

Preaching the Power of Grace

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My concern for the role of grace in sanctification had an intensely personal beginning. The inadequacies of my preaching were torturing me and I wondered whether I should leave the ministry. I could not discern what was wrong. Church members complimented my messages, but their own lives were consistently plagued by depression, addictions, and anger with each other. I had to question, “If I am such a good preacher, then why are the people I serve doing so badly.” Ultimately I determined a central reason for their despair, their escapist compulsions, and their judgmental impatience with one another was a pattern of thought I was encouraging.

Week after week I told the imperfect people in my church to “do better.” When God’s people only hear the imperatives of the Word, they are forced to conclude that their holiness is a product of their efforts. What I needed to learn was that the cure was not preaching less of Scripture, but more. In particular I needed to learn to preach each text in its redemptive context. No Scripture is so limited in purpose as only to give us moral instruction or lifestyle correction. Paul says, even the law itself functions as our “schoolmaster to lead us to Christ” (Gal. 3:24). Jesus also says that all the Scriptures the Jews searched “testify of me” (John 5:39).

By revealing the holy nature of the God who provides redemption and the finite nature of humanity that requires redemption, the law and the prophets point to the necessity of a Redeemer and prepare the human heart to seek him. Because of the great disproportion between our best works and God’s righteousness, we are always and forever incapable of the righteousness that would reconcile us to a holy God. Our best works are judged but “filthy rags” in the Old Testament (Isaiah 64:6), and the Savior echoes, “When we have done all that we should do, we are still unworthy servants” (Luke 17:10). Thus, in context the text is never about moral instruction alone, but always about our dependence on the Savior to be and do what his Word requires.

Christ-centered exposition of Scripture does not require us to reveal Jesus by mysterious alchemies of allegory or typology, but rather identifies how every text functions in furthering our understanding of who Christ is, what the Father sent him to do, and why. The goal is not to make Jesus magically appear from every detail of Hebrew narrative or every metaphor of Hebrew poetry (such practices lead to allegorical errors), but rather to show where every text stands in relation to the person and/or work of Christ whose grace achieves our salvation.

One approach to signaling the redemptive nature of biblical texts is determining how a passage *predicts*, *prepares* for, *reflects* or *results* from the person and/or work of Christ. This approach seeks to identify how the passage furthers our understanding of what Christ will do or has done in redemptive history. These four categories of redemptive/historical explanation are not, should not be, rigidly categorized. Other classifications also function well in relating the many varieties of Scripture passages to the person and work of Christ. The goal is not to determine a master metaphor that will

provide a proper niche for all passages. Such inflexible categorizing of texts typically limits the implications of the Bible's own rich variety of metaphors that are used to relate redemptive truth (e.g., kingdom, family, Sabbath, tree).

As long as we observe the text through spectacles whose lenses focus how the Holy Spirit is 1) revealing the nature of God that provides redemption and/or 2) the nature of humanity that requires redemption, we will interpret as Christ did when he showed his disciples how all Scripture spoke of him (Luke 24:27). Asking these two questions (i.e., using these two lenses) maintains faithful exposition and demonstrates that redemptive interpretation does not require the preacher to run from Genesis to Revelation in every sermon to show a text's redemptive context. While there is nothing wrong with such macro-interpretations, it is also possible – and often more fruitful – to expound the doctrinal statements or relational interactions in the immediate text that reveal some dimension of God's grace. The relational interactions can include how God acts toward his people (e.g., providing strength for weakness, pardon for sin, provision in want, faithfulness in response to unfaithfulness) or how an individual representing God provides for others (e.g., David's care for Mephibosheth, Solomon's wisdom recorded for others less wise).

In essence, redemptive exposition requires that we identify an aspect of our fallen condition the Holy Spirit addresses in the passage he inspired for our edification, and then show God's way out of the human dilemma. Such a pattern not only exposes the human predicament that requires God's relief, it forces the preacher to focus on a divine solution. His glory is always the apex of the sermon. The vaunting of human ability and puffing of human pride vanish in such preaching not because imperatives of the law of God are minimized, but because God is always the hero of the text. He enables our righteousness, pardons our unrighteousness, and provides for our weakness.

This consistent preaching of the dimensions of the grace of God does not render superfluous the commands of the law, but rather gives them new power by providing both our biblical motivation and enablement to honor them. Such preaching does not define grace as the world does – a license to do as I please – but rather as the Bible teaches: a mercy so overwhelming that it compels us to do what pleases God. The motivating power of grace is evident in Christ's words, "If you love me you will obey what I command" (John 14:15).

Because redemptive interpretation of Scripture leads to sermons marked by consistent adulation of the mercy of God in Christ, hearts in which the Spirit dwells are continually filled with more cause to love God. This love becomes the primary motivation for Christian obedience as hearts in which the Spirit dwells respond with love for their Savior. For the believer there is no greater spiritual motivation than grace-stimulated love – not fear, or guilt, or gain. Burning love for God fueled by consistent preaching of grace makes the Christian want to walk with God and follow the commands that please him. This is why the Apostle Paul could say the grace of God teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions (see Titus 2:12). The Bible recognizes no definition of grace that excuses sin or encourages moral license.

When grace is properly perceived, the law is not trashed; it is treasured. The standards that honor God we want to honor because we love him. In grace-based preaching the rules do not change; the reasons do. We serve God because we love him, not in order to make him love us. After all, how could production of more filthy rags

make God love us? He releases us from the performance treadmill that promises to provide holiness through human effort, but the affect on the heart is love that is more constrained to please him. God's overwhelming and unconditional mercy ensures that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1), but rather than promoting license, this kindness leads to repentance (Rom. 2:4). We want to turn from the sin that grieves the One we love (Eph. 4:30).

The primary message that stimulates such love is the cross. Contemporary theologians sometimes wince at such statements because they seem to slight the Resurrection, Second Coming, and other key redemptive events. Still, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he resolved to preach nothing among them but Christ crucified, he reflected a profound understanding of humanity (1 Cor. 2:2). The Father's gift of his Son stirs the heart at its deepest level to make it tender toward God, receptive of his Word and zealous for his will. The old preaching imperative, "make much of the blood," reflects great wisdom about human motivation. The cross stimulates love for God, the Resurrection zeal for his purposes, and the Second Coming perseverance in his cause. All are necessary, but God's mercy toward the undeserving – as it unfolds through Scripture and culminates in the Cross – is still the message that programs the heart to receive and employ all the other truths of the Gospel.

Christ's victory on the cross provides freedom from both the guilt and power of sin. The apostle Paul reminds us that because Jesus resides in us, we possess the resurrection power that raised Jesus from the dead (Eph. 1:19-23; Gal. 2:20). John adds, "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4). This is more than a promise that Jesus will add to our strength or aide our resolve. Because we are in union with Christ, all of the merits of his righteousness have become ours and his Spirit now enables us to resist the sin that he reveals to us. In the classic terms of systematic theology, once we were not able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*) but now we are able not to sin (*posse non peccare*). Enough of our sin nature persists that we will not be perfect until we are with Jesus in eternal glory (*non posse peccare*), but even now we are freed from Satan's lie that we cannot change. Sin has no more dominion over us. We can make progress against the besetting sins of our lives because we are alive in Christ.

The release of sin's guilt and the reception of Christ's benefits are the full Gospel of grace. Sometime preachers only preach half the Gospel indicating that the debt of our sin has been paid by the suffering of Christ (i.e., his passive righteousness). This is a glorious and precious truth for all Christians who know their need of forgiveness. Yet, even if our debt has been paid, it is still possible to live with a sense of inadequacy and humiliation because of our sin. It is as though we recognize that our debt has been paid, and though we are grateful, our spiritual math indicates that we now only have a zero sum balance. Christ's death in our behalf makes us feel guilty and small rather than free of debt. For such feelings we need the second half of the Gospel. We have not only been freed of our debt, we have also been supplied with Christ's righteousness (resulting from his active and passive righteousness).

Before God we are already accounted as heirs of heaven, co-heirs with Christ and children of God. This adoption signals our worth and preciousness to God prior to our entry into heaven. So sure is our status and so rich is our righteousness, that our Heavenly Father already considers us holy and pleasing to him (Rom. 12:1) and has already seated us in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). Because we are in union with Christ, his

status is ours (Gal. 2:20). Though we are striving with the power of Christ's Spirit to overcome sin in our lives, God has already reckoned us holy by his grace embraced through our faith. Our positional sanctification gives us the foundation for our progressive sanctification. Future grace awaits us in glory but we already possess its status through the certainty of the promises of God and the guarantee of the Spirit in us (2 Cor. 5:5).

Hatred of sin, freedom from past guilt, possession of Christ's righteousness and power, and assurance of future grace combine to equip the Christian for the holy race God calls us to run. However, it is important to remember that all of these truths rest on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5). No sentence in Scripture more underscores the need for Christ-centered preaching. A message full of imperatives (e.g., Be like ... a commendable Bible character, Be good ... by adopting these moral behaviors, Be disciplined ... by diligence in these practices) but devoid of grace is antithetical to the Gospel. These "Be messages" are not wrong in themselves, but by themselves they are spiritually deadly because they imply that our path to God is made by our works.

When we preach a biblical imperative in isolation from grace we take what should be a blessing and make it as deadly for the soul as an untreated cashew nut is for the body. Africans love the sweetness and nourishment of the cashew nut, but they know that the nut in its natural form can be deadly. Unless heat is added, cyanide the nut contains will poison those who ingest it. Similarly the imperatives of the law are good and nourishing for the Christian life unless the warmth of the Gospel is lacking. When no explanations of grace accompany the requirements of the law, it also becomes spiritually deadly ... creating despair for those who honestly realize that they cannot fully meet its requirements or stimulating pride in those who naturally think they can.

We must remember that even our best works deserve God's reproof unless they are sanctified by Christ (*WCF*, XVI.5). God delights in our good works only when they are presented in Christ (*WCF*, XVI.6). This means even if we do not mention Jesus by name in the explanation of a text, we must show where the text stands in relation to his grace in order to provide hope that the obligations of the text will be fulfilled. Just as the necessity of a Christ-focus in all is indicated by Jesus words, "Apart from me you can do nothing," so also the power of such a focus is indicated in Paul's words, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

How does this strengthening actually occur? The power that enables true obedience is from God and we access it through a walk of faith. We walk with God leaning on his strength, resting in the goodness of his providence and believing his Word. This trust relationship is ultimately the source of our strength. We act with the strength that comes from faith that the Good Shepherd will be true to his Word and will accomplish what is right for us as we obey him. The power of this faith is not in the strength or degree of our faith, but rather resides in the power and goodness of the One we trust. As an elevator is effective not on the basis of the strength of the person who walks in but on the basis of the strength of the cable and motors that power it, so also our blessing depends not so much on the strength in us as in relying on the power of God. Obedience is a result of faith in the grace of God, not a means to produce his grace. Blessings flow from obedience but these, too, are the product of the grace in which we trust.

The power that comes from this grace initially comes from the belief that what God's Word says is true. The Bible says that those who place their faith in Christ are new creatures who have the power to resist sin (2 Cor. 5:17). If we do not believe this, then we have no power to combat the sin. Yet, if we believe that God has already provided the assurance and resources for victory no matter how great the opposition, then we will act and we will overcome. If we do not believe that God has forgiven our past, then there will be no reason to risk failure or deny our lusts now or in the future. Yet, if we believe that our past is forgiven, our present is blessed and our future is secure, we will repent of sin and return to our walk with him.

The reason that we engage in the Christian disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, Christian worship and fellowship is not to bribe God to act in accord with his nature, but to feed our faith in his unchanging nature so that we will consistently act in accord with his Word. Too many Christians practice the disciplines of the Christian life with the intention of turning God's face toward them and inclining his heart to favor them. They forget that God has loved them with an eternal and infinite love. He turned his face from our sin when he placed it on his dying Son, but now he never looks away from us and his heart never ebbs in affection for us. Every act of providence is for our eternal good from infinite love.

Communing with God in prayer, understanding his ways through his Word, and embracing his glory and goodness through Christian fellowship and worship are means by which enabling grace fills our lives. These disciplines of grace are nourishments of the faith that we need to act in accord with God's purposes. They do not force or leverage God's hand, but enable us to see it, grasp it and receive the blessings it provides. The Christian disciplines do not earn blessings, but guide us into the paths where God's grace has planted his blessings.

If God's blessings depended upon the adequacy of our performance of his requirements, then we would know no blessings and would eventually turn from him. We do not practice the disciplines of the Christian life with the expectation that they would ever be sufficient in quality or duration to merit God's favor, but with the expectation that they will help us better to know, love and trust him. The disciplines defeat this purpose if they are preached as payment to a god with an insatiable appetite for human sweat and tears.

The Christian disciplines can be compared to the nourishment that parents encourage children to eat. If parents promise their love only on the condition that children will eat, then the children may very well clean their plate, but will grow up hating the food that nourishes them – and, ultimately, the parents who made their love subject to a child's abilities. By contrast, the parents who promise unconditional love may still struggle with the eating habits of their children, but as the children mature they will naturally love that which nourishes them and the hands that provide it. In a similar way, preaching of the Christian disciplines helps God's people mature and cherish these aides to faith when they perceive that such practices nourish their growth in grace rather than purchase it.

Confidence in the mercy the Father purchased solely by the blood of his Son, belief in our new nature and secure future provided entirely by our union with Christ, and trust in God's paths and providence consistently nurtured by the disciplines of grace – all combine to constitute the walk of faith that the Spirit uses to stimulate repentance and

empower faithfulness. The first lesson of this walk of faith for preachers is that while we must convict of sin, we are not finished preaching until we have also convinced of grace. Full application of the Word requires us to expound grace that not only teaches God's people what to do, but why to do it (out of love for him) and how (in dependence upon him). The second lesson is equally vital: without love there is no faith to empower obedience. Faith is the confidence that God is present, sovereign and good (Heb. 11:1, 6). We will put no faith in one we do not love. The faith that empowers the Christian life requires love for God.

Christian preaching must consistently proclaim the grace of God because to love him is to seek him. The *why* is the *how*; motive and enablement unite in holiness. Great love for God is great power for obedience. This is not only because love is necessary for true faith, but because love is power. The person that sins and claims that he still loves God may not think that he is lying, but in the moment that the individual sinned, he loved the sin more than he loved God. Such a person is no different than an adulterer who says to his wife, "The other woman meant nothing to me; I still love you." The man may still love his wife, but in the moment of the sin, he loved the other person or, at least, the passion more than he loved his wife.

Preaching the Christ-focus of all Scripture is not simply an interpretive scheme or an exegetical device; it is regular exposure of the heart of God to ignite love for him in the heart of believers. We preach grace to fan into flame zeal for the Savior. Our goal is not merely academic but relational and spiritual. We consistently expound the Gospel truths that pervade Scripture to fill the heart of believers with love for God that drives out love for the world. Without love for the world, its temptations have no power. We are not tempted to do what we have no desire to do. A preeminent love for God makes doing his will the believers' greatest joy. Thus, this joy is the listeners' strength and the preacher's privilege (Neh. 8:10).

Our preaching becomes a weekly joy when we discern that our task is not to harangue or guilt parishioners into servile duty, but rather to fill them up with love for God by extolling the wonders of his grace. Consistent preaching of these assurances drives despair and pride from the Christian life. As a consequence, congregations find that spiritual fatigue, competitiveness and insensitivity wane and in their place flow new joy, understanding of the weak, care for the hurting, forgiveness for those who offend and, even, love for the lost. In short, the Christian community becomes an instrument of grace because God's love becomes the essence of the church's existence.

The necessity of grace in all preaching that is true to the Gospel leads to a basic question that all must answer to affirm that they are preaching the Christianity of the Bible: "Do I preach grace?" Would your sermons be perfectly acceptable in a synagogue or mosque because you are only encouraging better moral behavior that any major religion would find acceptable? If this is so, the path to a better, more Christian message is not through preaching any less of Scripture, but rather through preaching more. Do not stop preaching until Christ's grace has found its way into the heart of your message. In this way the people to whom you preach will walk with him and his joy will be their strength to do his will.