

Living with Mystery
October 6, 2013

I want to take you to an important event this morning. Think about the night before Jesus died. Think about the things that were going through His mind that night. Think about the stress He was feeling. To know that on the morrow He would be killed, executed. But more than that, He was going to be crucified. It was a humiliating, torturous method of killing someone. It was filled with pain for many hours.

The bucolic days of traveling with His disciples were over. The times of wowing the crowds were done. Now came the return of His glory, if He could just make it through the crucifixion.

And so we have the longest recorded prayer of Jesus, ever, on that night. It is filled with passion and purpose. In this prayer we see what is most on His heart, as His public ministry has ended.

We're not going to look at everything in this prayer. We can only hit on one part this morning, but it was dear to Him. It was important to Him. It was high on His priority list. That is why it is stated in this prayer.

John 17:23 (NIV) May they be brought to complete unity...

The "they" are His present and future followers, including us. Jesus wants us to be one, one in faith, one in hope, one in love, and one in purpose. It was so important to Him that He was praying for it this night. If it was so important to Him, it should be important to us. We should strive to maintain the bonds of peace and unity over anything that could divide us.

There are many things can divide us, things that do divide other Christians. We must guard ourselves against such divisive things.

There is one such thing that is dividing Christians today, especially some Southern Baptists. How to deal with divisive issues is the subject of my sermon this morning.

Life is full of mystery. There is so much we don't know about our world. There is so much about the oceans, medicine, and disease that we don't know. Maybe one day man will find out all there is to know about the world. Maybe one day man's technology, science, and research will clear up all the mysteries of the oceans, of medicine, nutrition, and disease. Our world, as big as it is, is finite. The oceans and all that is in them are finite. There is only so much to learn about the oceans. One day, we may learn all of that information.

But one particular subject is infinite. One subject is greater than our knowledge will EVER be on that subject. That subject is God. Yahweh, the creator of heaven and earth is bigger than we can understand. He is wiser than we can know. He is more powerful than we can imagine. We will spend eternity learning about God, and never learning all there is to know.

Even things that apply to us now are beyond our knowing unless God, at some future point, reveals them to us. God has revealed much to us in the Bible. But God has not given us all the answers we want. We have many questions that God has not deigned to answer. God does things that puzzle us without explaining why.

We see this characteristic in Jesus. Jesus did a lot of things that puzzled His disciples. Let me give you several examples of this. For one, Jesus ate supper with tax collectors when invited to do so. The tax collectors were on the lowest rung of Jewish society, even lower than prostitutes. Second, Jesus traveled through Samaria, even though the Jews hated the Samaritans. Third, Jesus treated women, children, and even Roman soldiers with kindness and respect, something they rarely got from Jewish society or Jewish men. And fourth, Jesus did things to make Himself less popular. On one occasion Jesus said to do something no Jew would imagine doing.

John 6:54 (NIV) Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

To Jews these were blasphemous words. Not only were they not to eat human flesh, there were many kinds of animals, birds, and other creatures they were commanded not to eat. Nor were they to drink blood of any kind. Jesus did not explain what he meant by these words. He simply said this blasphemous thing and let it hang there. And look at the result.

John 6:66 (NIV) From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

You don't do these kinds of things if you want people to believe in you and follow you. Yet, Jesus did it often.

Today, we know what Jesus meant on that day, on that subject. We know He was speaking metaphorically about His coming death, and how our baptism identifies us with His death on the cross. That's what He meant by His body and blood. We put our faith in His death for our own forgiveness so that we can receive eternal life. But Jesus did not explain all that before the cross. And while we have THAT one figured out, other things in the Bible are not explained to our satisfaction.

Heaven is a mystery to us. We know very little about what heaven is like. Nor are we told much about Hell. Even things we know a lot about are not fully explained.

For example, we know some of the different aspects of salvation. But there are still unanswered questions. Let me review with you some, not all, of what is involved when you become a Christian. These are NOT in any particular order.

- **You admit to God your sinfulness and need for a savior.**
- **You confess your belief in Jesus as the savior God sent, that He died for your sins, and was raised from the dead.**
- **You place your faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins.**

In addition to these,

- **God puts His Spirit in you (indwelling).**
- **God Justifies you.**
- **The Holy Spirit regenerates your heart (new birth).**

Now, I specifically mentioned that these were not in any particular order. I STRESSED that because some Christians have created a dispute involving a couple of these elements. The two elements involved are regeneration and faith. Both of these can be seen in John 3. This is a subject that divides some Christians today.

The first involves regeneration.

John 3:3 (NIV) ... Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

To be born again is regeneration. This is accomplished by the Holy Spirit. You don't do this, God does. The other element in this dispute IS something you do. Jesus speaks of it further on in his conversation with Nicodemus.

John 3:16 (NIV) For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

In order to inherit eternal life in the kingdom of God you must put your faith in Jesus as your Savior and Lord. Eternal life is promised to those who believe on Jesus Christ.

Now, the need of both of these is plainly laid out in the Bible. What the Bible does not reveal is which comes first. Which comes first is a mystery that God has not explained in the Bible.

Some Christians believe that AFTER a person puts their faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit enters that person and regenerates their heart. Others believe the Holy Spirit regenerates the heart FIRST, enabling you to put your faith in Jesus.

I know that doesn't sound like it makes a big deal of difference. But some Christians actually argue over these things. They make this issue such a big deal that it divides Christians, churches, and even denominations. I know of at least one church in our county where this was one of several divisive issues.

And the strange thing is, God doesn't explain which comes first. God did not answer this question that some people have about which comes first.

Now think about this with me. God is all-knowing and all-wise. Therefore God knew that we would have some major problems over this question of which came first. He knew some people would take this issue and run to extremes with it, causing division in His church. And God, being all-wise could have explained the conversion process more fully in the Bible. But He chose not to.

Why? Why did God not make things plainer so we would not have this issue, and some other issues, dividing Christians? I think God left the mysteries in to test us.

God is in the habit of testing His people. In the history of Israel God purposely did things to test the Israelites. He tested their faith. He tested their obedience. The Bible says He fed them manna to test them. The Bible says He left Canaanites in the promised land to test them.

In that same way, God tests us today. I believe God purposely has left us with mystery... to test us.

What is God testing for? **God uses the mysteries to test our faith and love.** The two qualities God wants most in us are faith in Him and love towards each other. That runs all through the New Testament.

Faith is trust. God wants us to trust Him even when we don't understand. Let's go back to the earlier passage in John 6. Jesus speaks those really hard words about blood.

John 6:66-69 (NIV)

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Peter too was offended by what Jesus said. He did not know whether to take Jesus literally or figuratively. He did not focus on what he did not know. Instead he focused on what he was sure of. He was sure Jesus was the holy one of God and had the words of eternal life. So he was going to hang in there with Jesus based on what was clear to him and trust Jesus for what was unclear.

That is where God wants us. God wants us to trust Him with what we don't understand because of what we do understand. He wants us to trust Him with what is still mystery because of what is no longer mystery to us.

God doesn't explain the doctrine of election. God doesn't explain the trinity. God doesn't spell out exactly when the rapture occurs. God doesn't make clear whether the 10 commandments are to be treated differently from the other 603. God doesn't make clear whether the Day of the Lord and the Coming of the Lord are one and the same, or two separate events. There are mysteries in the Bible. God left them there to test our faith and love.

There is a phrase that is just about worn out today. It is "thinking outside the box". "Thinking outside the box" means to think of new ways to see an issue and determine solutions.

The truth is man likes the box. We like knowing. We like understanding. We dislike mystery. And if we aren't given the meaning, we like making explanations up. We don't like to say, "I don't know." We like to say, "Well, I think it means...." We want things boxed up, nailed down, spelled out in black and white, with no shades of gray. We want this for all the doctrines and structures of the church. We prefer having things in a box.

There is a feeling of security in that. There is also a feeling of pride in that. We can invent our own answer and feel proud of ourselves. When some Christians say things like, "Well all Christians know a lot of truth, but we're closer than the others", that's a prideful thing to say.

We try to explain things that God hasn't explained. We call them guesses, theories, or possibilities, but over time they can become orthodoxy, at least to us. And then we separate ourselves from other Christians over our theories.

God uses the mysteries to test our faith. God is also testing our love for each other. God wants us to live together in unity. Only one command of Jesus is given such emphasis that Jesus calls it a "new" command. That is His command to love each other as He loved us. This love for each other is not an emotion, but an action. It is not sexual, but brotherly. It is not aloof, but caring. Yet so many Christians ignore it and think they are serving Jesus faithfully when they divide over man's explanations of God's mysteries.

Our church has a good record of avoiding division over the mysteries. We must continue to love each other, even when we disagree. **The things God has not explained should NEVER divide us.**

Jesus wanted unity. We have to agree on the essentials, the things God makes clear. Salvation is found in no one other than Jesus. That is clear. Every person must put his or her faith in Jesus to be saved. That is clear. If anyone says, there are many paths to heaven, that is when we divide.

When I was a police chaplain, I worked with chaplains from other Christian denominations. What enabled us to work together despite our differences was to agree on the essentials, ignore our differences in the non-essentials, and live Christ's love towards each other at all times. This is how you work together even when you don't agree with each other on everything.

Many years ago an older man knocked on our church door one weekday. His son had moved to this area and the man was looking for a church to attend here in hopes of bringing his son with him. The dad lived in the county south of here and attended a church a good distance away.

So the man was asking me questions about what I believed and taught. At one point, he said, what if I join your church and one day you preach something that I disagree with. I asked him if he agreed with everything his current pastor ever preached. He said he did. I told him he better not leave that church. The likelihood that he would find someone else he agreed with 100% was pretty slim.

To fulfill Jesus' prayer for unity, we don't have to be in perfect agreement about every possible question and answer we have about what is in the Bible. God doesn't explain every mystery or answer our every question. Our unity is not based on guesses to what God doesn't explain.

Instead, our unity is based on what is clear. It is clear that salvation is found in no one else than Jesus Christ. If someone insists that there are many ways to heaven, that is an issue to divide over. But guessing about which came first, the chicken or the egg is not worth dividing over. And that is about as important as some of the issues Christians do divide over.

Jesus prayed for our unity. That was important to Him and must be important to us. Our unity is built on the love of Jesus for us. Our unity is maintained as we live out such love for each other. Let us not disappoint Him.

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Something that is abundantly clear in the Bible is that all of us are sinners before God and in need of a savior. The penalty for our sins, unless forgiven, will eventually be hell. The only way to avoid hell is to put your faith in the Savior that God sent you, Jesus Christ.

Jesus died on the cross as a substitute for you. He died to pay for your sins. God accepted His death for sins and proved that by raising Him from the dead.

Today, believe on Jesus. Confess your sinfulness to Him. Confess you need Him as your Savior. Turn your life over to Him as your lord. Make this your prayer today.