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May 29, 2011

The God-Centered Gospel

I'd like to begin this morning by asking you to consider a question – an extremely important question. What is the ultimate purpose of the gospel? What is it that makes the gospel truly good news? Of course asking this question presupposes that you already understand and believe that the Gospel is at least in some sense good news. And it presupposes that you already understand the bad news that necessitates the good news of the gospel. My question for you this morning is to consider - what is the ultimate goodness of the gospel? Why is it good news that Jesus Christ was born in human form, lived a sinless life, died on a cross and then rose again? If you were to ask 100 professing Christians in this country today this question, what do you think the response would be? I'm going to guess you'd get responses like the following:

- To save us from going to Hell
- So we can go to Heaven
- To relieve us of our guilt
- To be free from pain and sin

Now to be clear, I would certainly not deny that any of these are not things that the Gospel secures for God's children. BUT I also do not believe that any of these are the ultimate good, the ultimate purpose of the Gospel. In fact you could add to this list: our sanctification, our forgiveness, our security in Christ. Even though all of these are very precious gifts that God has given us through the Gospel, they are also not the ultimate purpose or the ultimate good that God has purposed for us in the Gospel. Even justification, what many would call the heart of the gospel, and I would agree: our being declared righteous in Christ by faith in his effective atonement on our behalf, even justification is not the God's ultimate or final purpose in the gospel. It is a key, hallmark doctrine to be sure, but it is not an ultimate purpose. All of these are great gifts from God, but they do not stand on their own. They are not a purpose until themselves. The ultimate good of the Gospel, the ultimate purpose is for us to see God's glory – for us to be in awe, to be in love with Him. Let's read our main passage this morning, one verse from I Peter 3:18

I Peter 3:18 - For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,

Now just to provide context, Peter is writing here to encourage the church and warning them that they will suffer for Christ's sake. He is encouraging the church to not fear or be troubled and to respond appropriately when these trials and tribulations come. And this is where I see verse 18 as so key – as it provides a grounding or a basis for why they should not tremble at suffering or fear what is to come but instead cling to Christ.

Verse 18 contains in it, first an extremely concise gospel message. First, it says that “Christ suffered once for sin”. The fact that he suffered once is significant. It speaks primarily to the effectiveness of his suffering - in other words that was all that was needed. In the old covenant, sacrifices were made again and again for sins – because the sacrifices themselves were not sufficient. Hebrews 10:4 even tells us explicitly that it was impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. BUT the blood of Jesus is different. It was sufficient. It was effective. It was shed once, he suffered once for sins. And his work was accomplished. And it was accomplished because of the next clause, the fact that he was righteous. That was the reason the blood of bulls and goats was never sufficient to satisfy God's wrath - our sin, we of course being the “unrighteous” referred to in v18, our sin required a righteous sacrifice. And of course that is exactly what Jesus was. His sinless life was just as necessary as his death because without either he would not have been a worthy sacrifice. So these short 2 clauses: “Christ suffered once for sin, the righteous for the unrighteous” contain the heart of the gospel message. But again we must ask – for what purpose? The next clause tells us precisely that: “that he might bring us to God”. That is the ultimate, final, decisive, crucial goal of the Gospel – that we might be brought near to God, that we might love Him with all of our heart, strength, soul and mind and we are enabled to do that because of the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Verse 18 is what gives the context to Peter's hearers in Chapter 3 for why they should suffer gladly: because Jesus also suffered and that suffering has a purpose. It has an important God-centered, God-directed purpose – that Jesus might bring us, his elect people, to God. That is the ultimate goal of the Gospel – not that we would escape suffering either here or in Hell, not that we would enjoy Heaven either for its sake or for our enjoyment and pleasure but that we would be brought to God – that we would be centered on Him. God's goal in the Gospel is that our attention would be diverted, 180 degrees and turned from running away from Him in hatred and disdain but that we would be brought to Him in love and joy and hope in Him.

God's Glory in Scripture

Of course this is the point of all of Scripture, not just described here in I Peter. Think of how many Psalms speak of the writer's longing to be brought near to God. Psalm 42:1 “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God”. Or Psalm 70:4 “May those who love your salvation say evermore ‘God is great!’”.

The Psalmist does not say that 'Salvation is great' or that 'Being forgiven and freed from guilt is great'. No doubt those are great things and we can say them – but they are not ultimate. Those things are great because God is great! They are pointers to God's greatness, not ends in themselves. How else could Paul say in Philippians 1 that "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain"? He is centered on the ultimate hope of Christ – he is not happy his sins are forgiven and is now living out the "American dream". He is focused, sold out completely to do whatever he can to honor Christ on this earth and looking forward with eager anticipation to be in God's presence in eternity.

The whole tenor of Scripture is pointing to God and ultimately his glory, his immense greatness and the fame of his name. What did Moses plead for in Exodus 33? He asks to see God's glory. That is what Moses longs to see – even though He had been talking with God and as a foreshadowing of Christ interacting with God on behalf of the people already, it was something that made Moses want more. He wanted to see more of God, to see more of His greatness, his majesty, his glory.

As the doxology in Romans 11 says:

Romans 11:33-36 - Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! [34] "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" [35] "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" [36] For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Verse 36 contains no limiters in its language, it has no reservations – all things are from God, are through God, and are to God (or for Him). All of creation is made with the intentional purpose to display and exalt God's greatness and glory.

Why Does This Matter?

So why am I making a big deal about this this morning? I don't think that the idea that all of Scripture is pointing to God's greatness or glory is a new thing to most of you. I don't think for most of you the idea that the Gospel is centered on God is necessarily new to most of you either. BUT I do think that this is a radical idea to the world. It is a radical idea to most of what is termed Christianity in this country. And it is a radical idea to the flesh that remains in our own hearts – we need to be reminded of this as well. In so many ways, if you're a believer this morning: whether you have been one for 50 years or for 5 minutes, we remain to some extent not God-centered. Even though if we have been born again and have had our affections changed, had our desires changed to love God, we remain in danger of not loving God for who He is but instead for what benefits we gain. We are free from the guilt of sin, we feel the burden of guilt lifted, but we do not become wholly God-centered. We enjoy the benefits of

the gospel but do not see, do not fully appreciate, do not fully pursue the end goal of those benefits.

And of course the reason we do those things is because that is the natural state of our heart. That is the flesh that is inside me and inside you, and even if we're truly converted and we are being slowly changed – we still have that flesh that lingers with us that continues to distract us, that continues to tempt us and tries to stop us from pursuing the main goal of the Gospel. Instead our flesh wants us to try to twist the Gospel – use it as a means to ease our guilt, to try to twist it to make much of ourselves and our worth rather than God's goodness and His worth. Our flesh in no way wants us to drop all reliance on ourselves and instead glory and rejoice and rely on God and His mercy and grace and to revel in His goodness and glory.

We are so prone to making the mistake of loving the gift rather than the Giver. If we're not God-centered, but instead focused on ourselves, that is a perfectly natural response. We see God's gifts and because we think of ourselves more highly than we ought, we will love His benefits, His gifts, but not submit ourselves in love to the giver of the gifts. Let me illustrate further with this story – say I have done or said something unkind to my wife. There is now a chill in the air when we are in the same room and our relationship has been injured by this sin of mine. I know that I should apologize, seek forgiveness and restore our fellowship. But why? Why do I truly want to be forgiven? Is it because she makes me delicious dinners and I'm afraid she won't tonight if I don't apologize? Is it because I don't want the feeling of guilt to ruin my day because I know I have sinned against her? Is it because of a hundred other benefits she provides to me that I am afraid she will stop doing because I have not sought reconciliation? Or - is it because I truly love her? Is it because I love who she is regardless of how it benefits me and I want to be restored because of that love for her alone.

There is a diagnostic question that many of you may have heard before: "Would you be happy going to heaven if you knew Jesus was not there"? If you could go to heaven and be free from sin, be free from pain and suffering and death, but if Jesus would not be there, would you be happy? I fear the answer for many who claim to be Christians the answer is Yes. JC Ryle, says in one of his sermons:

But alas, how little fit for heaven are many who talk of 'going to heaven' when they die, while they manifestly have no saving faith, and no real acquaintance with Christ. You give Christ no honor here. You have no communion with Him. You do not love Him. Alas! What could you do in heaven? It would be no place for you. Its joys would be no joys for you. Its happiness would be a happiness into which you could not enter. Its employments would be a weariness and burden to your heart. Oh, repent and change before it is too late!

I think Ryle hits the nail on the head – if you don't glory in God and hope in Him and love Him above all His benefits and good gifts – what is there in Heaven for you? If all of eternity would be spent enjoying God and worshipping and magnifying Him, how will that possibly be enjoyable for someone who has not been made to have that focus on earth? I think in this case its hard to imagine a person with this mindset being converted at all. But, even if we are truly converted, even if God has changed our hearts, we can still make a similar mistake. We can still love God not primarily for who He is but we love Him for what He gives. We love Him for the Gospel's benefits and what He does for us, but not accurately in a way that ultimately makes much of Him. Our flesh continues to twist what I'll call our "practical theology" – not that we wouldn't answer the catechism questions right. Not that we wouldn't agree and say that the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. But do we live like that is our chief purpose? And though we don't live like that, are we okay with that? After all, we're still living in the flesh, of course we don't do that. But is that okay with us? Are we content to go on enjoying God's benefits and not truly concerned for the centrality of God's glory in our hearts and in our practical lives?

The Effects of Not Being God-Centered

What does this do when we are not God-centered "enough"? The first thing it does is that it robs God of the Glory that is due His name. When we stop short of the ultimate purpose God has for the Gospel, He is not honored as He should be. He is not honored because we do not make Him out to be who He truly is. And by the way we all do this. Not that we intend to necessarily but we have our own ways that we misconstrue who God is, the way our flesh wants Him to be. It may be we're viewing him as too much like us or even as a genie who grants you wishes or some other way. And you may think, well I certainly don't believe God is a genie who grants me wishes or some benevolent grandfather but do you live your life like that sometimes? Do you wait to really come to God until you need something from Him? How often do we betray our theological answers with the way we practically live our lives?

The whole of scripture points to God's glory as the primary message. All of creation points to it as well. As Psalm 8 says "O Lord how Lord how majestic is your name in all the earth. You have set your glory before the heavens." Or as Psalm 19 says "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork". I could read dozens of other Psalms and other passages where the writer reflects on God's greatness and beauty and majesty and power. That is the message of God's word and the purpose for which he created the world. And yet when we misconstrue the gospel to be about ourselves, we are in serious error. When we make the mistake of thinking that the gospel is primarily about how much God values us that He sent His Son to die. God does love us – but the Gospel is not about how much he values us – it is about how much He values His glory and displaying His glory to all of creation. Our text this

morning tells us that Christ suffered for sins so that we might be brought near to God – NOT that God might be brought near to us. There is a huge difference in who we place at the center of our Gospel descriptions.

On the flip side of the same coin not being God-centered, not seeing that God is the ultimate goodness of the Gospel also misplaces our Hope and short changes us of true Joy (or at least more full joy).

We read the first verse of Psalm 8 a minute ago, here are verses 3 and 4: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” These verses make clear what our response should be when seeing God’s greatness and glory – we should marvel that God even takes notice of us. We should be astonished that a great God would even take notice of us – much less that He cares for us! This is what we were created for – to be insignificantly small in comparison to God. And because this is what we were created for this is the only circumstance that makes us truly happy. It is when we elevate ourselves and puff up ourselves and think too highly of ourselves that we will have little hope to have true joy. One of the songs we like to sing most with our kids is called “My God is So Big”. Oh how I hope that God will cause their little hearts to be changed and to understand the simple message of that song and realize how big God really is. That’s not just what my children need – to see God’s greatness – that’s what my heart needs as well. When I am struggling with worry or with doubt about the current circumstances that is when I need to remember how big and great my God is. And by the way when I am not struggling with worry and doubt – that is also when I need to remember how big and great my God is. Because if I do not, my flesh will surely supply the pride to make me feel as if my present contentment is due to my own credit and my own glory. That is precisely what Satan wants us to think – in hard, difficult circumstances He wants us to doubt God’s greatness, His power and His goodness. He wants us to question all the attributes of God that essentially comprise His glory. And again in good times, times of plenty in our lives, he wants us to ignore those glories of God to instead gaze at ourselves and compliment ourselves for the goodness we supposedly have, for the good fortune we have created for ourselves. The answer to both of these seemingly opposite circumstances is the same – in good or in want, we should be God-centered. We should seek to incline our hearts to God and continually remember and recount his glories and majesty and greatness. That is where true joy is found, in remembering our true position, our true small stature before a great God. Again back to the Psalms, Psalm 16 starts with “O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, ‘You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you’”. And after that confession of Jesus as David’s only source of good, he ends with these words in verse 11 “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore”.

Look around and see in the world what happens when we elevate ourselves and make life about exalting ourselves and not God. Does this create happiness? Does this make for fulfilled, truly satisfied people? Of course you know the answer. And yet our flesh continues to lie and tell us that all we need is more – more self-glorifying, more pleasure seeking, more focusing on ourselves. It is so unnatural for us to think that exalting and glorifying something besides ourselves is what will make us truly happy. But of course that is the truth, that is the only way to gain true Joy. As Blaise Pascal once said “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, and it can never be filled by a created thing. It can only be filled by God, made known through Jesus Christ.”

Application

Let me conclude this morning with a couple of points of application. How should our being God-centered work itself out practically in our life? Well I could probably make this a whole separate sermon but let me leave you with three specific exhortations.

First, we should repent of loving God’s gifts more than we love God. I think the first step to doing that is to examine our hearts and realize how much we do this. This essentially boils down to realizing how self-centered we really are. This is a painful process – and I think in so many ways this is the process of sanctification – continuing to have our ties to our flesh severed and our love purified and placed wholly on God alone.

Second, we should continually remind ourselves that true Joy is found only in God. How often we forget this as well – again not intellectually but practically. We just read Psalm 16:11 a minute ago, let me read it again: “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore”. This is a promise of God that is again unqualified – in God’s presence there is fullness of Joy. We would do well to continually remind ourselves and each other of that verse and seek fulfillment only in Him and not in the cheap, worthless mud pies of this world.

And finally, let me exhort us to continue to seek eternal things and not things of this earth. We need to remember the big picture – that we are only on this earth for a short while. We are aliens and sojourners in this world and we have citizenship in another country, as the Hall of Faith chapter, Hebrews 11:13-16 tells us “These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”

Finally, let me close by reading this quote from Jonathan Edwards:

The redeemed have all their objective good in God. God himself is the great good which they are brought to the possession and enjoyment of by redemption. He is the highest good, and the sum of all that good which Christ purchased. God is the inheritance of the saints; he is the portion of their souls. God is their wealth and treasure, their food, their life, their dwelling place, their ornament and diadem, and their everlasting honor and glory. They have none in heaven but God; he is the great good which the redeemed are received to at death, and which they are to rise to at the end of the world. The Lord God is the light of the heavenly Jerusalem; and is the "river of the water of life" that runs, and "the tree of life that grows, in the midst of the paradise of God." The glorious excellencies and beauty of God will be what will forever entertain the minds of the saints, and the love of God will be their everlasting feast. The redeemed will indeed enjoy other things; they will enjoy the angels, and will enjoy one another; but that which they shall enjoy in the angels, or each other, or in any thing else whatsoever that will yield them delight and happiness, will be what shall be seen of God in them.