

April 19, 2009

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

## *Rehearsing the Good of the Gospel – 2*

Ephesians 2:13-22

*Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands, remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.* Ephesians 2:11-13 On the basis of the mercy and love of God that saved us; on the basis of the grace that reached down and rescued us; on the basis of being seated with Christ in the heavenlies; on the basis that God's intention is to show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus throughout all the ages; and on the basis that we could do nothing to earn or merit this kindness –

**'Therefore remember!'**

**Essentially what Paul thinks is important for us as Christians to remember and rehearse is our wretched condition without Christ and the joy and delight and freedom we enjoy now in Christ.** What Paul is calling us to rehearse is the gospel. 'Remember the gospel – rehearse the good of the gospel – keep calling it back to mind'. We need to understand that we will never grow beyond the gospel – because the gospel is the power of God unto salvation – and we needed salvation from the penalty of sin being justified by faith – we need salvation from the power of sin being saved day by day – and one day we will be saved from the presence of sin with a new body when we see Jesus.

My ambition in presenting the truth of the word of God to you week after week is **to awaken those who are dead to the things of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ; and to encourage those who have been awakened to live in the good of the gospel daily.** I believe this is what Paul is telling the saints – **'Rehearse the good of the gospel – this will intensify your affections toward Christ and deepen your devotion to Him'**. In most of Paul's letters to the churches and individuals, huge chunks of them are devoted to rehearsing gospel truth. First, Paul declares the gospel and then shows how to bring the gospel truth to bear on all our living. **The gospel is our daily need, our daily protection, our daily sufficiency, our daily motivation toward holiness, and our daily stimulation to good works.**

And so Paul says, **'Therefore remember this – rehearse this' and he gives five descriptive statements of our condition without Christ:** separated, alienated, strangers, having no hope, without God. Rehearsing the good of the gospel in this way, keeps us from self-righteousness and pride. It helps us to cherish and value forgiveness that much more and causes our love for Christ to grow. 'He who is forgiven little, loves little – He who is forgiven much, loves much.' It also destroys the cult of denial and self-justification and teaches us to exult in the sovereignty of God in salvation and hate our sin. The gospel goodness here tells us that the incredible joy of our salvation ought to be matched only by the intensity of loathing for our sin. ***Until sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.***

And then Paul begins to describe our new condition in Christ: **brought near to God.** *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.* Ephesians 2:13 Our condition before Christ was that we were far from God. We never thought about Him much – we never considered Him in our decisions – He played no role in the way we lived our lives – He may have entered our consciousness only when we were in trouble or needed some kind of help – and then we hoped He'd go away quietly when the crisis was over. We were far from God. In his book, ***Bruchko***, Bruce Olsen describes a scene he happened upon in the jungles of Columbia one day. He describes seeing two Motilone natives – one of whom had dug a huge hole in the ground, and the other, perched high up in a tall tree – both of them calling out and looking for God. They didn't know where He was but they knew that they were far from Him.

And what brings those who are far off from God, near to Him, is the blood of His Son. What this indicates is that our estrangement from God that left us far from Him was on account of our sin. Sin and God cannot occupy the same space – sin gets blasted, and that means we would be blasted. One of the reasons God drove Adam and Eve out of the garden was that if they had remained they would have been destroyed. But in His mercy, God sent them far away from Him so that they might be brought near again through the blood of Christ.

**Separation is at the root of sin:** separation from God, and separation from others. But in pouring out His life blood for us, Christ removed our sin: *'...for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'* Matthew 26:28; and by doing so removed our separation from God: *'Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus'*. Hebrews 10:19 **The gospel goodness we are to rehearse and remember is that through the blood of Christ we, who once were far off, having no hope and without God in the world, have now been brought near to God. Communion and fellowship with our God is restored.**

The blood of Christ brought us near to God and His sacrifice brought us **peace with one another.** *For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.* Ephesians 2:14-16

Here Paul paints a picture for his readers of a scene many of them were very familiar with – the Temple. The Temple in Jerusalem was built with the view toward the holiness of God, with increasing levels of separation as you entered. First of all you would come to the outer court, called the Court of the Gentiles where anyone could come, particularly Gentiles. But Gentiles were excluded from entering into any of the inner courts, and warning signs in Greek and Latin were placed that gave warning that the penalty for such trespass was death. The Romans permitted the Jewish authorities to carry out the death penalty for this offence, even if the offender were a Roman citizen. It was for this alleged crime that Paul was attacked and nearly beaten to death by an angry crowd during his last visit to Jerusalem described in Acts 21:27-32.

And that low wall, with the death warnings on it, that separated the court of the Gentiles from the rest of the Temple was called the **middle wall of partition**. Here Paul calls it the **dividing wall of hostility**. It was a wall that symbolized the centuries-long mutual hostility between Jews and Gentiles. But Paul says that Christ, in His flesh, broke down that wall of hostility. That is, on the cross, the middle wall of partition consisting of all those ceremonial rituals and laws that kept the Jews separate from Gentiles and generated hostility, was done away with. The evidence for this is that when Christ died on the cross, the Bible says that there was an earthquake and the great veil in the Temple that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple was torn in two – and I can imagine that in keeping with symbolic nature of things – the middle wall of partition suffered some damage.

**Christ's death on the cross abolished all those ceremonial rituals and laws because it fulfilled all the truths that those rituals and ceremonies depicted.** There was no more need for the ritual slaughtering of lambs because the Lamb of God had been sacrificed. There was no need for just one man, on one day, year after year, to offer atonement for the sins of Israel because Christ did it once for all. **He Himself is our peace.**

Christ's death on the cross not only broke down the wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile, but Paul says He died on the cross so: *that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.* The best way to remove hostility and bring peace between people groups is to remove the distinctions between them and give them brand new distinctives. **One effect of the cross of Christ was to create a whole new race of people** where *'...there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* Galatians 3:28 Someone once suggested that in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, the Pharisee was probably repeating the familiar Jewish prayer: **"God, I thank you that I was not born a Gentile, but a Jew: not a slave, but a free man: not a woman, but a man."** And when Paul wrote, "In Christ there is neither male nor female" he was deliberately contradicting each phrase of the prayer which he had been taught to pray in his childhood.

Philip Yancy tells about one Indian pastor who clarified what made Christianity distinctive and unique in his country: ***'Most of what happens in Christian churches, including even miracles, can be duplicated in Hindu and Muslim congregations. But in my area only Christians strive, however ineptly, to mix men and women of different castes, races, and social groups. That's the real miracle.'*** It is a miracle because it is supernatural. A natural man makes social and racial distinctions – but a spiritual man recognizes none of them. Christ went to the cross so that He *'...might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.'* What needed to happen for peace to break out was death. The hostility had to be killed – not covered over – not massaged – not compromised with – but killed – and the cross was the best instrument for that. **We have been reconciled to God and one another through the cross.**

I think there are two main implications of gospel goodness here. **The first is that Christ who made us one by virtue of His death on the cross intends that there would be no social or racial distinctions in the church.** It is a shame to the Son of God that we would make decisions about who we worshipped with or who could be members in our churches based on social or racial distinctions. I heard about a black man who tried to attend a church near his home. Incredibly, the church wouldn't even let him attend a service. The pastor told him, 'You just need to pray about it.' About three weeks later the pastor saw him and asked, 'Did you talk to the Lord about it?' The man said, 'Yes, and God said, *'Don't worry, I've been trying to get into that church for 20 years and I still can't get in.'* Remember this – rehearse this: that Christ died to reconcile us to God and to one another. Rehearse this – Christ died to take hostility and anger and jealousy and fear and hatred and malice away from you toward all who are His.

If the design of the death of God's Son on the cross was not only to reconcile us to God but to reconcile alienated social and racial groups to each other in Christ – then would we not magnify and glorify Him better by a wider display of ethnic and racial and social diversity and harmony in our churches? If Christ died for this – to reconcile Jew and Gentile in one body as a display of His glory – do we not diminish and trivialize and even blaspheme His sacrifice when we harbor racial and social resentments in the church? **The more we rehearse the good of the gospel in this truth, the more we will develop a deep affection and love for all those in the church** – red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight. We love one another not only *because of the gospel*, but we love them best when we are loving them *with the gospel*.

**The second implication of this gospel goodness is that real peace only comes through Christ.** World peace will only be a reality in Christ. *For He Himself is our peace.* Peace is not merely an idea – peace is a person. If you have the person – you have peace. The closer we are to Christ, the more peace we experience. We have wars and conflicts and arguments precisely because we find ourselves far from God. You have all seen that little bumper sticker: No Jesus – No Peace. Know Jesus – Know Peace. Where there are no other factors between us, no regulations, no legalities imposed on us – only Christ; then there is peace. *And He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.* Ephesians 2:17

*For through Him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.* Ephesians 2:18 The Greek word here for access is *prosagoge* which is a technical term for the right of free approach into the presence of a king. In the Persian royal court, there was an official called the *prosegogeus* whose job it was to introduce people who desired an audience with the king. And here Paul deliberately paints this picture for his readers that Christ is the access point, the *prosegogeus* to the Father.

This is crucial to rehearse and remember because we are so prone to despair and then wilt under the accusations of the enemy of our soul that we are not worthy to come to God – we've been too bad – we're too rebellious – and a thousand other reasons we cannot approach Him. When we find ourselves in that place we need to preach the gospel to ourselves and say 'Self – Christ died for me so that I could come to God – His blood was shed to make a way for me – Self – stop your whining and pity party and follow me into the throne room of the King.' On the cross, Christ opened the door – in fact He nailed it open so that it could not be shut again – and through Christ we have access to the Father – open and free.

We need to remember that it is not our righteousness but His that clothes us and gains us admittance into the arms of the Father. Luke 15 tells the story of the son who wasted his life in reckless living, but one day, as he was living with the pigs, he came to his senses and said to himself, *'...I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.* And his Father didn't give him a lecture on sin and its consequences but rather the Scripture says that *'...while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.* I think it is significant that he did this even before the son could make his confession.

Then his father called for a robe and ring and sandals to be brought to dress his son and threw a party. The son's idea was that he would work to atone for his misdeeds – but the father's idea was that a hired servant could never be a beloved son. Acceptance by God is never earned but rather given. The gospel reminds us that **our righteous standing before our heavenly Father always remains firm regardless of our performance**, because our standing is based on the work of Christ, not on ours. On our worst days of sin and failure, the gospel encourages us with God's unrelenting grace toward us. On our best days of victory and overcoming, the gospel also humbles us with the truth that our victory is Christ's triumph and not ours.

*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,* Ephesians 2:19 A stranger here means a foreigner; an alien here meant a resident alien. In theory it was possible for a Gentile to become a naturalized member of the Jewish state by adopting the Jewish religion – but in practice his birth was always held against him. He was never quite accepted as a full son of Abraham. But the gospel truth here works to heal this issue – no longer strangers and aliens but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

When God saved us He made us citizens of heaven with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities that go with citizenship. **Our rehearsing of the gospel truth that we are citizens of heaven will impact the way we live here on earth. "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next."** C.S. Lewis He also made us members of His household which means we are not hired servants trying to earn His good favor, but sons and daughters of God with all the special connections that implies. Taken together, fellow citizens and members of the household of God imply that each believer is a significant player in each other's gospel story and it is in our relationship with one another that we experience the fulness of God in Christ. **So the more we rehearse these truths, the more we value and cherish the church for which Christ died.**

Rehearsing the good of the gospel day by day will keep us in the good of the gospel and will profoundly impact our lives in the way we live, the way we act, the way we think and the way we speak. My challenge to you and myself this morning is to make a habit and discipline out of rehearsing the good of the gospel daily. **I believe that we will find that as we do this our love for Christ and one another will grow, our loathing and rejection of sin will increase, our usefulness in the kingdom will multiply and our love for the lost will enlarge.**

*Our gracious Father and blessed Redeemer,*

*Grant that we would remember and rehearse the good of the gospel daily. Teach us to treasure this mighty blessing and to surrender every darling lust and sinful desire to its command. May the gospel goodness impact our souls to control our affections, mold our understanding and fill us with joy. May we never lose sight of the exceeding awfulness of sin; the exceeding wonder of Your forgiveness; the exceeding love of Christ; and the exceeding power of the gospel in our lives. Awaken those still dead in trespasses and sins to the beauty and glory of the gospel and cause them to delight in God through Jesus Christ we pray in the precious, life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

***May the Lord bless you and keep you  
and make His face shine upon you.  
May the Lord be gracious unto you;  
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you  
and give you peace.***