

March 22, 2009

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

But God...

Ephesians 2:1 – 7

If I came to you this morning and said, 'I have good news for you. I have just discovered a complete cure for the cancer that is killing you. It is a guaranteed cure that will let you live a long and happy life. The cure is expensive, about \$1,000,000, but it will completely cure you of your cancer. And by the way, you don't have to foot the bill. A generous donor has already paid for the cure. All you have to do is take it.' You would probably look at me and say something like, 'What are you talking about? I'm not sick – I don't have cancer. That isn't good news – good news would be that you were giving me \$1,000,000. No thanks, I don't need it.'

If you are under the impression that there is nothing wrong with you – my offer of a cure seems not only mis-guided but foolish. You don't think you need the cure because you're convinced you're not sick. That is exactly the situation we find ourselves in with respect to unbelievers, and with many professing Christians. The free gift offer of the gospel is not understood, much less appreciated by those who have no sense that they are dying. The popular gospel is one that promises to lift despair, mend broken hearts and heal broken relationships or reform morally corrupt people. The gospel does all that and more. But the gospel of Jesus Christ is not about making bad men better, or making life more comfortable or restoring relationships, or helping you feel better about yourself – **the gospel of Jesus Christ is about calling sinners to repentance and glad worship of God's glory in Christ.**

I think one fundamental problem in our churches today is that the gospel message that many have bought into and one that has been preached to a large majority of Christians is a message of reform and not repentance. **It is one that has reduced the doctrine of sin to the declaration of error.** That is, sin is simply a mistake, an error in judgment, a mis-step on the road of life. All we need to do is correct the error and all will be well. The assumption behind that thought is that we are not really as bad as all that – there is some spark of goodness deep down in our soul and if we can just fan that spark into a flame – we'll be alright. The only problem is that gospel never touches the core problem with us – and we end up with people in our churches who may think they are Christians but have never really left the road to hell, and leaves unbelievers who are not experiencing crisis or hopelessness or need in their lives thinking they don't need to find a cure.

John McArthur, in his book, *The Vanishing Conscience: Drawing the Line in a No-Fault, Guilt-Free World* wrote: ***Christians are rapidly losing sight of sin as the root of all human woes. And many Christians are explicitly denying that their own sin can be the cause of their personal anguish. More and more, are attempting to explain the human dilemma in wholly unbiblical terms: temperament, addiction, dysfunctional families, the child within, co-dependency, and a host of the irresponsible escape mechanisms promoted by secular psychology. The potential impact of such a drift is frightening. Remove the reality of sin, and you take away the possibility of repentance. Abolish the doctrine of human depravity, and you void the divine plan of salvation. Erase the notion of personal guilt and you eliminate the need for a Savior.***

The lack of understanding of the depth of our depravity, is manifested equally in a lack of joy and delight in Christ because He is seen merely as someone to help make our lives more fulfilling and comfortable. He is not valued and treasured as Savior and Lord and Master in our lives because He has been reduced to the heavenly butler. We do not cherish Him because we do not think we are all that bad. **Until we appreciate the utter awfulness of our situation, we cannot appropriate the joy of our salvation.** Or as Thomas Watson, that great Puritan pastor put it: ***Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.***

This morning, I am trusting the Holy Spirit to give us all a deep sense of the bitterness of sin and the deeper sense of delight in our Savior. I think that was precisely what Paul was trying to do in this passage. Paul never got away from the revelation that he was a sinner saved by grace. We think of Paul as that great New Testament saint – but he said of himself: ***It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.*** 1 Timothy 1:15 If we cannot echo that statement, we do not understand the depth of our need.

We must embrace the reality of all that we just saw in chapter one: We were chosen, predestined, redeemed and forgiven. God has lavished His grace upon us and will spare no expense to see that His will is carried out in us. He has made known to us the mystery of His will and works everything according to that will. And one day we believed the message of truth and now we bear the seal and guarantee of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And we must hold on to that with this hand – and yet with the other hold the truth that **Christ came into the world to save sinners** – among whom I am – *present tense* – foremost of all. Paul deliberately used the present tense because even though saved from the **penalty and power of sin in the present** and **to the hope of salvation from the presence of sin in heaven**, we still inhabit these bodies of sin – and we still need a Savior. This is the good news of the gospel – we have a Savior. And if we understand the depths of sin from which He saved us – then we will cherish and treasure Him supremely. In a very real sense, **if we do not cherish Jesus Christ as our Savior – we will not have Him as Savior.**

We are dead in trespasses and sins

So Paul lays out the reasons why we need a Savior. The first reality of our condition before Christ, is not that we are sick and going to die – Paul says that we've already died from the disease: *And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked*, Ephesians 2:1 – 2a. The problem we have is not that we are merely sick – our problem is that we are dead. We don't need self-help books or gurus – we need a rebirth – we need to be born again. We are dead in trespasses and sins. Dead implies lifelessness. An inability to respond to outside stimulus. But this is a curious deadness because Paul says that we are still walking. **This means that we are dead to the things of God. We are unresponsive to Christ and His word; we cannot feel or sense or worship the glory of God.** But at the same time we are very much alive to sin and the world and the devil, *walking* in our trespasses and sins. **This revelation will kill any hope that we are okay, and cause us to treasure the One who made us alive.**

We followed the course of this world

Our walking in the trespasses and sins Paul says was: *following the course of this world* Ephesians 2:2b or as other translations say, **according to the age of this world.** In Greek, this word refers to a period of time – it can mean a lifetime, an age, a generation, or even eternity. In history we talk about different time periods or ages like, the Dark Ages, or the Classical Age, or the Industrial Age. And each age had its own peculiar mindset that was shared by the people of that age. Just like today, I believe that historians will call this the Relative Age because the predominant thought that characterizes people of this age is a sense of relativism. Everything's relative. Truth or morality is dependent on one's own set of circumstances or belief system. There are no universal truths or universal moral code. What is true for you may not be true for me, and what is moral for you may be immoral for me.

There is another sense in which I think Paul was simply referring to the whole history of time as he says in Galatians, *'...the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age*, Galatians 1:4 referring to the whole history of man since the Fall. But the point is that the thinking of the spiritually dead people of the world naturally follows the course of this age because the course of this age is headed downstream. There is no life within to fight upstream, so they are just carried along with the current. When we were following the course of this age we were simply walking in step with the times. We were not living like strangers and aliens. We were native sons – we fit right in. **What this should do is awaken our hearts and minds to the understanding that whatever course the world is taking – we need to be taking the opposite.**

We followed the prince of the power of the air

We followed the course of this world because the whole world is *following the prince of the power of the air*, Ephesians 2:2c. We need to understand that there is a being who rules over the power of the air, and as the rest of the verse says, *is now at work in the sons of disobedience.* On March 26, Nightline will host a debate between Depok Chopra, new age guru and philosopher, and Carlton Pearson, a former evangelical pastor, once heir apparent to Oral Roberts, who now says that there is no devil or hell, on one side, and Mark Driscoll, Pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle and Annie Lobert, founder of Hookers for Jesus on the other, discussing the question: 'Does Satan Exist'?

The cleverest tactic Satan ever used was to convince men that he didn't exist; or to make him a joke or a caricature like Flip Wilson did in the 70's. And for you to suggest otherwise will be to earn you a condescending look of pity for the poor ignorant fundamentalist. But the Bible paints a very different picture. We won't spend a lot of time on this but you need to know that the Bible refers to him as the prince of demons in Matthew 12:24; Paul calls him the god (little 'g') of this age in 2 Corinthians 4:4; Jesus calls him the ruler of this world in John 12:31; and in Luke 4:6 Satan tempts Jesus with world rule by saying: *'To you I will give all authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.'*

What this means is that the whole world lies in the grip of the power of the evil one and the whole course and thought of this age is evil. And God has so permitted that the dominant themes and philosophies and trends of this age are under the control of Satan. And this stuff is just in the air – that is why Paul describes Satan as *the prince of the power of the air*. It is like when we say – 'There's excitement in the air' and what we mean is that there is a shared sense of excitement that is taking hold of everyone and we all get infected with it because there seems to be a manifest presence of excitement. In the same way, just being in the world means that we breathe in the dominant themes and philosophies and trends of the age without even thinking about it – without even realizing that the power in control of that is the enemy of our souls.

We are sons of disobedience

Another condition of those who have not been born again is that they are sons of disobedience: *the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience*" Ephesians 2:2d There are two important thoughts here. The first is that the prince of the power of the air is at work in unbelievers; and the second is that unbelievers are naturally disobedient. Satan exercises his rule by working in the hearts and minds of those without a Savior because there is no resistance – they are dead, and dead men cannot resist. There isn't even the discernment to know that they ought to resist. And furthermore Satan blinds men to the truth. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians that *'...the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the the gospel of the glory of Christ...'* 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 That is why debates like will happen on Nightline are in one sense futile, because we are working with blind, dead people. **That is why it is crucial to pray.** Pray that God would quicken dead hearts and open blind eyes so that they might see and savor the glory and majesty of the gospel of grace and believe and be saved.

The second truth to embrace here is that without a Savior we are just disobedient. It is how we are born. Never in the history of man has there been one born naturally obedient except the Lamb of God. You don't have to do much heavy research on this. If any of you have children, you are an expert on disobedience. We never have to teach that – that comes naturally. What we have to teach is obedience. We are called sons of disobedience because our father – Adam – started this whole disobedient thing. That was the root of his sin. Wanting his own way and not God's. And Satan's work is all about magnifying and expanding on the natural inclination of every man.

We live for ourselves

The natural inclination of everyone is to live for themselves. Being sons of disobedience means that we live for ourselves. Paul puts it this way: *among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind*, Ephesians 2:3a The passions of the flesh and desires of the body and the mind are all about one thing – satisfying, protecting, promoting, and catering to self. In one sense, this is the Me Age as well as the Relative Age. In fact there was book published in 2006 called Generation Me, and in it the author says, 'Generation Me has never known a world that put duty before self, and believes that the needs of the individual should come first. "Be yourself," "Believe in yourself," "You must love yourself before you can love someone else." People talk all the time about the need to find themselves – to do their own thing – and so they divorce their husbands or wives, leave their families and friends in the pursuit of self-fulfillment – satisfying and gratifying those passions of the flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh that are only bent on sin.

We are by nature children of wrath

What this means is that we are by nature children of wrath – that is what Paul says: *and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind*. Ephesians 2:3 That means that we naturally do those things that God hates. Paul emphasizes this in chapter 5 when he says: *For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience*. Ephesians 5:5-6 By nature we are self-seeking, reject the truth and embrace the lie, as Romans 1 tells us; by nature we refuse the gospel as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2; and by nature we are filled with illicit sexual desires, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Nothing good dwells in us

I think the Bible is trying to tell us that there is nothing inherently good in us – nothing that commends us to God – nothing in us that will save us from His wrath. Do you understand the implications and depth of our depravity? Do you understand how lost we are apart from a Savior? We were dead to the things of God – nothing we thought or said or did was spiritual because spiritually we were dead. Everything we thought or said or did came from what we were by nature, and by nature we were children of wrath. So everything we thought or said or did was sin. **Before God in His mercy made us alive all we did was sin.**

But I know some of you are going to argue -'That's not true – I know many unbelievers who do good things.' But you argue against the revelation of Scripture. When we judge what is sin and what is righteousness, we must judge according to the Word of God. **And the word of God says that if the impulse to build hospitals and feed the poor and provide education for the ignorant does not spring from a love of God and trust in the Savior; if what we do for humanity is not to give glory to God; if our work merely affects man's physical needs without touching his spiritual condition; then all we do is sin with respect to God!** *For whatever is not from faith is sin.* Romans 14:23 If what we do does not point men to God, or give Him glory or magnify His worth – it is sin. What you will find when you dig deep into the motivation for good works without God is a desire to magnify self.

Is it possible for evil men to do good things? Absolutely, but it is a good without God. There were two trees in the garden – the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam ate from the wrong tree and got the knowledge of good and evil – so there is a good that comes right along with evil- but it is a good without God. Paul alludes to this in the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians: *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.* 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 All we do apart from God, from the love of God that Romans tells us is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit – is sin.

And so without a Savior all of our efforts at good are rags and ashes. And when *'...the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might,* 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9

I hope I have painted a pretty bleak and desperate picture of our condition without Christ. But I think that the blacker the background – the brighter and clearer the picture will be for us. **I don't think that many of us appreciate the seriousness of our situation which is why we cannot adequately savor the sweetness of our Savior.** Charles Spurgeon put it like this: ***Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Savior. He who has stood before His God, convicted and condemned, with the rope about his neck, is the man to weep for joy when he is pardoned, to hate the evil which has been forgiven him, and to live to the honor of the Redeemer, by whose blood he has been cleansed.*** Charles Spurgeon

That is why the gospel is so sweet. It tells us that apart from Christ there is no hope in this world or the next. And I believe that is why Paul thought it crucial to remind the Ephesians of the futility and desperateness of their situation before Christ, so that the the blazing light of the gospel might shine all the brighter against that background: *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ "by grace you have been saved"* Ephesians 2:5 Amazing grace – how sweet the sound! Only the condemned who have been pardoned can savor that taste.

What about you this morning? Have you tasted the bitterness of sin and long for the sweetness of the Savior? Are you one who thinks you are okay, but have never stood before your God, convicted and condemned, with the rope about your neck, and then wept for joy when met with the rich mercy and grace of God to pardon and forgive and cleanse and renew? I want to invite you this morning to the throne of grace that is the gateway of heaven to embrace Your Savior and savor the sweet taste of grace.

*Our great God and gracious Savior,
Come and work repentance in our soul. Show us our sin in all its disgusting vainglory and bitterness so that we might hate it, shun it, run from it. Melt our hearts by the majesty and mercy of God. Unveil as it were the true nature of the course of this age and the bondage to its prince we were under. Cause us to weep over our sin and rejoice in our salvation. Teach us to behold our Savior, His ability to save, His arms outstretched, His heart big for us. Grant that we would confide in His power and love, commit our souls to Him without reservation, bear His image, love His laws, pursue His presence and be a monument to the effective working of His grace not only in this age but in the age to come. May we truly be those who delight in God through Jesus Christ and spread His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the saving name of Jesus our Savior, 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.**