal payment for the rebellion of the bride. So now the villain can’t hold her in his power through fear of death. The villain is defeated and death is conquered. This changes everything. Now we see that what he offers is not points, but a relationship of love with himself. He offers not a small dream, but the apparently impossible dream of life forever with the loving, powerful and faithful hero. It’s his presence, not points, that fulfills our longings for glory.

The Denouement

There are still some issues to be disentangled. Even though the villain has been defeated, he has not yet been brought to his knees. He still goes about like a roaring lion trying to devour the bride. The hero has given his bride the power necessary to bring the evil one to his knees (Romans 16:20). But to accomplish this mission she must trust him and avoid being sucked into the societal point system. Her task is to complete the journey, spread the good news so the bride is complete, and in so doing the hero will through her bring about the fulfillment of his plans.

He will bring her to himself and the great wedding feast.

Challenge to the Bride

Here is the challenge for the journeying bride: do you trust the hero Jesus or have you been sucked into the point system of the surrounding society? The truth is that when our focus is on accumulating points and on achieving our small dreams, it keeps us from seeing the glory of our hero Jesus.

Blindness to Jesus

The rich young ruler (Luke 18:18ff), for example, wanted to use Jesus to fulfill his small dream of becoming rich. He wanted Jesus to give him points. Knowing this, Jesus asked him to give up all his points and along with them, his small dream. The young man was in the very presence of Jesus, but his small dream kept him from seeing the true message.

The Jewish leaders also had their small dream: to have the places of honor in a restored nation. It was because of their commitment to this small dream that they were blind to the glory of Jesus.

Judas also had a small dream: he wanted to be rich. Because of this he was unable to see the glory of Jesus and betrayed him for money—for societal points.

Even the disciples let small dreams get in the way of seeing Jesus. They would argue about who among them was the greatest, and about who would sit on Jesus’ right hand and left hand (Mark 9:33-37; 10:35-45).

Mary had purchased perfume valued at a year’s wages. We don’t know where she got the money. Maybe she was saving it up to buy a new house or something. But we do know that a week

before Jesus’ death, she poured it out on him. The disciples—not only Judas, but all of them—criticized her for this “waste” of money that could have been given to the poor (John 12:1-11, Matthew 26:6-13).

They had been with Jesus for about three years—the time period of a good seminary education. Yet they were blind to his glory. They were so affected by their small dreams that they couldn’t understand the true message that Mary had understood at least to some extent.

The crowds of Jews who followed Jesus—many of whom claimed to be his disciples (John 6:60)—were also blind to his glory because they were committed to their small dream of having Israel return to the glory they had under David and Solomon. They wanted a Messiah who would give them those points—make them the head and not the tail of the nations. So when Jesus multiplied the bread and the fish, they followed him to the other side of the lake. On seeing them, Jesus told them to stop seeking the bread that perishes. Rather, they should look for the bread that does not perish.

As they converse with Jesus, it becomes clear that they are wrapped up in themselves, looking for points from Jesus. Finally, in an attempt to help them see their blindness, Jesus says to them, “If you want the life I have to offer you must eat my flesh.” On hearing this they started murmuring among themselves, no doubt asked each other if he meant cannibalism. Jesus knew what they were talking about, but didn’t stop to explain himself. Instead, he added that they would also have to drink his blood! For Jews, of course, this was unheard of. And in our day it’s only vampires that supposedly do such things.

Jesus’ point was this: Either he was talking about cannibalism, or he was talking about something beyond their existing paradigm. Jesus was attempting to break the paradigm formed by the twisted message that results in a search for points and a small dream. It should have been obvious to all who had seen Jesus that he was not talking about cannibalism. So instead of leaving (John 6:60), they should have gone to him to find out what he meant. But as soon as they realized Jesus was not going to give them points, they left.

We also can easily fall into the trap of interpreting the true message through the eyes of the twisted message. We can pray, sing, read the Bible, go to church, weep for our sins and change our behavior, and still end up trying to use Jesus to get points for ourselves—even “religious” points.

To Be a Hero Like Him

What more specifically did Jesus want his disciples—and us—to understand when he told them to eat his body and drink his blood? On this side of the cross it is clearer to us that Jesus was making a prophecy about his coming death. He would give his body and shed his blood for the bride. When we partake of the Lord’s Supper we are saying in effect, “It is the love, power and faithfulness of Jesus demonstrated in the cross and resurrection that gives me strength to get up in the morning when I’d rather stay under the covers and not face the day. It is his relationship with me that gives me strength to love those I don’t feel like loving and to accomplish the mission he’s given me to do.”

On the other hand, every time we worry, what we are saying in effect is, “Your love is great, but it’s not enough. Solve this or that problem for me and then

I’ll be able to serve you.” We thus show that what we really want is societal points and that we are misinterpreting the true message through the lens of the twisted message.

Any sin we can think of—greed, anger, lust, envy—is ultimately a rejection of Jesus in favor of the point system of our society. We show that we are empty and grasping for something to fill us up. Our longings for glory drive us to grasp.

On the other hand, when we believe him and his true message, then rivers of life flow out from us to be a blessing to those around us. These rivers are the Holy Spirit. Jesus says that whoever drinks of (believes in) him, will be a blessing to others just as a river is a blessing to the ground (John 7:37-39). And look at the disproportionate amounts. One sip of Jesus and rivers (plural) flow out from us.

According to the true message, we do not become the central hero, but we do become like him. Just as he was not empty and grasping for something to fill him up (Philippians 2:5ff), so we can be full and overflowing with blessings for others. As we look to Jesus we can be a hero to our spouse, to our children, to our friends and neighbors—even when we feel unloved and disrespected. As we reject the point system of our society (repentance) and look to Jesus (faith), the river of life begins to flow out from us and we become heroes like Jesus.