

October 30, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Unless You Believe that I Am

John 8:12 – 30

Last week we saw the wonderful picture Jesus drew when He was teaching in the Court of Women in the Temple as He stood before the unlit menorah and proclaimed that He was the light of the world. He was pointing to the Feast of Tabernacles and He seemed to be saying, 'The feast is over, the celebration is ended, the great light of this candelabra has been extinguished, but the very thing you celebrated and the light you long for and wish would return is here. In fact the thing you just finished celebrating, was provisional, was partial, was temporary – **but I am the very glory of God** – I am God come to you so that My presence can come centrally and permanently into you, and you into Me. I am the glory cloud that shaded you in the wilderness and I am the pillar of fire that illuminated the night. I led you then by the cloud and the fire, and I am here to lead you now. I am your Shepherd and your Sacrifice, I am your Living water and your Bread from heaven, I am your God and I am Your light'.

We looked at the metaphor – *light*, we looked at the claim – *I am the light of the world*, and we looked at the call – *he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life*. And today we want to look at the **conclusion**, and we'll get to that in a bit. Jesus Christ is the light of the world – **The** light – not just a light. He doesn't point to the light and say, 'There it is, go get it'. He doesn't claim to be a path to the light. He makes the unequivocal claim to be **the** light. That is, if there is any light in this dark world – it emanates and radiates from the source of light – Jesus Christ. **And as the light of the world, He is the ultimate source of life, the ultimate source of truth, the ultimate source of joy – He is the light of the world.**

The **claim** that He is the light, is followed by the **call** to respond to this light. Jesus said 'If you follow Me as the light, you won't walk in darkness anymore, but you will have Me, the Light of life.' It is not enough just to see the light – you have to follow it. It is not just enough to know about Jesus – you have to follow Him. The invitation of the gospel is to follow Jesus. What does that mean? How do we follow Him? Jesus tells us over and over in the gospels, *'If you want to be My disciple, you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Me.'* How do we follow Him? What does it mean to follow Jesus? How do we know we are true followers and not just people who think that Jesus is a good idea – or that He is some enlightened master who shows us the way? We know that we are following Him because we **obey Him**, because we have **fellowship with Him**, because we are **transparent before Him** and because His light shines out from us, we **shine with Him**.

But like everyone who is in darkness, eyes blinded by sin, the Pharisees start arguing with Jesus. *So the Pharisees said to Him, "You are testifying about Yourself; Your testimony is not true."* John 8:13 And according to the Law, they were thinking they had Him, because the Law of Moses requires at least two witnesses for a thing to be confirmed, and they only saw this ragged, itinerant preacher. But Jesus responds to their accusation: *Jesus answered and said to them, "Even if I testify about Myself, My testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going ; but you do not know where I come from or where I am going.* John 8:14 In other words, 'I came from God – I am returning to God, but you don't know God and therefore you can't see Me in the light of God'. The fact that He is from God is what it means for Him to be the light of the world.

He continues in verse 15: *"You judge according to the flesh; I am not judging anyone."* John 8:15 In other words, 'You don't have spiritual life so you can't see the light. To have the light of life, you need life – but you are only operating out of dead, lifeless flesh. And furthermore, I'm not judging anyone – but if I were – My judgments would be just because I am only echoing My Father's judgments'. *"But even if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone in it, but I and the Father who sent Me.* John 8:16 And then He spells out the reason that His testimony is true and His judgments are just: *"Even in your law it has been written that the testimony of two men is true. "I am He who testifies about Myself, and the Father who sent Me testifies about Me."* John 8:17-18 The two witnesses Jesus presents to the court here for the truth that He is the light of the world are the Father and Himself. He doesn't need anymore – the only possible witnesses to ultimate truth and reality are the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and here He gives them two out of three.

Jesus' claim here is astounding. What He is saying is that the only valid witnesses in this court are members of the Godhead. He was saying that **the revelation of who God is must come from God Himself** – that is, it takes God to accurately reveal God to man. That is why we say that to have a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, to embrace the Good News, is a matter of revelation. We must preach the gospel. Woe unto us if we don't. **But God must give revelation.** If all we are depending upon is the clarity of our thought or the eloquence of our speech or the heart-string pull of the worship music, or 15 stanzas of Just As I Am, we're just blowing smoke. If we win converts that way, we've not won them to Christ – we've won them to ourselves and they'll fall faster a skydiver without a parachute. Whenever I stand before you to preach the Word of God, I don't pray that you'll be blinded by my brilliance, or won over by my folksy humor, or convinced by my airtight arguments. I pray that you'll be bathed in light – I pray that you will not only know the Light of life but that you'll have the Light of life. I pray for revelation – because that is supernatural – that is God-given and therefore eternal.

But these guys didn't get any revelation: *So they were saying to Him, "Where is Your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither Me nor My Father; if you knew Me, you would know My Father also."* John 8:19 The proof of their blindness and deadness lay in the fact that they looked at Jesus, and didn't see the Father. They looked at Him and didn't see the God whom they claimed to know. In other words, Jesus tells them that, 'I and the Father are so one, that **if you knew and loved Him, you would know and love Me**'. This was such an amazing and shocking statement, along with everything else He had been telling them, that at this point John pauses and says: *These words He spoke in the treasury, as He taught in the temple; and no one seized Him, because His hour had not yet come.* John 8:20 John is trying to tell us how incredible it was that these guys didn't just tear Him limb from limb at this point. But two things were operating here. One was the fact that they were in such darkness that no revelatory light could penetrate – and the other is the fact that it was not yet time for Jesus to be killed.

And now Jesus turns to the conclusion. He's given them the metaphor – He's made and reinforced the claim – He's given the call, and now He spells out the implications of not responding. *Then He said again to them, "I go away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come."* John 8:21 In chapter seven we read where Jesus tells these same guys a similar thing: *"You will seek Me, and will not find Me; and where I am, you cannot come."* John 7:34 In other words, He is telling them something about the future. And in just a few years from that moment, the nation of Israel would suffer one of the worst times of suffering they had ever gone through, and when that time came they would desperately seek the help of their promised Messiah, but He wouldn't come. Having refused the Light, they would be left in darkness and having despised their Savior, they would die in their sins. And having rejected the Son of God, they couldn't hope to go where He was going.

It is a serious thing to continually reject the Lord. The writer of Hebrews warned his readers: *See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even after wards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.* **Hebrews 12:15-17** This particular crowd of Jews had been rejecting Jesus since He appeared on the scene. Their rejection had been aggressive, violent and continual. And the spiritual reality is that when we harden our hearts over and over to the truth of the gospel, eventually we get to a place where there is no place for repentance. In other words, we may find ourselves in a place where our hearts are so hard that true repentance cannot be found. **You may arrive at the point of no return in sinning.**

So Jesus says, *"...where I am going, you cannot come."* and they respond sarcastically: *So the Jews were saying, "Surely He will not kill Himself, will He, since He says, "Where I am going, you cannot come?"* John 8:22 They connected His going and their inability to follow Him there with hell, which they believed was the destination of everyone who committed suicide, and as righteous Jews they couldn't be expected to end up there. But Jesus didn't respond to their sarcasm – He focused on their problem: *And He was saying to them, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world.* John 8:23 In other words, they had an issue that came from the fact that they were born of earth and not of heaven as He was. He was pointing them to their terminal problem of sin. And this is the **conclusion**. *"Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am {He}, you will die in your sins."* John 8:24 This is the crucial warning of the gospel – left to ourselves, without a Savior, we will die in our sins. The gospel is good news precisely because God has made a way out of this horrible predicament. We must believe what Jesus told these Pharisees – **We must believe that Jesus is the Son of God.**

Two things need to happen for a man to be saved. He must be convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that **he is a sinner**, that without remediation, can only look forward to death; and that **Jesus is the only one who can save Him**. These Pharisees had two problems. The first was that they didn't think they were sinners. All through the gospels we read where Jesus hung out with the tax-gatherers and the sinners. And the Pharisee's were always complaining that He was hanging out with sinners, saying things like – *"This man receives sinners and eats with them."* Luke 15:2 implying that they themselves weren't sinners. And the second problem was that they didn't recognize and believe that Jesus was God incarnate, come to rescue them and save them from their sins.

Jesus told them, *"...unless you believe that I am {He}, you will die in your sins."* Most of your translations render **He** in italics because the pronoun is not in the Greek text and here I put it in parenthesis to emphasize that fact. What Jesus was saying was 'Unless you believe that I am the I AM you will die in your sins'. That is, Jesus was again referring them back to the Old Testament and to the very name of God that Moses heard from the burning bush – I Am that I AM. Unless you believe that Jesus is the Son of God you will die in your sins. The two necessary elements to salvation are that a man knows that he is a sinner, and that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior. And that might sound to you like a no-brainer. No doubt some of you are muttering 'Duh' under your breath. But don't be so quick here. These are the two biggest obstacles to faith in most people's lives. Most people if you ask them if they are a good person will say 'Sure, I'm a good person. Oh I might lie a little, cheat a little, swear a little – but on the whole I'm pretty good – and when that trumpet sounds I'll be there.' And they reject utterly that in their present state not only are they unfit for heaven, but they actually deserve hell.

This is a problem with a lot of people, Christians and non-Christians alike. They find it hard to wrap their minds around the fact that every human born after Adam deserves death, not life. **That we all stand, apart from any grace and mercy from God, sinners condemned under the wrath of God, doomed to an eternity in hell.** Paul in Romans outlines the issue: *"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes."* Romans 3:10-18 *'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.'* Romans 3:23 and finally, *'The wages of sin is death...'* Romans 6:23

And that becomes a problem for people, firstly because **no really believes they deserve hell**, and secondly, because if that is true, then **what about all those people who never heard of Christ?** Most of the time this isn't really a sincere objection, but simply a way of trying to get out of the spotlight themselves and shift the blame. If God is a loving God, how can He condemn people to hell who never heard of His Son? The problem with this question is that it is assuming something. **It assumes that people are innocent.** Perhaps you've heard it put like this, 'What about the innocent pygmy in Africa who dies without ever hearing the gospel?' And the crucial assumption is that pygmy's innocence. In other words, he didn't do anything to deserve hell so just because he didn't hear the gospel does that mean he'll be condemned along with all the other really bad people like Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot? But the Bible has just told us something very important – 'None is righteous – No! Not One! There is no innocent pygmy in Africa – he doesn't exist there or anywhere else.

Too often we view heaven as the default eternal destination for everyone, unless of course you really mess up. We assume that we deserve heaven. These Pharisee's assumed that. We have come to feel that God owes us heaven. But Jesus was not saying that. He was saying just the opposite – 'Unless you believe that I AM – you will die in your sins'. To believe that Jesus is the I AM necessarily means that we come to grips with our own desperate, and terminal sinfulness. And it means that unless we believe that He is the Bread of Life come down from heaven; that He is the Living Water that if we drink becomes a well of living water within springing up to eternal life; unless we believe that He is the Good Shepherd leading and guiding us; unless we believe that He is our Spotless Lamb, perfect Sacrifice – that He is our Light of Life – we will die in our sins.

But the question still persists **'What about those who've never heard of Jesus?** Isn't it unjust of God to condemn them?' To answer to that we have to look at **who God is, what He has revealed** about Himself, and **our response** to that revelation. The Bible tells this: that **God is holy, just, unchanging and all-loving.** This means that **God will always do what is right.** That is who He is – He cannot be other. When people accuse God of being unjust it is because they don't know Him. That was the problem these Pharisee's had. They claimed to know Him, but when He stood in front of them all they could say was 'Who are You?' *So they were saying to Him, "Who are You?" Jesus said to them, "What have I been saying to you from the beginning?"* John 8:25 In other words – 'What have I been telling you all along – I AM! This is the revelation of who I am.

When it comes to what God has revealed about Himself, we talk about **special revelation and general revelation**. Special revelation is the testimony of the Bible and the testimony of Christ. These guys were getting special revelation of who He was. But general revelation is what God has revealed of Himself to everyone through the natural world and moral conscience. *"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse"* Romans 1:20 and *"the requirements of the law are written on their hearts"* Romans 2:15 Taken together these passages claim that *everyone* has an inherent knowledge of God, that this can be *clearly* known from creation and that everyone also has a God-given moral compass. Is it true, then, that "those who have never heard," really have no idea of God's existence or of their moral responsibilities? The Bible says 'No'. *"Those who have never heard"* have heard something and they do have access to key information about God. **They know that God exists, that there is a moral standard and that they have broken this standard.**

Furthermore Paul goes on to say: *For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!* Romans 1:21-25 The fact that men stand condemned to hell before God is **not because they haven't believed in Jesus, but rather because they have rejected God**. Romans tells us that men are without excuse, because even though they know about God, even though they know that there is a moral standard that they have broken, they reject the very One who could save them from this condemnation.

Now I'm not saying that we don't need to believe in Christ. I'm not suggesting an alternative gospel here. But the reason men stand condemned in the first place is because they have rejected God and willfully, rebelliously, gone their own way and tried to become their own Savior, not first of all because they never heard of Jesus. But the great provision God has made, has been made for us in Christ; and it is only as we receive the free gift of eternal life from Him that we are saved. Which means that we must come to Christ. Unless we believe that He is the I AM, we will die in our sins. Faith in His atoning work on the cross is the only means by which we can be saved. And I can hear some of you saying, 'What about those who died before Christ came – how were they saved? And the answer is – the same way people are saved today - by faith in His atoning work on the cross. **Only that faith was one that looked forward to the cross – and our faith is one that looks back to the cross.**

In the book of Hebrews we find a list of people who never heard about Jesus but still are saved. The salvation of those who never heard about Christ depends on two basic elements: their response to the amount of revelation they had; and the imputation of Christ's coming sacrifice on the basis of their faith. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, David and others, are all considered heroes of faith, despite the fact that none of them heard about Jesus. Jacob, Moses and David prophesied about his coming, but had a very limited understanding of its meaning. Others like Rahab, Naaman the Syrian, Melchizedek, and Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, were saved although they didn't even belong to the people of Israel. They responded with faith to the small amount of revelation they had, and as a result God imputed to them the coming sacrifice of Christ. Job's confession of Christ was, *'For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.'* Job 19:25 It was a faith in the coming redeemer that saved him. Faith is always the key element – Saved by grace alone through faith alone by Christ alone. Knowledge doesn't save us, but Christ saves us, as we respond in faith to his revelation, no matter how limited it might be. And because as we've seen God is holy and just and will always do what is right – **He will never turn away the soul that earnestly and genuinely seeks Him. He will always provide the means for salvation to be known.**

The Gedeo were a half-million strong Ethiopian tribe who believed in Magano, the benevolent, omnipotent, Creator of everything. And yet few prayed to Magano. They were far more concerned about trying to appease Sheit'an, an evil spirit. They felt they did not know Magano well enough to be free from this evil spirit. One day, however, a Gedeo man, Warrasa, prayed that Magano reveal himself to the Gedeo people. Then followed a vision in which he saw two white-skinned strangers erect temporary shelters under a certain sycamore tree near Warrasa's hometown, Dilla. Later they built more permanent shiny-roofed structures. Warrasa had never seen either type of dwelling before. A voice told him that these men would bring a message from Magano. During the next eight years other Gedeo soothsayers prophesied that strangers would soon arrive with a message from Magano.

At the end of 1948, two Canadian missionaries Albert Brant and Brent Cain came to Ethiopia to begin a work among the Gedeo. They had originally planned to set up base right in the middle of the Gedeo people, but the political climate forced them to decide on Dilla, which was just on the outskirts of Gedeo land. Brant and Cain proceeded to set up their tents under that very sycamore tree Warrasa had seen in his vision and events continued to unfold just as Warrasa had foreseen. Warrasa was one of the first converts and also one of the first to be imprisoned for his faith and today there are tens of thousands of Gedeo Christians.

When we ask the question, 'What about all those people who've never heard of Christ?' we need to realize firstly that we do not, and cannot know everything. God has said that it is by believing in His Son that we are saved and that if we reject Him, we will die in our sins. We do know that. But we cannot know the particular details of how God makes His Son known to every people, tribe, nation and tongue. We just know that He does. We know that it is by faith in Christ and His atoning work on the cross that men come to Christ, and that it has always been so. In the 1896 July edition of *The Missionary Review of the World*, there was a story about a man named Adiri in what was then Dutch Guiana. Years before he ever heard of missionaries, Adiri received dreams and visions in which he was convicted of sin and his need for a Savior. Heaven and hell were revealed to him. Near death because of illness, he saw a man in a vision announcing that he was the mediator between God and man, and telling Adiri that someone would come and tell him how to be saved. Missionaries did come Adiri did believe and call on His name and began preaching the gospel to his fellow tribesmen.

And so if that is true, and it is, how should we respond? If the Bible tells us that '*...there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*' Acts 4:12 And that '*...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*' Romans 10:13 And if Jesus told us that '*...unless you believe that I am you will die in your sins.*', how should that inform our **priorities**, our **pursuits**, our **passions** and our **plans**? Paul answers this question a little further down in chapter 10: *How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"* Romans 10:14-15 God's plan goes like this: God sends His people, they preach the gospel, people hear the word of God, they believe the message His people have brought, they call on the name of the Lord, and they get saved. That's it. That's the plan. He sends, we preach, they hear and believe, they call and He saves them. **[Diagram]**

Not everyone who hears believes – Paul tells us that '*...they have not all obeyed the gospel.*' Romans 10:16 But that quite frankly is not in the job description – no where does the text say that the hearer's believing is our responsibility. That is God's work of grace in their hearts. The end of the Bible tells us that one day there will be countless millions worshipping around the throne of God from every nation, people, tribe and tongue and that should fill us with confidence and hope and courage to do what the Lord has given us to do – go and preach the gospel. Here is the conclusion: All people know God, and all people reject Him. All people stand guilty before the judgment seat of God and all stand condemned by God for rejecting Him. In mercy, God has made a way of salvation for the lost through the death and resurrection of His Son, and people cannot come to God apart from faith in Christ. And God's plan to bring them to faith is to send you and me and every other believer to make the gospel known to all people.

So where does this leave us? I just want to leave you to ponder two things – **Gratitude and Going**. *If it is true* that unless we trust in Christ – believe that He is the I AM – the Author and Finisher of Faith, the perfect Sacrifice of God for our sin – bearing our sins in His body on the cross – and unless that happens we will die in our sins – **then we must embrace Him as Savior** and rejoice daily in the truth of the gospel, filled with gratitude. We need to live every day as people who rejoice every day as people whose sins are forgiven, sin's power over us is broken, savor the knowledge that hell's mouth has been shut and heavens gates opened to us. We need to preach the gospel to ourselves everyday. **'My sin, O the Bliss of this glorious thought...'**

The last thing is this – if it is true that unless we believe that Jesus is He – the Lamb of God slain for our sins – that people cannot come to God apart from faith in Christ – that they will not hear and believe and call unless we go – that they will die in their sins – then **our whole life should be bent toward this purpose** – whatever our occupation or calling. Our life should be lived as those who have been sent. What it should look like is that we are always going. If we have embraced the good news of the gospel, then we are lovers of God, and if that is true then we will love our neighbor as ourselves. And if this is true then the most loving thing we can do for anyone is to let them hear the gospel from our own lips. I like John Piper's definition of love: **'Love is helping people toward God'**.

If you are here this morning and you have never trusted Christ as Your Savior, today is the day, tomorrow may not come. Don't harden your heart yet again – embrace Him today as the Living Bread that came down from heaven to feed us – the Living Water that quenches every thirst of our souls – the Light of God that awakens us to eternal life, ultimate joy, and perfect peace.

And if you have trusted Christ, you are living in the wonderful light of the revelation that your sins are forgiven and you're anticipating living forever with Him in unimaginable joy and peace, then all your **priorities**, **pursuits**, **passions** and **plans** will be centered on making the good news of the gospel and glory of God known among all people. Today, there are over five thousand people groups, totaling more than 1.5 billion people who are currently classified as unreached and unengaged by the gospel. That means that we don't have time to waste in selfish pursuits and passions. If you've ever wondered what the will of God is for your life – this is it – to spend your life urgently and even recklessly declaring the glory and grace of God through the gospel to the world.

*Our gracious God and wonderful Savior,
Come Light of the world and shine on us. Show us the awful sin that condemns us and the marvelous grace that saves us. Show us our utter helplessness without You, and the sweetness of Your undeserved mercy. Work repentance and submission in our souls. Melt our hearts by the majesty and mercy of God. Let your light reveal our Savior, His ability to save ruined sinners, His arms outstretched for us, His heart big for us. Let us embrace Your grace that saves so that we might live by faith, feel the joy of our salvation, and have our hearts engaged for Your great purpose on this earth. Let all our priorities, passions, pursuits and plans be centered on making the good news of the gospel and the glory of God known in every nation, people, tribe and tongue on earth. Grant that we would give ourselves urgently and recklessly to delight ourselves in You through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*