

Preaching the Gospel...to Ourselves
The Gospel, Sermon 1
Isaiah 40:12, Deuteronomy 32:3-4
September 18, 2011 (Kit)

When I was a new Christian I had no emotional assurance of my salvation. I believed that Jesus died for my sins. I believed that He is God. Yet, emotionally, I had a terrible time feeling loved by God, accepted by God, liked by God. Add to that, as a new Christian, the first couple of churches I went to didn't help. They were good churches filled with Christians who were kind to me, but the teaching I was hearing there was not grace-filled.

The first was a charismatic church. The music was upbeat, the preaching inspiring, the dedication of the congregation moved me. However, so much emphasis was put on the miraculous and experiences with the Holy Spirit that were unusual that I felt even less loved by God. I tried to have miraculous experiences but they didn't come to me. This made me wonder if I was saved at all. But I couldn't walk away. God had given me the faith to believe it was all true, so how could I walk away from Jesus? But I couldn't shake this deep-down feeling that Jesus didn't truly accept me. Not being able to pull off the miraculous made me doubt even more that I was truly loved.

A year later I found myself in another church. Not that I had any problems with the first, but I had friends who invited me to a church closer to home, and they went there. I loved the preacher. He was fiery and passionate, and every week declared the gospel, forgiveness of sins. He warned of hell fire and the danger of walking away from God, and invited people every week to sell out to Jesus if they knew Him and to receive Him as Savior if they did not.

The message every Sunday was similar, encouraging non believers to come and get the free gift of salvation. But to believers, it was not so grace filled. To us, the message was, if you were really on fire for Jesus you'd do more. Also, I was told that the rock and roll music I liked, even if it was Christian, had to be set aside for it was of the devil. I learned that if a sip of alcohol crossed my lips or if I read any Bible besides the King James that I was getting off track. Nevertheless, I knew that following those rules couldn't be right, but I still felt unloved deep within.

I tried for a couple of months to follow the rules there, but soon my intellect would not allow it. I began to going to another church a year later when I moved to State College to finish my schooling. It was a good middle ground. There were young people. The music was good again, even if not quite as lively as I liked. The teachings were reasonable. But the passion was less. The way of following Jesus was to trudge away and have quiet times and do your best, and tell your friends about Jesus. I thrived in this environment. Culturally, I was home. However, deep within, I struggled greatly to feel loved and accepted by God.

God would deal with me on this issue. Years of trial would soon come, and through that fire and hardship, I would come out the other side realizing that the solution to my lack of feeling God's affection did not include me doing church or Christianity a certain way nor having religious experiences that excited my emotions. Rather, I learned that my heart would be comforted only by God moving, and I was to wait on Him.

What I can see looking back is that there are personal reasons that we all have for not feeling loved by God or for feeling loved. I can see that my faith wasn't the problem. But I can also see that I was being malnourished in all three churches I went to. You see, I was learning Christianity in all three varieties of churches I attended like this: You get saved by grace. God accepts you as you are and forgives you. He did the work on the cross, so you must turn from your sins and believe in Him, and He will come into your heart and give you His Spirit and eternal life. Of course, all of that was true.

But it was at the next step where I was malnourished. For what I learned by experience in these three churches, as a sincere believer who sought to obey all that I learned, was that now that I was saved by God's grace, I had to work hard to stay in His good graces. Of course, no one put it that way. But that is what I was taught. In the first church, I had been saved by grace, but God's favor would show itself in receiving the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, having victory in every area of life, seeing healings, etc. If this happens and I avoid sin, then I am truly walking in God's grace and He will accept me. This was the implied message. Of course, I failed and that was proof to the lie in my heart that I was not truly loved by God.

In the second church, I was saved by grace. Then to stay in the grace of God, I had to stay "on fire" for Him, witnessing to all my friends, dressing up for church, reading the Bible every day, weeping in prayer for the lost, avoiding tobacco and cigarettes, avoiding worldly people, avoid worldly music, and staying free from sin. If I would do all that, then I was in good standing with God.

In the third church, the pressure of having to do miracles was off. That was good. The pressure of not listening to rock and roll went away. Not much comment on alcohol, but best to avoid that too. Didn't have to read the King James either. But you did have to read, every day. And call it a "Quiet Time". And of course a life of prayer was necessary. And you should at least consider foreign missions as a possible vocation. And witness to your friends, but in a cool and friendly way. Culturally, this was much more comfortable, but the effect was the same. I was saved by grace, but now I live under rules; *If God is going to accept me, then my performance was a huge issue.* This left me searching for great spiritual experiences, some deeper truths, and some secret techniques for getting out of sin. I did okay in the system. I witnessed to people often enough I guess (even though I still felt guilty about not doing that enough); I struggled with the garden variety sins (but confessed those to others every once in a while), and avoided the biggies like sex outside of marriage, drinking, etc; I didn't read my Bible every day, but I read it a lot and retained the info; I even taught in a small group. That had to be worth something. Outside I looked like what is called a "strong Christian." Inside I was an emotional mess. I often heard people declare the Bible text that said, "When the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!" I believed that. I wanted that. I felt nothing like that within.

My error was that I was saved by grace, but living by Law. God has largely set me free from this. (I say largely because I don't think the tendency to judge myself on performance will ever stop being a temptation. It is the nature of my sinful flesh.) God would teach me, but not simply by showing me a Bible verse. He could have done it that way, I'm certain. He does for many. But His plan for me was different. Instead He taught me by crushing me. Perhaps that was the only way I would stop seeking to make myself acceptable by being a "good Christian."

By the way, I use the phrase “make myself acceptable” to God to describe what I was doing. Trying to make myself acceptable to God is a sin. Why? The Bible has another word for it. I was trying to “Justify” myself before God. I didn’t feel loved so I had to prove to God that I was good enough. This is sin. This is a form of unbelief. And so, I had faith that Jesus died for me. I followed Him. But at war with that was my flesh which was insulting the grace of God by demanding that I was acceptable to Him based on what I did. This is an insult to God. Why? Because all that was needed to make me acceptable to God was done by Jesus on the cross.

All that time that I felt unloved, I was loved. All that time I felt unaccepted, I was accepted. God taught me this the hard way. He brought years of great emotional suffering to me. He broke me down to the point that any attempt I could ever make to satisfy Him and make myself acceptable to Him it just looked stupid. I gave up trying. When I gave up, after years of God doing heart surgery on me, I knew I was helpless. I could do nothing but wait on Him. Would He come through? Of course, I knew He would. But when? Wait.

I waited. And He began to build me back up, but now I was confident in my weakness and that I was not acceptable based on being a strong Christian. But I was acceptable only because of Jesus. You see, what I needed to learn was that I was not just saved by the kindness of God, but that I stayed saved by the kindness of God, not by my own effort. This changed my life. Then as I went back to the Bible, the truths in it began to stand out. I could now see that the freedom was always there in front of me before, but I just couldn’t see it then.

Now, let’s talk about you. I have the job of bringing you the truths of the Scripture. I do my best. But you must receive and feed yourself. How do you think your standing before God is right now? My guess is that the vast majority in this room lives under the law. You feel not good enough. You feel condemned –either outright, or as a general mood. You hope that one day you will be a good enough Christian to truly be pleasing to God, but you know that’s not who you are now, and you are not sure you ever will be. Many of you are afraid others might see this in you. You think they all know some spiritual secret that you don’t. But they don’t. They think the same way you do.

Or you have determined that true Christian life is for holier more dedicated people than you. You are content to know God forgives you and you will fail Him all the time. You are saved by grace, but you seek to live by law. You will make yourself acceptable to God by your right doctrine or your good behavior or your avoidance of certain sins or of sinful people, or by your passionate worshiping or your regular praying or your Bible reading. But you are under the law, and Satan has you in the dark. The freedom of God is not now yours.

And the preaching you hear throughout the Christian world helps to encourage this; on the radio, in churches, on TV. The preaching of living by the law continues. One preacher tells you that if you are not reaching your neighbors with the gospel you are backsliding. Another puts a pretty face on it and says, “If you do these 7 things, God will give you your best life now!” Either way, it is still living by law, and trying to justify yourself.

One preacher by the name of Milton Vincent preached in this way for years. That is, until his own emotional turmoil led him to the end of his rope. It was then that God showed him this verse, and he saw it as if for the first time:

Romans 5:1-2 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

“Justified by faith.” He was made acceptable to God by faith through Jesus. But that was not just a one-time deal when he first got saved. Oh no. He realized that now he had obtained access by faith “into this grace in which we stand.” He saw, by the Holy Spirit’s illumination in his mind, that he stands justified right now before God. No matter how strong a Christian he had been, no matter how weak, no matter if he sinned or if he didn’t his status before God was one of being loved and accepted and justified; because of what Jesus did on the cross. This idea revolutionized his life.

“The more I read, the more I began to see something I had not seen before. As a justified one, I am under God’s gracious favor at all times because of what Jesus did! This favored standing with God has nothing to do with my performance, but only with the performance of Jesus! ...I began to see that my justification was not something to agitate over, but to exalt in, not something to wrestle for, but to rest in. I stole a glimpse into chapter 6 [of Romans] and realized that even when I sin, God’s grace abounds to me all the more as He graciously maintains my justified status....

...Indeed, I had always believed I was justified, but I guess I treated my justification as some sort of legal fiction that had little direct bearing on the mechanics of how God related to me and how I related to Him. I suppose I would have imagined God saying, “Yeah, technically you’re justified, but I’m angry with you anyway for what you did today.”

....now I realized that ...100% of the wrath I deserve for my sins was truly spent on Jesus, and there is none of God’s anger left over for me to bear, even when I fail God as a Christian...”

This realization changed Milton’s life. He found that joy returned to him. He found that victory of sin increased for sinning was no longer linked to punishment. But the power to avoid sin was the gift of a holy God who wanted joy for him. As Milton went on to describe:

I felt like a kid in a candy store. How did I not see these things before? The gospel is the craziest thing I’ve ever heard in my life. And it’s true! Released from the burden of having to maintain my righteous standing with God, I quickly found that I had enormous amounts of passion to put into growing in holiness and ministering God’s amazing grace to other people.”

Milton then determined to write out gospel’s truths in his own words, and rehearse them over and over so that he could more fully walk in grace. He wrote out 41 statements and fully supported them in Scripture. He began the habit of preaching the gospel to himself so that his mind could be transformed to the truth.

Milton took his statements and put them in a book called “the gospel primer.” For the next 5 months I will be outlining those 41 statements by preaching through the texts in the book. My hope is that God’s Holy Spirit will help you to see these truths too. My hope is that the result in your life will be joy and freedom. My hope is that chains of fear and insecurity will be broken. My hope is those who have trouble feeling loved by God will slowly or even quickly realize God’s affection. My hope is that those who struggle in the chains of habitual sins will be freed from them. My hope is that as we grow in our understanding of the gospel that we will think the gospel all the time. So today, we start with statements one and two. Because of time, I will read them both, and then move right to the scripture and comment briefly on it:

1. My God is immense beyond imagination. He measured the entire universe with merely the span of His hand.

2. He is unimaginably awesome in all of His perfections, absolutely righteous, holy, and just in all of His ways.

With these two as our starting point, let me add a couple of texts of the thousands where these truths are found:

Isaiah 40:12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?

One of the best ways I have found to beat pride in my life is to remember that no matter what I accomplish on this earth and no matter who I impress, I am but a speck of dust and a moment in time compared to God. Nothing is impossible for our God and no one can rival Him.

Men might knock down towers, or drop atom bombs that destroy cities, but our God can wipe the oceans away with a word. He built the mountains that put us in awe on the earth, while He Himself has placed trillions of stars in place, and planets to many to number, filled with mountains of their own. No matter how much your heart can object when I tell you of the great kindness of God, the answer is that He is so great that not a single sin of yours is too much for Him to handle. No small concern of yours is too small for Him to see.

Deuteronomy 32:3 For I will proclaim the name of the LORD; ascribe greatness to our God! 4 "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.

The habit of proclaiming the name of God, the greatness of God, to other men and to ourselves, this is the habit of righteous men and women from the very beginning. He is holy and all His ways are right. No man can judge Him. He is faithful and without any sin. He is the Rock that cannot be moved. He is perfect in all His ways. This week, rehearse these two truths. And think on the greatness and holiness of your God. But if you don’t do this, His love for you will not waver! The greatest act of love we have ever seen was the death of Jesus on the cross for our sins, and His raising from the dead for our salvation. Forgiveness of sins is free, eternal life is a gift. Believe, rejoice, and let us praise Him together.