

Becoming What God Wants Us to Be

By Tony Campolo

I was on a train leaving Victoria Station. We were about ten minutes out of the train station and these two men sitting opposite me reacted. One had a seizure. I hadn't seen a seizure for years. I was kind of frightened. He shook. He rolled off the seat onto the floor. His friend quickly reacted, picked up the man and put him back on the seat. Took off his coat, made it into a blanket, rolled up a newspaper, put it in his mouth so he wouldn't bite his tongue, and administered some medicine.

The man shook for about a minute. It seemed like longer than that, but it was frightening. And then he fell into a very, very deep sleep. His friend said, 'please forgive us. We were in Vietnam together. I was seriously wounded. I lost my leg.' He pulled up his trousers, showed me an artificial leg. 'My friend here, a hand grenade tore away half of his chest, and there was shrapnel all through his chest. He couldn't move without screaming in pain. As we lay there, the helicopter that had been sent to rescue us was blown out of the air by a rocket and I knew we were going to die. Somehow my friend stood up. In agony he stood up. He moved with pain and he reached down and grabbed my shirt and he began to drag me through the jungle. Every step he took he screamed in pain. I yelled at him, James! Let me be. Go on without me. You'll never

get both of us out of this jungle. But he did. I don't know how he did it, but he did.

'A year ago, I heard he had this condition and I also heard that somebody has to be with him every minute of the day because we never know when these convulsions will occur and somebody has to be there to take care of him at that moment. So I closed down my apartment in New York and sold my car and I came over and I'm that somebody. I'm with him every minute of the day. So that's our story. I hope you'll excuse the upset.' I said 'You don't have to apologize to me, mister. I'm a speaker and whenever I can come up with a really good story, I'm thrilled. This is a great story.' I'll not forget his response. He said 'oh don't be overly impressed. You see, mister, after what he did for me, there isn't anything I wouldn't do for him.' Gratitude.

We owe that kind of gratitude to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for what He did for us, and what He continues to do for us every minute of every day. Two thousand years ago, when He died on the cross, He took the punishment for our sins but more than that, He absorbed the sin itself. He absorbed the sin itself.

Let me take you on a brief excursion into Einstein's theory of relativity. I thought that would get you. Einstein said the time is relative to motion. The faster you travel, the more time is compressed. So if I put you in a rocket and sent you into outer space traveling at a hundred and sixty thousand miles a second and said come back in ten years, when

you return, you would be ten years older. But all the rest of us would be twenty years older. You say how's that? Because as you increase speed, time becomes compressed, more and more compressed so at a hundred and sixty thousand miles a second, our twenty years would be compressed into ten years of your time. If I put you in a rocket and sent you into space and you were traveling at a hundred and seventy thousand miles a second, our twenty years would be compressed into one day of your time.

Now here's the clincher: if I got you traveling at the speed of light, one hundred eighty six thousand miles a second, all of time would be compressed into one moment. Now we can't do that because as you approach the speed of light, your physical body would expand outward in weight and size towards infinity. I tell you that because don't let anybody ever say you're fat. Just say I'm traveling too fast. You just tell them that.

But, if I could get you traveling at the speed of light, one hundred eighty six thousand miles a second, all of time would be compressed into one eternal now. All of time would be compressed into one eternal moment. There would be no passage of time at all. No passage of time at all. I tell you that because that's God time. With God there is no past, there is no future. The very name of God suggests His eternal now-ness. The name of God is what – I am that I am. God never was, God never will be. God is an eternal now. For Him all of time, all of history is compressed into one moment. That's why Jesus it could be said I am the

Alpha, the Omega, the beginning and the end. It all is one moment with me. He said before Abraham was, I am. He wasn't using poor grammar. He was saying something profound. He said before Abraham was thousands of years ago, that's simultaneous with me right now. Its present tense with me right now. Before Abraham was, I am. The now-ness of God.

You say so why is this so important? Because when Jesus hung on the cross two thousand years ago, He was and He is simultaneous with you sitting right here in this church. You say wait a minute, Campolo, there's two thousand years separating me here and Jesus on the cross back there. But at the speed of light, in God time, those two moments are compressed into the same moment, so as Jesus hangs on Calvary's cross, He has you on His mind. He is aware of you sitting here and now. And His divinity is able to do that. And it says in scripture He not only takes the punishment for our sins, but this: He takes the sin itself. The scripture says "He who knew no sin." He who never sinned, who despised sin, loathes sin, on the cross it says "He became sin." If you were Russian Orthodox or Greek Orthodox, you would know this line from the liturgy. On the cross He became everything, everything that we are in order that we might become everything that He is. Whoa. Whoa.

You say what does that mean? It means that on judgment day you need not be concerned. It says in the book of Jude He will present you faultless, spotless, sinless to the Father. Is that incredible? He has

absorbed all of that into His own body. When you sin, He reaches across time and space and connects with you, and empathetically absorbs into Himself all of those dark and ugly things about you. And on judgment day, He shall present you to the Father, here it comes, faultless! Faultless! I can hardly wait. Father, I'd like you to meet my friend Tony, the perfect one. I hope my wife's there. I can just hear you say well you don't know him like I know him.

The good news of the gospel is that your sin is absorbed on Calvary. He reaches across time and space and like a magnet He draws out of you all those dark and ugly things that are part of you who are. Like a sponge, He absorbs all the ugly sinfulness of your life and makes it His own. He who knew no sin, says the scripture, on the cross, listen to this: He doesn't just take the punishment, He becomes sin. That's incredible. And yet, it happens and it happens every moment of the day.

And right now, if you'll simply open yourself up and say Jesus connect with me, reach across time and space and touch me, and absorb out of me those things in me that ought not to be so that I can become everything that you want me to be. Cleanse me, oh God, see if there be some wicked way in me. Cleanse me, cleanse me, purify me. We've got a God that not only forgives but cleanses. He not only forgives sin, but becomes sin for our sake.

How do you say thank you to such a gift? How do you, how do you say thankful? How do you do that? Well there's an infinite ways in which

you can respond. Let me just cite three simple ones. He wants you to become empathetic like He was empathetic. He empathized with people. He knew what was in people. He felt people's pain. He felt people's hurts. He always was willing to be interrupted, like He was interrupted by blind Bartimaeus. You need help? Let me stop. Let me help you. Let me help you. Let me empathize with you. Let me connect with you. Empathy.

There's a difference between looking at a person and looking into a person. I tell my students at Eastern University, where I teach, that there is a difference. They don't get it because they're too young. But when the Holy Spirit explodes inside of you, when you are filled with the Holy Spirit, you are empowered to do something. You're empowered to not only look at a person, but to look into a person's eyes and reach down into the depths of a person's being and connect. Connect with the innermost recesses of that person's being. The person is no longer just another human being. When you reach into a person's soul, you sense the holiness.

Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher/theologian said it becomes an I/thou relationship, for to connect with the other person like that is to touch God Himself; to connect with God Himself. What an incredible story. What an incredible gift. Love, so amazing, so divine, demands everything that we are. Gratitude to God for His great gift in Jesus Christ. Empathy.

The second thing is concern. To be concerned. I don't care whether you're a conservative or a liberal politically, every Christian should be concerned about those pathetic people marching up towards the border. I mean I'm not asking for a political solution, because I don't have one. Every time I listen to politicians, they always give me an answer and every answer I can see things that are wrong with the answer. But there has to be an answer. And if this is true about Jesus, it's true about you. He's concerned. You know He's concerned. And as you go to bed at night, do you reach out to them? Do you try to connect with them and pray for them in the midst of the hurt and the agony that they must be experiencing? To be concerned with these people, we do not brush them off. We do not say well they shouldn't be doing this. You just know that they are hurting people and we must be concerned about them.

I went down to Haiti to check on some of my students who are working there. I got out of the van, I'm walking across the pavement to go into the Holiday Inn right there in Port-au-Prince, I got intercepted by three girls. I call them girls because the one in the middle was the oldest and she was only 15. And she said to me, "you can have me all night long for \$10." I was stunned. I looked at the one next to her and I said "what about you, do I get you for \$10." She shook her head yes. I said to the third one "what about you?" She nodded yes. I said "you're in luck! I've got \$30. I want to hire all three of you for the night. I'm up in room

210. You be up there in a half hour but not before. Do you understand?
Not before.”

I rushed up. I got in the room. I called down to the concierge desk. I said “I want every Walt Disney video you’ve got in stock. Every one of them. Send them up to room 210.” Called down to the restaurant. I said “I want banana splits. I want to pay you extra but I want extra ice cream, extra whipped cream, cherries, nuts, I mean I want them huge. I want four of them.”

And the girls came and the videos came and the banana splits came, and I sat at the edge of the bed and we had a party. It was about 1:00 in the morning when the last of them fell asleep across the bed, and I said to myself nothing’s changed. Nothing’s changed. They’ll be back on the streets tomorrow selling themselves to dirty evil men. Nothing’s changed. And then it was like a voice inside of me said – except for this: for one night, for one night you let them be children again. For one night you gave them back their childhood. You didn’t solve the problem, but you did what you could.

People, that’s what the Lord asks of us. The kind of concern that gets us to do what we can do. Do you do what you can do? You can all name some lonely person that doesn’t get visited. True religion is this, says the book of James, to visit the fatherless and the widows in their affliction. There’s some sick person. There’s somebody whose day would change if you gave them a phone call; if you wrote a card to them when

you're on vacation; if you remember their birthday. I mean to be concerned. It's one way of showing your gratitude to God to be concerned about other people.

And then this: to be committed. To be committed. I mean it's one thing to believe in Jesus. I mean I meet them all the time. I ask students 'do you believe in Jesus?' Yeah, I believe in Jesus. Big deal. You can go down to the local bar and ask the guy on the stool next to you, do you believe in Jesus? Chances are he'll say yeah, I believe in Jesus. It's not believing, its being committed.

There's a big difference between being a believer and being a disciple. And Jesus said "go into all the world and make" what – believers out of everybody? Go into all the world and make disciples. Disciples are people who do what the master would do at any given moment. Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to do what Jesus would do if Jesus was in your place? Are you willing to become the person that Jesus wants you to become?

One of my students said I've thought about becoming a minister, but doctor, you have no idea how much sin there is in my life. I'm so unworthy. I just can't do it because of my unworthiness.

I told him a story about sending a student over to be with Bishop Tutu who said exactly the same thing to Bishop Tutu in Africa. I'm not worthy to become a minister or a missionary. And Bishop Tutu said don't worry, Harry, don't worry, God has very low standards. Do you

understand what I just said? God has low standards, so don't say I'm unworthy, I'm unworthy, I'm unworthy, come just as you are and Jesus will transform you, but you've got to be committed. You've got to say Jesus, here's my life, let it be holy, yielded, Lord to thee. To be committed. To be committed.

I had a friend Dale Moody, he taught at the seminary in the south. He talks about the day his mother died. And he said she rolled off the chair onto the floor right after breakfast. My father ran around to the other side of the table, picked her up, and carried her out to the pickup truck, plunked her in the front seat, was down the road onto the highway. She was dead on the arrival at the hospital.

The day of the funeral, we went out and we put her into the ground, we checked everything out and then went back to the homestead, we were sitting on the back porch when my father asked me and my brother, who was there with us, what do you suppose mom is doing right now? What do you suppose she's doing this very moment? And Dale said I told my father when she closed her eyes, the next moment she opened them the first thing she saw was the face of Jesus. And my father said, oh, oh, that will be glory for me! Glory for me! When by His grace I shall look on His face. That will be glory, glory for me.

Now let's go back to the cemetery. They said it's 10:30 at night. Don't argue with the man who's just buried his wife of 54 years. And they went back to the cemetery and he checked out everything, checked

out everything, made sure the flowers and everything was in place and then he stood back and he took one son in one arm, and one son in the other arm, and he held them close, and he said we can go home now. We can go home now. Boys, it's been a good day. It was a good 54 years and it ended just the way I wanted it to end. She went first. When two people are committed like the two of us have been committed, each wants the other one to go first because I didn't want her to have to go through the pain that I'm going through putting her in the grave. Do you understand, boys? We were committed. We were committed. We can go home now. It's been a good day. It's been a very, very good day.

People, people there's very little commitment in this world, is there. Marriages fall apart because of lack of commitment. People fall apart because they don't understand commitment. And I'm calling you not only to believe in Jesus, but to become committed to Jesus, not just to believe the doctrines of the Apostles Creed, but to say here's my life. I want to commit myself to you. I'll do what you want me to do. I'll be what you want me to be. I'll go where you want me to go. I am thine, oh Lord. I have heard thy voice. To be committed. To be committed.

You've been a lovely congregation. I wondered what you would be like, but you've been lovely considering that you're overwhelmingly white. White people are hard to talk to. They really are. I mean you can say anything to a white congregation: I just returned from the moon.

I belong to an African American church, a black church, and man they let you know how you're doing. The deacons sit right up front. Right up front. And whenever you say something good, the deacons yell "preach brother! Preach!" I would have done much better had my deacons been here instead of you people.

And the women in my church, they put one hand in the air like this and they go "well." Just like that. "Well." Doesn't sound like much. You got 500 women going "well". And the men in my church, they're the best. They're up on their feet and they're yelling "keep going, baby, keep going, man, keep going, keep going." You don't get that from white people. White people do not yell "keep going." They yell "stop, stop."

Once a year in our church, we have student recognition day, and the students come back from the colleges and universities, come to the pulpit one by one, give the name, tell what they're doing, what they're studying, and the old people love it. 'I'm studying law at Harvard.' And people go 'my, my, mmmmmmm mmmmm mmmmm.' Somebody else will say 'I'm studying engineering at MIT.' 'Oh thank you Jesus, thank you Jesus.' Somebody else will say, 'I'm studying music at Juilliard.' 'Oh yes, yes, yes, yes.' You heard great music today, but you haven't heard the greatest music till you hear about 500 grandmothers and grandfathers moaning and groaning, the moans and groans of joy because their grandchildren are becoming what America never let them be. You know what I mean by that, don't you.

And when they were all finished and seated, bright eyed and bushy tailed, my pastor got up and looked at them, he said, 'children! Children! You're gonna die. You are gonna die.' That's a good thing to tell young people cause they don't think they're gonna die, that's why they drive the way they do. 'You're gonna die, they're gonna take you out to the cemetery, they're gonna drop you in a hole, they're gonna throw dirt in your face, and they're gonna go back to the church and eat potato salad.'

'When you were born, you were the only one that cried. Everybody else was happy. That's not important. Here's what's important: when you die, will you be the only one that's happy and everybody else will cry? That depends on what you're living for – titles or testimony?' That's black preaching. He's got a alliteration and power. Titles or testimonies?

Then he did what only a black preacher can do – he swept through the Bible in five minutes. He said 'there was Moses and there were Pharaoh. Pharaoh had the title – ruler of Egypt. That's a good title, ruler of Egypt. But when it was over, that's all he had was a title. He had the title but Moses had the testimonies.' Yeah, you got it. He said 'there was Jezebel, Queen Jezebel. That's another good title, queen. Queen Jezebel. She was going to destroy Elijah, the prophet of God, but when it was over all she had was a title. She had the title, he had the testimony. And then there's Daniel and Darius the king threw him into the lion's den. I mean Darius had a title king – king Darius, but when it was over, all he had was a title. He had the title but Daniel at the testimony.'

People of God, one of these days they will drop you in a hole, they'll throw dirt in your face, and they'll go back to the church and eat potato salad. What will it amount to? A tombstone and an obituary with some titles? Or will there be people standing around your grave giving testimonies of how you empathized, how you were concerned, how in the name of Jesus you were committed to their well being.

Hear me, people. I wish for you both titles and testimonies, but if you have to make a choice, go for the testimonies!