



Maintaining a God-centered Focus in Ministry (Important things to remember as Nor'wood Bible Church ministers the gospel)

The Gospel – Not just an entry point, but also a way of life

In an attempt to be a congregation that is God-centered, Christ-exalting and Holy Spirit-inspired, having a perspective assessment is a necessary thing. The natural sinful tendency of all Christians, and therefore church ministries, is to make more and more of man and less and less of God. But we must fight this perpetual drift. Isaiah 42:8 says, *“I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other...”* Since the Lord God is jealous for His glory, His church should also be jealous for His glory and strive to focus on God as the source of all goodness and grace, resisting the natural drift. For this purpose the following information gives a brief presentation of vital truths that we must keep before the eyes of every minister and ministry of Nor'wood Bible Church.

We start at the beginning of spiritual life when a child of God is born again. The very essence of the gospel is that the grace and mercy of God flows down from God as He takes the initiative to call sinful hearts from death to life, from darkness to light and from slavery to sin to slavery to righteousness. It is God who grants to every child of God faith, repentance and forgiveness.

Acts 5:31 “God exalted [Jesus] at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.”

Acts 11:18 “When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’”

Acts 13:48 “And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”

Ephesians 2:8-9 “⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

The gospel is “good news” because it declares the kindness of God to meet the need of sinful men and women by declaring them righteous in and through the work of Jesus Christ. But it is important to remember that the gospel is not simply a past event for a believer. The gospel is an ongoing display of God’s grace that repeatedly meets our deficiency and depravity with His sufficiency and righteousness. The Christian life does not start with the gospel of grace and then progress with personal determination. Paul questioned the Galatian churches about this same type of distortion of the gospel, asking *“Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”* (Galatians 3:3) Gospel grace is made known through the work of Jesus Christ as our living Savior and Lord and it is in this gospel grace believers consistently stand.

Romans 5:1-2 ¹ Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with

God through our Lord Jesus Christ.² **Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.** Galatians 2:20 *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And **the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.***

Man-centered religion attempts to meet God's standard with personal performance. This is the natural tendency of all human beings and this desire is what makes religion dangerous. God's favor cannot be earned! Yet every prompting of the flesh wants to try. The true gospel, the one we live in and stand in every moment of every day, is focused on what God does for us rather than on what we do for God. The grand and glorious reality is that the grace of God continually flows down to us. God mercifully opens our hearts to repeatedly receive His grace and goodness by faith as a life-giving stream. In contrast, the sinful heart of man wants to try to pump up the flow from man to God to please Him and earn His favor. It is a joy-robbing sin and for some it is deadly.

The Glory of the All-sufficient Benevolent God

God does not need us. God has no deficits. He is the all-sufficient, benevolent God and out of His fullness and grace He supplies everything that is needed. The Apostle Paul instructed the Athenian philosophers about the sufficiency of God in Acts 17:24-25. ²⁴ *The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,* ²⁵ **nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.** Some will say, "But aren't we told to serve the Lord?" Yes, we are told many places in Scripture to serve the Lord. However, we are not expected to serve the Lord from the resources of human effort and determination. We serve the Lord in the strength that He supplies. This becomes the most consistent deduction as we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. Note the following verses:

1 Corinthians 15:10 *But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, **though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.***

John 15:5 *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for **apart from me you can do nothing.**"*

John 6:63 *"It is the Spirit who gives life; **the flesh is no help at all.** The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."*

Philippians 2:12-13 ¹² *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for **it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.***

Colossians 1:28-29 ²⁸ *Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, **struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.***

Few people understand this concept more than Dr. John Piper. He is the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota and a prolific writer. God has used Dr. Piper to inspire many people with a renewed delight in the goodness and grace of God. A phrase that is repeated in many of his books and throughout his ministry sums it up—"God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." In a message titled "**Can we give anything to**

Christ?' John Piper gives an illustration that aptly makes the point concerning the sufficiency and benevolence of God in all things.

Jesus gives us the gift of himself and we ask, "Now what can I render to Jesus for all the benefits of his fellowship?" Answer: Ask him for his help. That's the gift he wants.

The reason Christ wants this is because he always wants to get the glory while we get the benefit. Glory comes to him when we depend on him rather than try to enrich him. If we come to him with gifts—as though he needed something—then we put him in the position of a needy person, and we're the benefactors. He always wants to be the one who is infinitely self-sufficient. Therefore the only gifts that we can bring Jesus are gifts of praise, thanks, longing, and neediness.

A fountain is not glorified by us hauling buckets of dirty water up the mountain and pouring them in. A fountain—a spring in a mountain—is glorified, rather, by us lying down at the edge of the stream, putting our face in, drinking our fill, and getting up and saying, "Ah!" That's called worship. Then we take a bucket, dip it in, walk down the hill to the people in the valley who don't know that the spring exists, and we say, "Taste this! It's right up there, and his name is Jesus!" The kind of gift that the fountain wants is drinkers, because then he looks truly overflowing, rich, and self-sufficient. And that's exactly what he wants to look like.

Chart for Christ-centered Clarification

The flesh is all about making the effort to earn and deserve God's goodness and grace. We must resist this godless drive with rabid intensity. Since the temptations are subtle and frequent we will benefit by checking our focus and making sure God is in the crosshairs of our sights. The following are some things to keep in mind to make sure our perspective is where God would have it to be. They can help us to keep a biblical perspective on our priorities that are beneficial for any believer and anyone to whom he or she ministers.

Christ-centered Gospel	Man-centered Legalism
Christ is the living Savior	Christ is our example
God's grace descends to us	Our works ascend to God
God is the Seeker	We are the seekers
God is the Judge and Justifier	God is our encouraging buddy
Bible is a treasure of the riches of Christ	Bible is a book of cause and effect equations
The church focuses on God's service and ministry	The church focuses on our service and ministry
Baptism – Christ meets the believer bringing blessings of grace	Baptism – the believer's first step of obedience evidencing commitment
Communion – Christ meets His people inspiring cleansing, refreshing, unifying grace	Communion – an observance to show our obedience and devotion
Worship – joyfully reflecting back to God the radiance of His worth (John Piper)	Worship – what we give to God
Delight	Duty

Practice Rooted in Position

It is far too easy to push for change and expect commitment without establishing the necessary groundwork of our resources in Jesus Christ. By grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for God's glory alone we have been brought into the family of God and declared righteous in Jesus. From this position and the continuing flow of God's grace we repeatedly receive the power and fortitude to practice the things required of believers.

As we read Scripture we must acknowledge our natural bent to embrace the imperatives that tell us the things we must do and the ways we should feel. But if we do this without understanding our position through the indicatives of Scripture (things to believe about who we are in Christ), we get the cart before the horse. This results in frustration and discouragement because we are attempting to obey the commands and live our Christian lives in the power of personal performance. Rather, we should recognize our hopeless and helpless state by repeatedly and humbly approaching the throne of grace where the mercy and goodness of God flows to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness that only the Lord can provide.

In Philippians chapter 3 Paul explains how he turned from the emptiness of self-righteousness to the fullness of righteousness of Christ. He remembers his life as a legalistic Pharisee when he used to have misguided confidence in the flesh that he could live the righteous life God required. But the mercy of God helped him to realize that attempting to serve the Lord with legalistic determination was futile and he discarded that pursuit as worthless. He says, *"⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, **not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith...**"* (Philippians 3:8-9) We, too, must realize that we cannot understand the imperatives if we do not understand the indicatives (Cf. Romans 1-11 – indicatives, Romans 12-16 – imperatives; Ephesians 1-3 – indicatives, Ephesians 4-6 imperatives; etc.).

Looking at a portion of Paul's letter to the Romans may aid us further in understanding that a believer's practice (imperative) must flow out of a believer's position in Christ (indicative).

Romans 11:33-12:2 "³³ 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. ¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

From Romans 12:2, God lets us know that our lives are not to be pressed into the mold of the world. It is natural and easy to "fit into" the world and live by its man-centered ways, which include man-centered religious ways, yielding the fruit of comparative condemnation or comparative discouragement. We must fight the tendency to conform to man-centered worldliness.

This fight is embraced by renewing our minds, which means refreshing our thinking and living by the truths and promises of God's word that make much of God's mercy for us. We must be refreshed in the rich mercy of our God that flows down to His elect so that all glory is God's. It is these God-centered truths we are called to remember so that we never resolve by mere human determination to try to live and minister for God. It is with open-handed lives that we stand before the gracious throne of God to receive His abundant mercy, which is the source of our spiritual, mental and physical power to worship and minister for God. We tap into this source by the grace of God that inspires us to be captivated by the glory of the Lord who is full of mercy and provides us with all we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him (Cf. Romans 1:1-11:36).

Our renewal is a repeated Spirit-wrought determination to focus and reflect on the beauty, splendor and all-sufficient grace of the Lord. This is what Paul instructed the Corinthians believers to do. *"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."* (2 Corinthians 3:18) We cannot understand the imperative (Romans 12:1) "present your bodies as a living sacrifice" until we have worshipfully reflected on the indicatives summarized as "the mercies of God" (Romans 1:1-11:36).

In fact, we can have our minds filled with the teachings of Scripture, but we will not understand the truth of Scripture unless we see it in the proper God-centered light, revealing that the grace of Almighty God flows richly and abundantly to us through Jesus Christ. We are not competent in ourselves, our competency is found in Christ alone. He is the living water of God's grace and mercy flowing down to us. As Paul says, *"Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."* (2 Corinthians 3:5-6)

When our minds are repeatedly renewed with a God-centered and Christ-exalting perspective, we are enabled to discern what is the will of God. There is no profitable point in trying to understand the teaching of Scripture from any other perspective. There is no point in trying to decide on an act of service or ministry from any other perspective. In this light it is easy to see how Paul's exhortation in Romans 12:1-2 flows out of the doxology of Romans 11:33-36. All things must be tested from this perspective. Without this humbled assessment, all beliefs and actions are distorted.

Summation

The information presented above is for the purpose of Scripturally checking our perspective so that we resist the various temptations to drift into man-centered ways of living life and doing ministry. Our desire is to be diligent and joyful in pursuit of God's glory and the pursuit of satisfaction that flows from God the Father through the work of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. We live and serve by the grace of our great God. May God continue to enable us to maintain a God-centered focus in ministry!

(The ideas presented above are the result of God's blessings flowing through the writings of John Piper in ***Desiring God*** and ***The Pleasures of God***, the writings of Michael Horton in ***Christless Christianity***, and the preaching of Jesus in the ***Sermon on the Mount***.)



Grace, Mercy,
Goodness, Power



Gratitude,
Worship,
Etc.

Ministry,
Disciplines,
Etc.

God-centered



Attempts to Earn
God's Favor



Christian Duties
Bible Reading, Prayer,
Worship, Witnessing,
Serving in the Church, Etc.



Man-centered