

May 5, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

Pierced to the Heart

Acts 2:14 – 41

What we have here is Peter's magnificent first sermon. And there is really no explanation for it, no way to account for the inspiring insights into Scripture and the sheer eloquence of his message, given his rustic, fisherman roots, than the outpouring of the Spirit of God on his preaching. And we saw last week that when the Spirit of God is poured out, ***there is an overpowering appearance of the manifest presence of God; there is the spontaneous declaration of His greatness and power; and there is the effective proclamation of the gospel.***

When the Spirit of God is poured out He shows you Jesus, and you begin to say, 'O the cross – where His blood was shed for me. The cross, where the Father's eternal love is displayed and His wrath against sin is satisfied. Oh, the goodness of God!' When the Spirit of God is poured out you see at the same time, the awful, wretchedness of your sin, and the awesome redeeming love of God. ***You see all the goodness of God.*** There is a deep conviction in your soul that, 'I was utterly lost, and now by the grace of God, eternally found!' ***You are pierced to the heart.*** And that is just what happened here. Luke tells us that when this crowd saw what was happening among the disciples of Jesus, and when they heard the message that Peter gave, he says they were pierced to the heart. *Now when they heard this they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"* Acts 2:37

In other words, the effect of what they saw and what they heard caused them to think. Listen, in this crowd were no doubt some of those who joined in with the mob on Passover to crucify Jesus. And if we know anything about a mob mentality, we know that there's very little thinking going on. But here we see the Spirit of God at work confronting these men with the truth and causing them to think. First of all we are presented with the truth and we are compelled to think. When the Spirit of God comes, He comes with the truth. John told us in his gospel that He is the Spirit of truth, and John says: *When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come.* John 16:13 And the work of the Holy Spirit is always to point, not to Himself, but to Christ. In chapter fifteen of his gospel, John says: *"But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness about Me.* John 15:26

And so we see that everyone who heard this message was pierced by **the truth of Christ**, and they were pierced by **the death of Christ**. The truth of who Jesus really is and the truth that we personally are complicit in His death are like sword thrusts to the heart. You see, Christianity is not, as some detractors claim, a religion for non-thinkers, a refuge for ignoramuses and fools. You have to be a thinker – the first thing the Spirit of God does is cause you to think deeply about God and Christ and eternity and the state of your soul. That is why the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul **and mind**. That is why Paul **reasoned** with people about Jesus. That is why the New Testament is filled with exhortations to **think on these things**. This would require a whole other series, but in short, the main reason God has given us minds and the ability to think and reason is that we might seek out and discover all the reasons that exist for loving Him, worshipping Him, and treasuring Him **in** all things and **above** all things.

Our God is a thinking God and He did not design ignoramuses to glorify Him. And so Peter takes these unbelieving Jews to the book of Joel and begins to explain what they are seeing in light of Scripture. And he says, 'What you are seeing is the promise of God that Joel saw being fulfilled in your eyes. What you are seeing is the work of the Spirit of God. These guys aren't drunk and disorderly – they are filled with the Spirit – salvation has come, and by the way, you can have this too: *And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*' The Holy Spirit was causing them to think. To remember the prophecy and the promise of the Father and begin to realize what it all meant.

And then the Holy Spirit begins to get them to think about Jesus. **The truth of Christ.** Peter points out that *Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves know-- this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.* Acts 2:22-23 In other words, Peter was pointing out that believing in Jesus wasn't just a kind of blind, ignorant belief. There had been attesting mighty works and wonders and signs along the way – **as you yourselves know.** Peter doesn't say that 'Well I can't prove anything to you – you'll just have to close your eyes and take a blind leap into the dark and trust me on this'. That's what a lot of people think Christianity is – blind, ignorant belief – in spite of the evidence. No, the Holy Spirit through Peter was showing them the evidence. **You know this.**

And then Peter reasons with them through the Psalms to reach the conclusion that the psalmist David was talking about the Christ and not himself. Moreover, Peter says 'You killed Him, but God raised Him, and we are witnesses to the fact' Now he's talking to a group of people who were not in any way disposed to believe in resurrection of dead people. A lot of Jews did believe in some kind of general resurrection on the last day, but none of them believed in the resurrection of a single person before then. And some Jews didn't believe in any resurrection at all. So Peter couldn't just get up there and say, 'Trust me on this – I've seen Him'. And the idea that Jesus was the Son of God who was raised from the dead would have been abhorrent to them. Of all the people in the world, the Jews had a view of God that He was a transcendent Creator, infinitely exalted above His creation – and therefore no human being could possibly be God. Listen, these guys wouldn't even say His sacred name – they could only spell out the consonants for fear of inadvertant blasphemy. They might just possibly say it wrong and dishonor God.

So these would have been the last people on earth to believe in the resurrection and so if Peter had simply appealed to blind faith they would have laughed him off the stage. But speaking for the 120, he says, **'We are witnesses of this – we saw this.** This Jesus is risen and now He's ascended and *poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.'* We know from Scripture that the risen Christ had just recently appeared to these disciples many times in the last few weeks, and to over 500 at one time, the apostle Paul tells us. So it isn't as if Peter is introducing some startling new information – no doubt many in this crowd had heard at least rumors of this. Much like Paul, who tells King Agrippa in chapter 26 of Acts that none of the events about the Christ has escaped his notice because these things were not done in a corner. In other words, there was abundant evidence about Jesus. And so Peter is essentially saying 'This is a matter of public record' and nobody could dispute it. That pierces them. They start to think. Peter is not appealing to their emotions, he's appealing to their minds.

The foundation of faith is truth, and it is built upon the truth of who Jesus is. It is also built upon the foundation of the truth of His death and resurrection. And if you were here on Resurrection Sunday, you know that we talked about how faith rests on the truth of the risen Savior. But it also rests on **the truth of His death.** And this is the thing that really pierced them. Peter tells the crowd that it was this Jesus, the risen Jesus, that they crucified. He says it twice, in case anybody wasn't listening. In verse 23 he says: *this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.* And then He says it again in verse 36: *Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."* And it was when they heard this that they were pierced to the heart and they said 'What shall we do?'

What Peter was **not** saying is that the Jews killed Jesus. This has been used in the past to demonstrate how anti-semitic the Bible is. You see, people say, accusing the Christians of being anti-semitic, the Jews killed Jesus – Peter says it. But that's not what Peter is saying. For one thing, most likely, most of the people in the audience hadn't even been in Jerusalem during Passover. And the ones who were, most likely were just there along with the rest of the mob. If he had wanted to lay the blame on the most likely culprits, he would have mentioned the leaders of the Jews. If anyone bore that responsibility they did. But that's not his point. So what's his point?

His point, the thing with which the Holy Spirit was piercing their hearts was the thing that He has been piercing hearts with for 2,000 years – is that whenever the Holy Spirit brings conviction, you know this is true of you. Not just them, but you – personally. You nailed Him to the cross – you crucified the Lord of Life. As John Newton wrote: *My conscience felt and owned the guilt, and plunged me in despair, I saw my sins His blood had spilt, and helped to nail Him there. Alas I knew not what I did, but now my tears are vain, where shall my trembling soul be hid, for I the Lord have slain.* If you are a Christian, you know this is not just true of a few people 2,000 years ago – it's true of you. And Peter couldn't have been singling them out for blame – Peter knew it was true of him.

All the gospel writers include the story of Peter's denial – over and over at the crucial moment Peter denies the Lord. Three times he insists 'I don't know the man'. And the third time he emphasizes it with curses. But only Luke tells us that the third time Peter denies the Lord, **cursing**, in that moment, Jesus turns and looks right at him. And Luke says that Peter immediately turned away, weeping bitterly. And when Peter looked back on that moment, I believe that was then that Peter knew without a shadow of a doubt that he had crucified the Lord of life. Peter saw Jesus dying because of him, he saw that it was his sins that had crucified the Lord. And so what he is saying here is 'You too have crucified Him – you too drove the nails into His hands and feet – you pushed the crown of thorns on His head – you too whipped Him bloody'.

And this is what pierced their hearts. And this is what pierces our hearts. This can only be the work of the Holy Spirit. You're not a Christian until your heart has been pierced not only with the truth of who Jesus is, but the truth of how He died. Listen again to John Newton: ***Sure, never to my latest breath, can I forget that look; it seemed to charge me with His death, though not a word He spoke. A second look He gave, which said, "I freely all forgive; this blood is for thy ransom paid; I died that thou might live."*** You might be convicted that you broke God's rules, but real conversion tells you that you broke God's heart. Before the Holy Spirit pierces your heart, you think Christianity means keeping God's rules, but when you are pierced to the heart you understand that you didn't just break God's rules, you broke God's heart. ***And it is the realization that you were the one who pierced His heart with your spear that pierces your heart.***

You may very well be weighed down with the guilt of sin, you may have a deep realization that you've broken God's rules, but this piercing goes deeper. The guilt of sin makes you say, 'I've broken this and I've broken that', but this conviction makes you say, 'I've broken Him'. The one makes you say, 'I'd better do the right thing or He'll get me'. The other makes you say, 'Look what He's done for me, and I didn't know'. And it melts your heart. One of the interesting things that being a pastor brings to my life are unsolicited confessions. I can't tell you the number of times I've been in conversation with a total stranger, and they find out that I'm a pastor, and they begin confessing how they've broken God's rules. But what is always lacking is a deeper conviction that they have broken God's heart.

In the country of Wales there is a little village named Beddgelert, and it means the place where Gelert is buried. Gelert was a great Irish wolfhound that belonged to the Welsh king Llewellyn. Llewellyn loved Gelert who was his favorite companion; and the only one he loved more was his infant son whose mother, Llewellyn's wife, had died in childbirth. One day, leaving his faithful wolfhound home to guard his son, Llewellyn went hunting. But when he returned he found the room where he left his son nearly destroyed. Furniture overturned and smashed, tapestries ripped from the wall and the cradle his son was in lay empty on the floor with blood all over it. As Llewellyn stood rooted to the spot, he felt a soft, warm, velvety nose nuzzle the palm of his hand. He looked down to see Gelert's trusting eyes gazing up at him. The dog looked exhausted but wagged his tail weakly. His head and paws were stained with blood.

"You wicked creature!" roared the king. "You've killed my son!" and he drew his sword and plunged it into Gelert's side. As the dog slumped to the ground, Llewellyn heard a soft whimpering from behind the upturned cradle. As the dog lay dying, Llewellyn gently picked up his son and saw at the same time the body of a huge wolf lying dead on the floor. And he realized the blood on the cradle was Gelert's blood – the blood on the sheets was Gelert's blood. Gelert had killed the wolf in a savage battle to save the baby, and Llewellyn realized he had slain the savior of his family because he hadn't known, he treated the savior of his family as an enemy, and his heart was pierced with the bitter sword of remorse. Now if our hearts are stirred by the story of a noble dog killed ignobly – how much more by the death of the Son of God?

This is what makes you a Christian. A Christian is someone who says, 'I didn't know what You'd done, and I've been treating you as an enemy. I didn't realize that Your rules were good for me – I didn't know they were designed for my happiness, not my harm.' A Christian is someone who says, 'How in the world can I go on living my life as I please, when You gave everything for me? How can I go on treating You as an enemy, You who died to make me Your friend?' A Christian is someone whose heart has been pierced like the prophet Zechariah prophesied: ***"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on Me, on Him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over Him, as one weeps over a firstborn."*** Zechariah 12:10

And the only response you have when the Spirit of God pierces your heart, is the response the crowd makes: *"Brothers, what shall we do?"* These guys weren't asking, 'What shall we do' looking for a list of rules. They weren't saying, 'We'd like to become Christians. Could you tell us two or three things you'd like us to do?' When they said 'Brothers, what shall we do' what they meant was **'We'll do anything'**. When you are pierced by the One you've pierced, you suddenly realize that this one whom you crucified is both Lord and Christ. You realize you are not your own, you've been bought with a price. And you take all conditions off your obedience. You do what Peter calls them to do – you repent – turn around and go the other way. You begin to live for Him, not because of the rules, but because He gave His life for you. ***If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him.*** C.T. Studd

That changes everything for you. Because **the very thing that convicts you is the very thing that brings forgiveness**. When you look on Him whom you have pierced you realize two things. The first is that you killed the Lord of life – your sins put Him to death. But at the same time you see that even though your sins were terribly bad – His love for you is terribly strong. The very same sight of Jesus on the cross tells you that not only were you the worst of sinners, but that He is the best of Saviors. On the one hand you didn't care for Him at all, but on the other, you mean the world to Him. You can't look at the cross and only let it tell you about your sin. Why is He there? You see when you say, 'He died **because** of me' that's the conviction. But that also means 'He died because of **me**'. The very thing that convicts brings forgiveness.

There is a great hymn that we need to sing more often and it goes like this: ***And can it be that I should gain, an interest in the Savior's blood? Died He for me who caused Him pain, for me who Him to death pursued. Amazing love how can it be? That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*** It is only when we have been pierced to the heart by the truth of who Jesus is and what His death is all about that we can really understand the amazing love that brings repentance and forgiveness and the gift of salvation. *"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."* Has your heart been pierced? Are you a Christian because your heart has been pierced, or because you're trying not to break God's rules?

We celebrate communion on a regular basis, not just because it is the Lord's command. But because we need to regularly look on Him whom we have pierced, lest our hearts get hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and we no longer live as those whose hearts have been pierced; and we lose sight of His great love and what He has done for us. As Christians, living in this world, there is the tendency for our hearts to get hard and calloused because we're not perfect and we do sin; we tend to live as Christians not breaking the rules, but not giving any thought to breaking His heart. And we need to be pierced again and again, our hearts need to be melted over and over so that we never lose sight of the Savior's amazing love. Let the Holy Spirit pierce your heart this morning as we come to the cross.

Our gracious God and Father,

You are worthy to be praised with every breath, loved with every fiber of our being, served with every action of our lives. You have loved us, redeemed us, forgiven us and called us friend, when we were dead in our sin, hardened to the things of God, and enemies of Your Son. Our voices cried out to crucify Him, our hands wielded the whip and pushed the crown of thorns on His head. It was we who nailed Him to the cross and mocked Him as He died. But the wonder of the cross is that we who pierced Your heart have in turn been pierced by the lance of Your love and grace and forgiveness. And we praise You this morning that Your love endured our curse, Your mercy bore our deserved death and Your everlasting arms are opened wide for everyone who calls on Your name to be saved. May we never recover from being pierced to the heart and lose sight of Your great love and the majesty and mercy of God, we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, Amen.