

October 18, 2009

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

## *Work, For It is God Who Works*

Philippians 2:12 – 18

I love the way Paul writes. Even though this letter, more than all his others, is more intimate and personal, he always delivers the truth followed by the implications of that truth. And we come to another section where he does just that. *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.* Philippians 2:12-13

I think though, to understand Paul, we have to understand His governing vision. And I think he sums that up in chapter 1 very succinctly: **To live is Christ and to die is gain.** This is the heart of the gospel message and the heartbeat of Paul. When the Holy Spirit awakens our hearts to faith and we hear the voice of Jesus say *'Take up your cross and follow Me'* this is what is meant. In living and dying Christ becomes our reference point for everything and He is the goal toward which we run. It is a call to a radical abandonment to Christ Himself and His purpose on the earth. **'To live is Christ' means that while we live we are engaged in the great purpose of God on the earth. And 'To die is gain' means that in dying we win.**

**It is a trumpet call to live a life worthy of the gospel by which we were called. A life worthy of the gospel is above all a life lived sold out for the gospel.** It is a life that is wholly given over to the purpose of God in the world. It is a strength of vision and purpose that puts a higher priority on the call and plan of God than on our own selfish desires. It is not a solo performance either. We hear Paul urging the Philippians to *'Make my joy full'* by demonstrating that the power of the gospel is real in their lives by being one. With one mind, having the same love, being absolutely one in the way they conduct themselves – the way they live together – the way they work together for the sake of the gospel. Believers, Paul says, who are **striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.** **The most appropriate response to the good of the gospel is to live your life in company with other believers contending for the faith.** It is a life that says, in view of the glories of His grace, in view of the surpassing rewards He extends to those who believe, in view of the utter delight and joy of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord, no trial is too great, no cost too high, no service too hard, no loss too dear for the sake of the gospel.

**'To live is Christ and to die is gain'** is written large over lives that are shot through with humility. Paul urges the Philippians to *'Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* Philippians 2:5-8 In the Gospel Primer, Milton Vincent writes: **'God deliberately designed the gospel in such a way as to strip me of pride and leave me without any grounds for boasting in myself whatsoever.'** The outstanding characteristic of someone who has embraced gospel truth not only in their head but their hearts is humility. It is an attitude born out of the staggering revelation of the wretched state from which they were delivered. It is a continued consciousness that without Christ they are lost. **Humility is the accurate estimation of yourself in the face of Christ.**

**This gospel produces believers who are intensely other-centered.** This is why missions exist. The gospel has so impacted our minds and hearts and lives that the outpouring and overflow of God's love and mercy toward us must necessarily spill out on others. I would say that those whose hearts are full of His love cannot help but be other-centered, because that is the nature of Christ's love for us.

**And this gospel is unswervingly cross-centered.** *He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* Philippians 2:8 We did not spend much time on this point last time but this is so crucial that I want to spend a little time this morning. **Because what follows – follows the cross.** Jesus' response to His disciples on the heels of the revelation that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God was to begin telling them about the cross: *From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.* Matthew 16:21 And we know Peter took Him aside and rebuked Him for saying this. Basically I think Peter thought Jesus ruined a beautiful moment by all this talk of suffering and being killed.

But Jesus exposed the problem in Peter's thinking: *'...He turned and said to Peter, Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to Me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.* Matthew 16:23 And then Jesus taught them: *If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.* Matthew 16:24-25 **The gospel is a call to a life in the shadow of the cross.**

When each one of us is granted that great mind-altering, life-changing revelation that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God and we embrace with joy the good news of the gospel, we must understand that implies first and foremost a call to live a cross-centered life. That is what Jesus said – 'If you want to come after Me – deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Me.' He was headed to Jerusalem to suffer and die and rise again and His command is that we follow Him. I don't think Peter and other guys got it until Pentacost. I don't think it made any sense to them. **The amazing paradox of the Christian experience is that for us to live – to really live, we need to die.** That is why there is all this talk about suffering and dying in the gospel. I believe one of the great hindrances to spiritual growth in the church today is that we have marginalized the message of the cross. We showcase beautiful and ornate crosses in our churches – we wear little gold crosses around our necks – and dangle them from our ears. And the interesting thing is nobody is stunned even a little bit.

Suppose we designed some new jewelry that featured the ovens of the Holocaust, a nice rendition of the Hangman's Noose, or 'Old Sparky' the electric chair and proudly wore that? I think we would shock a few people – they would probably think that was horrible. And the cross as an instrument of torture and death was designed specifically to evoke just those thoughts. The Romans brought the awful art of crucifixion to its peak during their Empire and they didn't do so it you could wear a nice little cross around your neck. Crucifixion was considered too cruel – too inhumane – too horrifying – too shameful even, for polite Roman conversation. And yet Jesus says if you want to follow Me you have to take up your cross. The instrument of utter shame and degradation for the world has become the gate of heaven for us who believe.

But the church in large part today has tamed and marginalized the cross. In the 1991 November issue of The Biblical Evangelist, one of the columns read like this: ***"The new cross encourages a new and entirely different evangelistic approach. The evangelist does not demand renouncing of the old life before a new life can be received. He preaches not contrasts but similarities. He seeks to key into the public view the same thing the world does, only a higher level. Whatever the sin-mad world happens to be clamoring after at the moment is cleverly shown to be the very thing the gospel offers, only the religious product is better."The new cross does not slay the sinner; it re-directs him. It gears him to a cleaner and jollier way of living, and saves his self-respect...The Christian message is slanted in the direction of the current vogue in order to make it acceptable to the public."***

A.W. Tozer put it this way: ***'The old cross slew men; the new cross entertains them. The old cross condemned; the new cross amuses. The old cross destroyed confidence in the flesh; the new cross encourages it.'*** The cross of Christ is meant to put a decisive end to our dreams, desires, hopes, ambitions, aspirations in favor of His. When Peter confronted Jesus, Jesus made it plain that Peter wasn't concerned about what God wanted – he was only concerned about what Peter wanted. So Peter needed the cross. He needed to deny himself and let the cross kill all that within him that resisted the plan and purpose of God. Self-denial is at the foot of the cross. *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.* Philippians 2:5-7

This is what it means to deny yourself – to make yourself nothing – to empty yourself as one translation puts it. **Essentially it means to give up your rights** – your right to do as you please, your right to your opinions, your right to be indignant like Peter over injustice, your right to be offended, your right to be hurt or wounded by others, and let the cross put it to death. Because the truth is, insisting on our rights not only keeps us from God, but lines us up with Satan's purpose in the world. The cross is where Satan suffered his crushing defeat, and if he can keep us from the cross he wins in our lives and we lose. Jesus said, *'...whoever wishes to save his [soul] life will lose it, but whoever loses his [soul] life for My sake shall find it.'* It is in the life of our soul that we experience the self-denial of the cross. **It is in our cherished opinions, and feelings and the determination of our wills that the cross is intended to work.** If you consider your rights too important to relinquish, your opinions too good to let go of, your hurts too deep to be given up, those offenses against you too great – then you will not run to the cross and let them die – and you will lose.

I hear this time and again – 'But I have been so hurt by...(fill in the blank)' Jesus was hurt more. 'But what they did wasn't fair – wasn't right'. Jesus suffered a greater injustice than you or I ever will. 'But so and so offended me'. Jesus bore those offenses in His body on the cross. If you consider that Jesus went to the cross for just those sins – how dare we indulge ourselves in them? **By what force of logic do we conclude that we have any right to be offended?** In Corinth during Paul's day, things had come to such a pass that the saints were suing one another in the courts of law. They were building lawsuits against each other that arose from hurt and offense and wrongs done and apparently none of them were willing to take those offenses to the cross.

Listen to Paul's words: *When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. **Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?** 1 Corinthians 6:1-7 **Why not indeed!** You may pat yourselves on the back and say, 'Well, at least I am not taking them to court'. But you already have taken them to the courtroom of your mind and convicted, sentenced and hanged them. Or worse, you take your case to the people and try to get as many as you can to side with you and share your offense.*

But if you lose all that in the cross – you will find that you haven't really lost anything but gained life that is really life. **And this needs to be our daily experience.** The gospel of Luke adds the word 'daily' to taking up your cross and self-denial is a daily experience. What we must do, day in and day out when self rises up to re-assert its rights is to declare along with Galatians 2:20: *'I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.'* Galatians 2:20 **Don't identify with the self** – don't identify with its reactions of jealousy or envy, don't sympathize with its woundedness or offense, don't pander self with its pride in its opinions – deny it and don't let it live. That is what the cross is for. Don't wallow in its suffering or allow it to pity itself – pay no attention to its whining. **The cross is death – suffering is involved but the end is death to self and life to God.**

**The success of your relations with others are directly tied to your understanding of the cross.** The presence of sin in the world makes relational conflict inevitable. You sin against others, they sin against you. You need forgiveness, they need forgiveness, you need humility, they need humility. **Our relationships with one another must be based in our relationship to God through the cross.** When we take up offenses against one another, when we become bitter and angry over our treatment by others we are assuming that their sins are more serious than our sins against God – but the cross radically transforms our perspective. Through the cross we understand that no sin against us will ever be as serious as our sins we've committed against a Holy God. When we truly understand just how much we have been forgiven, we have no trouble forgiving others.

*'Therefore, my beloved...'* Paul says, therefore, based upon the humility of Christ, based upon the obedience of Christ all the way to the cross, based upon the Father's exaltation of Christ – *'...as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling'* **The working out of our own salvation is a work centered in the cross.** **'Work out'** here holds the idea of carrying something all the way to a successful conclusion. That is, the call of the gospel began a good work in you – now work to bring it to completion. We cannot miss the clear indication that though we have been saved – from death and hell and the wrath of God – **there is still work to do and that we must do it.** And the implication here is that this working out of our own salvation is the work of the cross in our lives.

We work with fear and trembling. What I believe Paul is saying is that in the ongoing work of salvation – a process the Bible calls 'sanctification' – we need to have an attitude composed of both fear and trembling. Fear that is born out of a right knowledge of God and proper respect and worship of who He is; and a trembling that comes from the impact of His word and its implications for our lives. I would phrase it this way: **'Work out your own salvation with hearts and minds that are staggered by the awesome holiness and grandeur of God and overwhelmed by the massive grace and mercy He has shown us.'** *But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at My word.* Isaiah 66:2

However, this is not a case of Paul saying, 'God helps those who help themselves' – that's not biblical. Nor is it biblical to say 'Let go and let God'. We do not say on the one hand, 'Work to be saved because God has done His bit and we must do ours.' Nor do we say, 'Just relax now – salvation is assured and there is nothing for you to do.' Paul follows this command to work out our own salvation with the very reason it is possible for us to do so: *for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure*. **The only reason we can even contemplate working out our own salvation is because God is working in us.** The only reason we can even approach the cross is because He died there first. Paul says to work out our salvation with fear and trembling *precisely* because it is God who is at work in us first. His working assures us that ours will not be in vain. Jesus went to the cross so that we might follow in His steps. *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.* 1 Peter 2:21

God is not merely working to strengthen our wills to work – the cross puts an end to the old will and retires the old man from his work by killing him. God is the willing within us to humble ourselves and to deny ourselves and the working in us to take up our cross. *for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure*. God becomes our willing and God becomes our working. **Any God-ward impulse, any longing for holiness, any appetite for God's word, any affection and desire for God Himself is the result of His willing and His working firstly in us to produce a like-minded willing and working.** It is a great incentive and assurance to us to know that all our efforts to do what is right is the work of the Almighty God within us. It is a massive encouragement to me that any effort I make towards God is a blazing neon sign of His empowering grace in me.

*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*

*Our good and gracious heavenly Father,*

*May the banner that flies over our lives be 'To live is Christ and to die is gain'. May our souls be staggered by its implications and encouraged by its promise. We humble ourselves under Your mighty hand and ask You for mercy in our battle with pride. Help us put to death all that is arrogant and self-serving and self-exalting in us. Grant that we would live in the shadow of the precious cross of Christ. Rivet our attention and affections there and help us grasp the truth that to really live we must really die. Help us to bring our cherished opinions, and feelings and wills to the cross and nail our right to be offended or hurt, our right to do as we please, to that blood-stained wood. Grant us to know the sweet victory of working out our own salvation in the shadow of its form, and to know the certain assurance that victory is ours because it is God who is at work in us. Let the outpouring and overflow of Your love and mercy toward us spill out with joy through the gospel to all people we pray, in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*