

April 5, 2009

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Rehearsing the Good of the Gospel

Ephesians 2:11 – 16

We saw last week that we *'...we are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* That means, I think, at the very least, that all of our working, all of our living, all of our ambition and drive would be directed heavenward. It means that men should see our good works and glorify God. It also means that because our hearts are in heaven our ambition on earth is to please God and not ourselves. It means as well that apart from faith in Christ, there is no rational or understandable explanation for our lives. And it means that we spend our lives in the pursuit of God. And I think that it means lives over which can be written - **"No reserves" "No retreats," "No regrets."** as we saw in the short but brilliant life of William Borden.

'Therefore remember' Paul says in verse 11: **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.** Ephesians 2:11-12 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!'**

The grammatical construction of this command is a present imperative and could be translated as **'keep on remembering'**. Or **keep on rehearsing**. Evidently Paul thought it was very important to keep on rehearsing something because he emphasizes it in verse 12 by saying **'Remember'** again. And what are we to 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.** In his book, *The Cross Centered Life*, (which by the way is available out on the booktable) C. J. Mahaney wrote: **'The gospel isn't one class among many that you'll attend during your life as a Christian – the gospel is the whole building that all the classes take place in! Rightly approached, all the topics you'll study and focus on as a believer will be offered to you 'withing the walls' of the glorious gospel.'** Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15: 1-2a: **Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved...'**

Essentially the gospel tent of Jesus Christ houses the whole of Christian living. We receive the gospel – when the word of God lands on our souls and invades our minds and we embrace the gospel and trust Christ – we've received it. And then we live by standing in the gospel – embracing and agreeing with the truth that it presents about how we ought to live as those who have received it – letting it convict and change us. And we are being saved as we daily rehearse the good of the gospel and meditate on the truth and let it saturate our thinking and transform our lives.

I believe this is what Paul is telling the saints – **'Rehearse the good of the gospel – this will intensify your affections toward Him and deepen your devotion to Christ'**. In most of Paul's letters to the churches and individuals, huge chunks of them are devoted to rehearsing gospel truth. In his letters, 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**. And then he gives us five descriptions concerning our new condition in Christ: **brought near, at peace with God and men, free from the penalty of the law, reconciled to God, one new man**. I suppose if it were left up to us we would just jump from verse 10 to verse 13. What is the value of remembering our former condition? What is the point of rehearsing the fact that before Christ we were separated, alienated, strangers, having no hope and without God? That seems to be a recipe for depression, not joy. But Paul says 'Remember this – rehearse this' and so we will take a look at the first five of these to see **the gospel good that flows from them**.

Our condition before Christ was one of separation. 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 Ephesians 2:11-12a There are only two kinds of people in the world – Jews and Gentiles. The Jews are the chosen people of God – the Gentiles are everyone else. Before Christ we were Gentiles. As a sign of their being chosen, the Jewish males are all circumcised – **made in the flesh by hands** – Paul says, emphasizing the fact that he is talking about the distinction between natural Israel and everyone else. But he links that right away to their spiritual condition – uncircumcised, separated from Christ, but in the mercy and grace of God, by grace through faith in Christ, believing Gentiles are now made part of the people of God.

We need to understand that salvation is of the Jews as Jesus teaches in John 4:22. That means that if I am to have any hope of being saved, I have to become a Jew. There is no salvation outside of true Israel. Redemptive history is not divided into two different salvation stories – one for the Jew and one for the Gentile. Paul expands on this mystery further in chapter 3 when he says: **This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel**. Ephesians 3:6 And he tells us in Galatians: **And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise**. Galatians 3:29 These and many other passages tell us that **real Jews, the genuine people of God, are those who have trusted Christ. God's plan was always to save His own people – and the good of the gospel tells us that when we trust Christ we gain all that God has for those who are His**.

Our rehearsal of this reminds us that we were once separated from all the glorious good that God has in store for His people, and not only separated but alienated: Remember that you were **alienated from the commonwealth of Israel** Ephesians 2:12b What this means is that as Gentiles we had none of the blessings of citizenship enjoyed by the people of God. We were aliens – not even green-card aliens – and Paul says, 'Remember this – rehearse the fact that before Christ you could not share in the blessing of heavenly citizenship and **savor the good of the gospel that ended that alienation**.

Remember too that you were **strangers to the covenants of promise** Ephesians 2:12c Before Christ **you could expect to enjoy none of the promises made to Abraham and his seed**. Being separated from God, alienated from heavenly citizenship, and strangers to the covenants of promise meant that we could not claim any of the promises of God, least of all the great promise of a Savior. Until God in His mercy made us alive with Christ our condition was dire. In fact we were without hope: Remember your condition of **having no hope** Ephesians 2:12d We had no hope of heaven, no hope that life had any meaning, no hope that anything would work out, no hope of life after death – but rather a sense of hopelessness and impending doom.

Remember too that you were **without God in the world** Ephesians 2:12e To be without God in the world means that instead of God being for us – God was against us. God told Abraham, and therefore the promise is to his true descendents: **And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you ...and I will be their God**. Genesis 17:7-8 And when God says this, 'I will be your God' **He means that He will be for them and not against them – that they are the beneficiaries of all that He can give**. If He is our God then justification is ours, salvation is ours, joy is ours – all the promises of God are ours in Christ.

But if we are without God in the world then none of His blessings are ours – and **God is not only not for us – He is against us**. When Paul says 'Remember you were without God in the world' he means remember that apart from the mercy of God we could not expect justification but rather condemnation; there was no hope of eternal life but a certain expectation of eternal damnation. We were storing up wrath for ourselves on the day of judgment, as the Scripture says in Romans, and apart from the free and unmerited mercy of Christ we would go away into eternal punishment as Jesus told us in Matthew. **Remember this – rehearse the truth that God was once against us and the good news that God is now for us**.

So what is the good in rehearsing our separation from God, our alienation from the commonwealth of Israel, our estrangement from the promises of God, our hopeless condition and the fact that we were without God in the world? I think there are many, but I see five the main reasons it is good for us to rehearse these things. **The first is that it keeps us from self-righteousness and pride.** If in our rehearsing these things the mercy of God does not stagger us and take our breath away – then I am not sure we have truly been converted. If our minds do not shudder at the thought of eternal separation and alienation and estrangement from God, then I do not think we truly understand our condition apart from Christ.

The second reason is that I believe such a rehearsal helps us to cherish and value forgiveness that much more. One of the reasons people find it hard to forgive others is that they have not savored the mercy of their own forgiveness by Christ. The word says that we are to forgive others as Christ forgave us – and if we have no deep appreciation of our wretched condition when we were forgiven – then we cannot understand how to forgive like Christ forgave us.

The third reason to rehearse is that it causes our love for Christ to grow. When Jesus was eating at Simon the Pharisee's house, a prostitute came in and upset all of Simon's dinner plans: *And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.* Luke 7:37-38 This got Simon all indignant and self-righteous and so Jesus told him a story to teach him a lesson: *A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?* Luke 7:41-42 And Simon, who was no dummy, said of course the one who owed the most and Jesus said, **'Exactly – and that is why this prostitute was moved to tears and you weren't – He who is forgiven little, loves little – He who is forgiven much, loves much.'** If we truly understood how much we've been forgiven, words of affection for Christ would not be hard to come by. It is not possible to love Christ with a white-hot devotion if we do not remember our plight without Him.

The fourth reason is that it destroys the cult of denial and self-justification. We see this played out in our society today. The refusal of men to accept the concept of original sin has created a mentality of 'It's not my fault'. We have bought into the lie that somebody or something else is always to blame for the problems in our lives. We hear in the multitude of personal injury lawsuits and criminal defense cases that clog our courts, the echoes of Eden as Adam, confronted with his sin by God blamed it on the woman and she blamed it on the snake. We cannot take responsibility for our own actions because we have lost the sense of ownership of our sin. Criminals are excused because their childhood was bad and companies are sued because a customer spilled coffee on themselves. I don't know if you realize this, but Zacharias Moussaoui, one of the leaders of the 9/11 attack on America, was sentenced to life in prison, instead of death for helping to kill 3,000 people, because the jurors noted that Moussaoui had a troubled childhood. Rehearsing the truth of our condition without Christ, will destroy the cult of denial and self-justification, and will cause us to embrace our salvation with joy.

The fifth reason to rehearse these things is that it teaches us to exult in the sovereignty of God in salvation and hate our sin. In Ezekiel we read of the sovereignty of God in salvation together with the rehearsing of our sin that gives us a deep sense of both joy and sorrow. *And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the country that I swore to give to your fathers. And there you shall remember your ways and all your deeds with which you have defiled yourselves, and you shall loathe yourselves for all the evils that you have committed. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I deal with you for My name's sake, not according to your evil ways, nor according to your corrupt deeds, O house of Israel, declares the Lord God.* Ezekiel 20:42-44 **The gospel goodness here tell us that the incredible joy of our salvation ought to be matched only by the intensity of loathing for our sin.** Do you know the unbelievable joy and gladness of forgiveness and acceptance mingled with the utter shame and loathing of your sin? It is that shame and hatred of sin that make the joy of salvation and the granting of forgiveness so sweet. **Until sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.**

As we celebrate communion this morning – rehearse the good of the gospel that makes sinners into saints. Allow that remembering to squelch any sense of self-righteousness and pride; let it cause you to cherish and value the forgiveness of your sin through Christ's death on the cross; permit the magnitude of Christ's forgiveness move you to tears and cause your love for Him to grow; allow it to destroy the cult of denial and self-justification and help you embrace your salvation with joy; and let the rehearsal of sovereignty of God in salvation inspire a deep hatred for sin and a joyful exultation of a great Savior.

As John Newton said near the end of his life: **"My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour."** Let verse 13 of this chapter fly as a banner over the Lord's Table this morning: **But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.** Ephesians 2:13 Let's rehearse the good of the gospel in the Body and Blood of Christ.

Our gracious Father and blessed Redeemer,

Grant that we would remember and rehearse the good of the gospel daily. Give us a deeper repentance, a horror of sin, a dread of its approach. Let the remembrance and loathing of our sin help us to savor the sweetness and glory of our salvation. May we cherish Your mercy with unbounded gratitude as we rehearse our former separation alienation and estrangement from Christ. Let the remembrance of being without hope and without God in the world cause our souls to rejoice with unspeakable joy at the greatness of Your grace. Help us to fathom the extent of our forgiveness so that our love for You might be all that much more. 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.***