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Gospel of John #13
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Sermon Summary #13

Is God's Pursuit of his own Glory an Act of Megalomania? John 4:1-26

Jesus is bushed. He's tuckered out. He's bone-tired from his journey. He's hot, thirsty, and hungry. It's high noon and the disciples have nothing to eat. So while they go shopping for lunch, Jesus sits down at a well to drink. It is here that he decides to enlist yet one more person into the ranks of those who will worship the Father. But it isn't just any person. It isn't a recent graduate of the local theological seminary. It isn't a respectable businessman or a housewife with three kids, a cat and a dog. He chooses to speak with a person who, in the opinion of the ancient world, has already struck out. This person is a Samaritan. Strike One! This person is a woman. Strike Two! This woman is sexually immoral. Strike Three!

And yet, notwithstanding these racial, social, and moral liabilities, Jesus begins to teach her about the nature of God and true worship. Ladies, please don't be offended by my saying that this person's gender constituted a strike against her. That was simply the way things were in the first century. Men in the first century simply did not engage strange women in conversation in public. What made this even more remarkable is that this particular woman was a Samaritan. Samaritans and Jews had no dealings with each other. They hated each other.

And to cap it off, this Samaritan woman was immersed in sexual sin. Her first five husbands had either died or divorced her. Jesus doesn't condemn her for remarrying. But he discerns that she is seeking in her relationships with men something that will fill the emptiness of her soul. The closest thing she could find to genuine soul-satisfaction was sex. She needed love. She needed to feel valued and cherished. She longed to be affirmed. And she sought for it in the arms of one man after another. And at present, as Jesus reminds her, the man she's living with isn't her husband.

Her reaction to this comment by Jesus is to change the subject as quickly as she can. You can almost hear her saying to herself, "I don't like the direction this conversation is taking. I'll try to throw him off the scent of my sin by engaging in a theological debate about worship." It's always easier to talk about theology than to deal with the truth of sin that is personally distressing. As John Piper says, "a trapped animal will chew off its own leg to escape . . . and a trapped sinner will mangle her own mind and rip up the rules of logic" to avoid having to face her sexual immorality. So, she says, "Uh, by the way Jesus, as long as we're talking about my sexual sin, what is your opinion on the issue of where people should worship? Should it be on this mountain, Gerizim, or in Jerusalem?"

As bizarre as her response to Jesus is, he's ok with it. It was worship he wanted to talk about in the first place. It is in his response to her question that we find a statement that is simultaneously shocking and glorious. Most people read through this story and never pause to reflect deeply on the implications of this statement. But C. S. Lewis did. And it changed his life. Let me explain. But first, listen again to what Jesus says:

"the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for *the Father is seeking such people to worship him*" (John 4:23).

Did you see it? God the Father is seeking, he is on the hunt, he is looking everywhere for people to worship him.

I believe the most helpful and instructive way for us to understand this remarkable passage of Scripture is by listening to C. S. Lewis and the struggle he had with it. I say "struggle," but it was more than that. It was biblical texts like this that almost drove Lewis back into atheism and came close to destroying his Christian faith. Let me explain.

C. S. Lewis's Most Life-Changing Discovery

C. S. Lewis was voted by evangelicals in America as the single most influential Christian of the 20th century. If you are wondering why he was known only by his initials, it is probably because C. S. stands for Clive Staples. If you were named Clive Staples, I suspect you'd go by C. S. yourself!

Lewis was born in 1898 in Belfast, Ireland. His death was hardly noticed by many, because he died on the same day that President John Kennedy was assassinated: November 22, 1963. His mother died when he was nine years old and his father never remarried. Lewis attended four different boarding schools before being admitted to Oxford University. However, before going to Oxford he joined the British Army to serve in World War I. In February of 1918, he was wounded in France and returned to England to recover. It was then that he began his studies at Oxford.

Over the next six years he was awarded three First Class Honors in classics, humanities, and English literature. He became a teaching fellow at Oxford in October, 1925, at the age of twenty-six. After a long personal and intellectual struggle, he professed faith in Christ as his Savior six years later, in 1931. After thirty years at Oxford, in 1955, he became professor in Medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge University. Lewis was not quite 65 years old when he died. Lewis is probably known most for his books, *Mere Christianity*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

The reason I've taken time to tell you a little of Lewis's life story is because it was this statement by Jesus in John 4:23 and others like it, especially in the Psalms, that almost destroyed Lewis's faith. He had come out of atheism into theism and eventually to faith in Jesus as Lord. But he was deeply troubled and even angry with what he saw in Scripture as a less than flattering portrayal of God.

What kind of God is it, Lewis asked himself, that would go about trying to find people to worship him? "What are you doing, God?" we might ask of him. "Well, I'm on the hunt, I'm on the lookout for people who will tell me how great I am. And I especially want them to tell everyone else how great I am."

Lewis was more than puzzled by this. He was agitated and deeply offended. It is one thing, said Lewis, that Christians tell other people to worship God. What made it even worse is that **God himself called for praise of God himself**. This was almost more than Lewis could stomach. What kind of "God" is it who incessantly demands that his people tell him how wonderful he is?

Lewis describes his struggle and how he worked through it in an extraordinary passage from the essay, "The Problem of Praise in the Psalms" (found in *Reflections on the Psalms* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958], pp. 90-98). Although I'm not widely read in Lewis, of what I have read this is undoubtedly the most important thing he ever wrote. I want you to hear it for yourself.

"We all despise the man who demands continued assurance of his own virtue, intelligence or delightfulness; we despise still more the crowd of people round every dictator, every millionaire, every celebrity, who gratify that demand. Thus a picture, at once ludicrous and horrible, both of God and His worshippers, threatened to appear in my mind. The Psalms were especially troublesome in this way – 'Praise the Lord,' 'O praise the Lord with me,' 'Praise Him.' . . . Worse still was the statement put into God's own mouth, 'whoso offereth me thanks and praise, he honoureth me' (50:23). It was hideously like saying, 'What I most want is to be told that I am good and great.' . . . It was extremely distressing. It made one think what one least wanted to think. Gratitude to God, reverence to Him, obedience to Him, I thought I could understand; not this perpetual eulogy. . . ."

I suspect this strikes us as problematic, as it did Lewis, because we want to think that God is preeminently concerned with us, not himself. **We want a God who is man-centered, not God-centered**. Worse still, we can't fathom how God could possibly love us the way we think he should if he is so unapologetically obsessed with the praise and glory of his own name. How can God love ME if all his infinite energy is expended in the love of HIMSELF? Part of Lewis's problem, as he himself confesses, was that he did not see that,

"it is in the process of being worshipped that God communicates His presence to men. It is not of course the only way. But for many people at many times the 'fair beauty of the Lord' is revealed chiefly or only while they worship Him together. Even in Judaism the essence of the sacrifice was not really that men gave bulls and goats to God, but that by their so doing God gave Himself to men; in the central act of our own worship

of course this is far clearer – there it is manifestly, even physically, God who gives and we who receive. The miserable idea that God should in any sense need, or crave for, our worship like a vain woman wanting compliments, or a vain author presenting his new books to people who never met or heard him, is implicitly answered by the words, 'If I be hungry I will not tell *thee*' (50:12). Even if such an absurd Deity could be conceived, He would hardly come to *us*, the lowest of rational creatures, to gratify His appetite. I don't want my dog to bark approval of my books."

Lewis is addressing, somewhat indirectly, the question: How, or better yet, why do you worship a God who needs nothing? If God is altogether self-sufficient and cannot be served by human hands as if he needed anything (Acts 17:24-25; Romans 11:33-36), least of all glory, why does he command our worship and praise of him? Lewis continues.

"But the most obvious fact about praise – whether of God or anything – strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honour. I had never noticed that ***all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise*** unless . . . shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise – lovers praising their mistresses [Romeo praising Juliet and vice versa], readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game – praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. . . . Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible. . . . I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: 'Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?' The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value."

What Lewis is touching on here is ***how the love of God for sinners like you and me is ultimately made manifest***. God desires our greatest good. But what greater good is there in the universe than God himself? So, if God is truly to love us, he must give us himself. But merely giving us of himself is only the first step in the expression of his affection for sinners. He must work to elicit from our hearts rapturous praise and superlative delight because, as Lewis said, ***"all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise."*** That's the way God made us. We can't help but praise and rejoice in what we most enjoy. The enjoyment itself is stunted and hindered if it is never expressed in joyful celebration. Here's how Lewis explained it.

"I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because ***the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation***. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. ["I just have to tell you how beautiful you are. I can't keep it in any longer. I'm about to explode. You are the most wonderful person I've ever seen or met, and I love you!"] It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly, at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with. . . .

If it were possible for a created soul fully . . . to 'appreciate', that is to love and delight in, the worthiest object of all, and simultaneously at every moment to give this delight perfect expression, then that soul would be in supreme beatitude. . . . To see what the doctrine really means, we must suppose ourselves to be in perfect love with God – drunk with, drowned in, dissolved by, that delight which, far from remaining pent up within ourselves as incommunicable, hence hardly tolerable, bliss, flows out from us incessantly again in effortless and perfect expression, our joy is no more separable from the praise in which it liberates and utters itself than the brightness a mirror receives is separable from the brightness it sheds. The Scotch catechism says that man's chief end is 'to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.' But we shall then know that these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him."

Let me summarize.

God's pursuit of your praise of him is not weak self-seeking but the epitome of self-giving love! If your satisfaction in God is incomplete until expressed in praise of him for satisfying you with himself (note well: with HIMSELF, not his gifts or blessings, but the intrinsic beauty and splendor of God as God), then God's effort to elicit your worship (what Lewis before thought was inexcusable selfishness) is both the most loving thing he could possibly do for you and the most glorifying thing he could possibly do for himself. For in our gladness in him (not his gifts) is his glory in us. Or as John Piper has most famously said, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him."

If that was hard to digest, try this.

If God is to love my wife, Ann, optimally, in the most superlative way possible, he must bestow or impart to her the best gift he has, the greatest prize, the most precious treasure, the most exalted and worthy thing within his power to give. That gift, of course, is himself. *Is there anything better than God that God can give her?* No. Nothing in the universe is as beautiful and captivating and satisfying as God!

It isn't enough that God gives to Ann a Snickers when she's hungry or good health instead of disease or a new car when the old one breaks down. This isn't to say these things aren't wonderful. Of course they are. But they pale in comparison with God himself.

So, if God loves her, he will give himself to her and then work in her soul to awaken her to his beauty and all-sufficiency. In other words, he will strive by all manner and means to intensify and expand and enlarge her joy in him. All of which is to say, and I owe this thought to John Piper, that God's love for Ann is seen not in him making much of her, but in him graciously enabling her to enjoy making much of him forever.

So God comes to Ann in the person of Jesus Christ and says: "Here I am in all my glory. Look at me. Behold me. Study me. See me. Explore me. I am incomparable, infinite, immeasurable, and unsurpassed. So, be satisfied with me! Enjoy me! Celebrate who I am! Experience the height and depth and width and breadth of savoring and relishing me!"

Does that sound like God pursuing his own glory? Yes. But it also sounds like God loving my wife perfectly and passionately. *The only way it is not real love is if there is something for Ann better than God: something more beautiful than God that he can show her, something more pleasing and satisfying than God with which he can fill her heart, something more glorious and majestic than God with which she can occupy herself for eternity.* But there is no such thing! Anywhere! Ever!

If I stood on this platform week after week and said to you: "Bridgeway, men and women, young and old, my aim in all that I do is to get you to tell me and everyone else how unbelievably great and good and glorious I am. So come on. Praise me. Adore me. Spread the fame of Sam Storms far and wide. Tell others what they are missing by not being here. Explain to them all of my attributes and personality traits and be sure you convince them that no one can compare with me."

If I did that, at minimum you should get up and walk out and never return. Perhaps even better, you should openly rebuke me, mock me, laugh at me, and then do whatever you could to get me institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital as an incurable egomaniac, a megalomaniac of the worst possible sort. If you're not familiar with the word "*megalomania*", the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "delusion about one's own power or importance" (889).

So, if that is how you should treat me should I dare to make such claims for myself, how does God escape the same judgment? Why he does he get off the hook? *Why don't we mock him as a colossal megalomaniac?* Why shouldn't God be vilified and rejected? Why shouldn't we take offense at him in the same way you would take offense at me?

The reason is simple. I'm not God. He is. I'm not perfect. But he is. I'm not glorious or the most adorable being in the universe. But he is. I'm not the most valuable treasure in all the world. But he is. I'm not infinite in knowledge. He is. I'm not all powerful. He is. There are countless individuals more virtuous than me. But none are more virtuous than God. I cannot satisfy your soul beyond anything else in life. But he can. If you focus on me and what I can do for you, you will end up empty and deeply unsatisfied, just like the Samaritan woman at the well. But if you focus on God and all that he is for us in Jesus, you will never again thirst or go spiritually hungry or lack for the joy that your soul most deeply desires.

Do you see the difference? Do you now see why God can, indeed, why God *must* seek his own glory and praise and adoration and can do so as an act of supreme love rather than an act of selfishness and lunacy?

Perhaps another way of making the same point is to ask this question: What is the pre-eminent passion in God's heart? What is God's greatest pleasure? How does the happiness of God manifest itself? In what does God take supreme delight? *I want to suggest that the pre-eminent passion in God's heart is his own glory. God is at the center of his own affections. The supreme love of God's life is God. God is pre-eminently committed to the fame of his name. God is himself the end for which God created the world. God's immediate goal in all he does is his own glory.*

God relentlessly and unceasingly creates, rules, orders, directs, speaks, judges, saves, destroys and delivers in order to make known who he is and to secure from the whole of the universe the praise, honor and glory of which he and he alone is ultimately and infinitely worthy.

Two objections are often voiced to this assertion. First, this sounds terribly selfish and egocentric. And secondly, if God loves himself pre-eminently, how can he love me at all? How can we say that God is for us and that he desires our happiness if he is primarily for himself and his own glory? I want to argue that it is precisely *because* God loves himself that he loves you. I want to argue that it is precisely in seeking his own happiness that he seeks yours.

By making it his goal to find passionate worshipers God is loving us in the highest and best way he possibly could. What may seem to you as an act of supreme selfishness and egotistical megalomania is in fact the greatest expression of God's concern and love for you that one could ever conceive.

Are you aware of how often in Scripture we are told that everything God does he does for the sake of his own glory and praise and honor? And does that bother you, or do you see in it God's love for you and his desire to satisfy your soul in a way that no one else can? There are actually several hundred biblical texts that make this point. I'm only going to give you a handful this morning.

God's Pursuit of His Own Glory

We begin with two texts that directly speak to the purpose for all creation.

"For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, . . . all things were created through him and *for him*" (Col. 1:16).

"For from him and through him and *to him* are all things. *To him be glory forever. Amen*" (Rom. 16:36).

Or we could even put the words of these two texts in God's mouth so that it reads: "For by me all things were created. . . . All things have been created by me and for me." Again, "For from me and through me and to me are all things. To me be the glory forever. Amen."

We see this in God's relation to Israel. For example,

"Yet he saved them for his name's sake, that he might make known his mighty power" (Psalm 106:8).

"I will say to the north, 'Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar, and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made" (Isa. 43:6-7).

"For my name's sake I defer my anger; for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. . . . For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another" (Isa. 48:9,11).

"Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, [so] that I might be glorified" (Isa. 60:21).

“[The Spirit of the Lord is upon me] to grant those who mourn in Zion – to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified” (Isa. 61:3).

“But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived” (Ezek. 20:9; see vv. 14, 22; see also 36:21-23).

What is the purpose of your being predestined to be the children of God? Paul tells us:

“In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:5-6a).

Why is Jesus going to come back to this earth at the end of history?

“when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed” (2 Thess. 1:10).

Numerous texts describe the purpose of our godly conduct as the glory of God.

“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

“so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:10-11).

“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (John 17:8).

“Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Peter 2:12).

The purpose for the execution of divine judgments against the wicked and unbelieving is the glory of God.

“And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen” (Exod. 14:17; see also Exod. 28:22; 39:13).

Do you know the ultimate motivation in God’s heart for why he leads and guides throughout life?

“He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3).

“For you are my rock and my fortress; for your name’s sake you lead me and guide me” (Psalm 31:3).

Do you know why God forgives you of your sin?

“For your name’s sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great” (Psalm 25:11).

“Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name’s sake!” (Psalm 79:9; see Psalm 109:21; Jer. 14:7).

“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name’s sake” (1 John 2:12).

There are more than **65 verses in the book of Ezekiel alone** that make the point that everything God does he does in order to make known his name and to promote his glory. I trust that by now you get my point and I don’t have to cite another hundred or so texts that assert the same truth.

God’s Love for Us

The point that I have labored to make is that *if God is going to love us to the fullest, if God is going to seek our eternal happiness and welfare, he must be committed above all else to the pursuit of his own glory. He must do whatever is best suited to magnify his own name and to advertise his own glory.* That is why he is so energetic and passionate about seeking out people who will worship him in spirit and in truth.

My conclusion is that if God is going to love us, he must first love himself. The most loving thing that God can do for you is to love himself pre-eminently. ***God is the only being in the universe for whom self-love and self-seeking is the consummate expression of his love for others.***

Are you still turned off by this? Does it seem arrogant and egotistical of God to be pre-eminently concerned with his own glory? C. S. Lewis thought so, at least initially. The reason why isn't difficult to ascertain. We intuitively recoil from people who are always seeking their own glory and exploiting others to enhance their reputation or position. We value altruism and hold narrow self-seeking in contempt. And rightly so.

So, again, how does *God* escape our disdain? How can we be asked to admire God for seemingly doing what we condemn in others? The answer is in the nature of moral excellence, which demands that we value what is most valuable and honor what is most honorable. Both the Bible and common sense tell us that we must cherish what is most valuable.

God is the supremely valuable being in the universe. His majesty exceeds that of all others, his holiness is incomparable and his beauty transcendentally attractive. God is the pre-eminently worthy One and the most honorable being in existence. That is why we worship only him and ascribe all glory to his name (Exodus 20:3-4).

How could we describe God as righteous and good if he ever failed to pursue and preserve that which is supremely valuable and of greatest worth? That is why God ***must*** take ultimate delight in his own glory or he would be unrighteous. It is incumbent on everyone to take delight in a person in proportion to the excellence of that person's glory. Whose glory can compare with that of God? If God were not to delight supremely in God, he would not *be* God, or at least he would be an unrighteous one and thus unworthy of our delight.

For God to fail or refuse to value himself pre-eminently would implicate him in the sin of idolatry. Idolatry is honoring anyone or anything as god, instead of God. If God were ever to act in such a way that he did not seek his own glory he would be saying that something more valuable than himself exists, and that is a lie. Worse still, it is idolatrous. The reason it is sinful for us to seek our own glory is because there is something more valuable and important than ourselves: God. We are but creatures. For the same reason it is righteous for God to seek his own glory because nothing is more important or more worthy than God. He is the Creator.

To sum up: ***God loves himself infinitely.*** He has to! His own glory is the principal focus of all his energy and efforts. It follows from this that everything he does is designed to win praise for that glory from his people.

So, if God is going to love you, he must do two things. First, he must give himself to you. He is himself the greatest gift. Second, he must work to secure from your heart the praise of his glory. Why? Is it because he is weak and deficient and our praise of him boosts his ego? No! It is because, as C. S. Lewis discovered, our enjoyment of God is not complete until it is expressed in praise and adoration.

My point is that if God is going to love us to the fullest, he must do what Jesus said he does. He must seek people who will worship him. Therefore, if God really loves us, he must work to bring us into the enjoyment of who he is (there's our happiness) and thereby win from our hearts praise for himself (there's his glory).

Thus, ***for God to seek his own glory and for God to seek your happiness are not separate or antithetical endeavors.*** Our highest good or happiness is in the enjoyment of God. God's highest good is in being enjoyed. Thus, for God to work for your enjoyment of him (that's his love for you) and for his glory in being enjoyed (that's his love for himself) are not properly distinct. That is the gospel of Christian Hedonism.

Father, you are committed above all else to find men and women, like us, to worship and praise you, to declare your greatness above all else. Thank you, Lord. Thank you for loving us so much that you would do this for us.