

What in the World is the Christian Message?

Selected Scriptures

GTY64

1997

When anybody asks me what I do, and they often do when I'm sitting on an airplane. You know, the number one fear of people sitting on an airplane is that they would be seated next to an insurance salesman. But the number two fear is that they would be seated next to a preacher, obviously. And so people often ask me what I do? And I've come to the conclusion that the best answer is to say, "I have a job that is the greatest job in the world because I have the greatest news in the world. I travel around and tell people that God will forgive all their sins. Are you interested?" Now that cuts to the chase, folks, gets right there fast.

I was flying down to El Paso some time back to speak at a Calvary Chapel Men's Conference down there and got on the Southwest Airline plane and we were going down there, I was sitting next to one of the sons of Ishmael, and...who was a part of the blessing to Ishmael. And he kept noticing that I was studying the Bible. And eventually he got up enough courage to say something to me. And he said, "Excuse me, Sir." He said, "I see you have a Bible," and he said, "I'm new in America and I'm from Iran and I don't understand American religion. Could you help me?"

I said, "I think I can."

He said, "I just have one question. Could you tell me the difference," he said, "between a Catholic, a Protestant and a Baptist?" And I said...that's exactly what he said. I said, "Well look, I'll give it a try." And so I sort of sorted those things out and tried to explain them to him.

And I said, "Now that you've asked me a question, may I ask you a question?" He said sure. I said, "Are you a Muslim?" He said yes. I said, "Well I want to know about...a little bit about Islam. So, could you tell me, do Muslims have sins?"

"Oh yes," he said. "Many, many sins. I don't even know all the sins."

I said, "Well let me ask you another question. Is it serious if you commit them?"

"Very, very serious."

I said, "Well do you?"

"All the time," he said. "I commit all the sins. In fact, honestly, I'm going to El Paso to sin."

I said, "You are?"

He said, "Yeah," he said, "I met this girl and I'm going there and then we will sin."

I said, "Well, let me ask you another question. Now how does God feel about your sin?"

"Very bad," he said, "it's very bad."

I said, "Well, do you have any hope for forgiveness?" And this is what he said, and this is a quote. "I hope that God will forgive me."

I said, "On the basis of what?"

And he was blank. I said, "Well, may I be bold enough to say I know Him personally and He won't." And I didn't realize what I had said and his immediate response was, "You know God personally?" Like, "What are you doing in coach in the middle seat?" And then I went on to say that you need to know about Jesus Christ because in Him and in Him alone is found forgiveness." And I went on to show Him the distinctive of Christianity, which is we tell sinners God forgives sin. That's why we exist, folks. That's why there is a national religious broadcasters. Ultimately in the end, it all has to come to that. If we had been saved purely for worship, then we might as well go to heaven and get it perfect. And if we have been saved purely for fellowship, let's go up there where even fellowship is perfect because I don't know about your church, but there are a lot of folks in mine messing it up. If we were saved purely for joy, let's go have the joy. If we were saved to be righteous in every aspect, let's go there and be like Jesus. There's only one reason we're left here and that's because there's a ministry been committed to us and I want to read you about it from 2 Corinthians chapter 5. This is what it says.

"Now all these things are from God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ as though God were entreating through us, we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." That's 2 Corinthians 5:18 to 21.

That may be the most important passage in the Word of God for us. Five times in those verses I read to you, the word "reconciliation appears, five times. It is the theme of that text. And it defines the whole intent of the Christian gospel, the whole intent of Christian ministry which is to preach to sinners that they can be reconciled to God. That's our duty. To us has been given, it says, the ministry of reconciliation, to us has been given the word of reconciliation. We are called ambassadors for Christ. And the good news is, that it is possible for sinners to be reconciled to God. That's what we live for. That's what we preach. That's what we teach. That's what we sing about. That's the only reason we're here. We live to proclaim this great good news to the world

Sometimes I think we get a little distracted. Sometimes I think we get a little off the main thing. But this is it. Now let me talk about that in the context of this passage, just for a few moments with you. From our viewpoint, it would seem an impossibility to reconcile sinners with an absolutely and utterly

perfect and holy God. From our standpoint it would be inconceivable that a man, or men, or a committee, or an elite group of religious leaders could concoct some scheme by which they could come before a holy God and somehow satisfy His justice and His wrath and His holiness and at the same time, receive complete forgiveness. From the human viewpoint, it is an utter impossibility. It can't be done by us. And that's why it says, in the text I just read, "Now all these things are from God." If there is to be reconciliation between sinners and holy God, then God has to initiate it.

All these things...what things? The verse before. "If anyone is in Christ, he is...what?...a new creature, old things passed away and behold, new things have come." That's describing conversion and all the issues with regard to conversion, it says, are from God. Sinners couldn't decide to be reconciled to God and pull it off. We couldn't devise a plan to make it happen. We have no power to satisfy God's anger toward sin. We have no virtue to charm Him. We are all offenders who have been eternally banished from His presence and sent with a condemnation that is eternal into punishment that is relentless. We are hopeless, we are helpless, we are impotent, we are ignorant, we are blind, we are doomed.

And if there is to be any change in the relationship between the sinner and God, it has to come from Him. And that's the gospel. "God so loved the world that He gave..." He made the way of reconciliation. It was God who desired to reconcile sinners, to make them His friends and His children. And while this is not foreign to us, do you understand that this is extremely foreign to the nations of the world throughout all of human history? Do you understand that a Muslim believes that God is an angry God who has to be somehow appeased and cajoled and coddled in the hope that He may find whimsy to be favorable to some erstwhile sinner? Do you understand that religions of the world have always bound their people in fear and that they do everything they can to try to get that God off their back because basically He is either angry with them, or indifferent to them?

And in the midst of all of this comes the true religion, comes the true doctrine, comes the true God and says, "I love sinners and seek to reconcile them." That's the distinctiveness of Christianity. God desires to reconcile sinners. God, our Savior, who will have all men to be saved, God who is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. In the wonderful epistle of Titus, God is mentioned after the introduction three times; once in chapter 1, once in chapter 2, and once in chapter 3. And every time He is mentioned, this is His title, "God our Savior, God our Savior, God our Savior." In that little three chapter epistle, Jesus Christ is mentioned three times, after the introduction, each time, "Jesus Christ our Savior, Jesus Christ our Savior, Jesus Christ our Savior." God is such a Savior by nature, He is so disposed to save people, that according to 1 Timothy chapter 4, and verse 10, this is a monumental statement, "God is the Savior of all men," it says, "Especially, *milista*, the little adverb in the Greek, especially those who believe." God is so saving by His nature that He is even the Savior of all men, in some way.

Now the question comes, "In what way is God the Savior of all men? And then yet distinctively the Savior of those who believe?"

Very simple to understand. God is a Savior of all men in a temporal sense. You can see the saving character of God, the gracious merciful, lovingkindness of God even in the way He deals with unregenerate sinners. What do you mean by that? I mean, He lets the let rain fall on the just and the unjust. I mean, they laugh and they sing and they cry and they have babies, and they kiss little children, and they see a sunset, and they smell the flowers, and God doesn't kill them dead and send them to hell the first sin they commit." The very character of God as a saving God is manifest in what

the Reformers used to call “Common Grace.” But especially it’s His saving mercy manifest to those who believe.

But you can see in the way God treats sinners in the world who have hated Him, and continue to hate Him, that He is by nature a gracious and merciful God. We don’t have a God that has to be appeased. We have a God who longs to save sinners. God Himself then is the reconciler. We have to understand that in the gospel. Reconciliation is the divine provision by which God’s holy displeasure has been appeased, the hostility removed and sinners restored to Him. And man can’t make that reconciliation. I can’t make it, you can’t make it. Listen carefully, we do not make reconciliation with God, we receive it. It’s not what we do, it’s what we embrace. It’s not what we achieve, it’s what we believe.

To put it another way, reconciliation between sinners and God is not something we accomplish when we stop rejecting Him, it’s something He accomplished when He decided not to reject us. God is the source of reconciliation and we are His ambassadors. Reconciliation then is by the will of God.

A second point that Paul makes here is reconciliation is by the act of justification. In verse 19 he says, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself.” All right, how was He doing that? How does He reconcile the world here, meaning mankind, a generic term, it’s to say to us that His saving work is on behalf of mankind, not angels, for example. So God was reconciling mankind, all who believe among mankind. How was He doing it? By not counting their trespasses against them.

The way that God reconciles sinners is by not counting their trespasses against them, or by forgiving their sin. That’s...that’s the very heart of the doctrine of justification. God forgives sin. That’s what we preach, and we’re right back to where we started. “Blessed is the man,” Romans 4:8 says, “Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.” David said, after his gross iniquity in the case of Bathsheba, and then the plot against her husband, Uriah, who was such a noble soldier, that he might lose his life, David said, “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity,” and he had amassed a mountain of it and he was blessed to know that God forgives sinners. That’s our message. We need to preach the message that God forgives sin.

Obviously we have to identify sin and the sinner. But then the good news is the message of forgiveness. And I know you know this, but this is at the heart of everything we do and how often we need to be reminded of it. God will forgive all your sins. Are you interested? I have learned, frankly, that that is a great way to start a conversation about the gospel. Say, “Are you interested in having all your sins forgiven?” If they’re not, you’re done. Make a move to the next person. That’s the gospel. He has literally not counted our trespasses against us.

Now does that mean we don’t have them? No, we do. He just doesn’t count them against us. The first thing then, and I’m going to wrap this up, so listen carefully when we get to the end and I’ll put some more content into that second point.

The first thing about the message we preach is to preach reconciliation, it is by the will of God that reconciliation is offered. It is by the act of justification or that is not including their sins to them, impugning rather righteousness to them that it occurs. And thirdly, it is by the obedience of faith. It says in verse 20, “We are ambassadors for Christ as though God were entreating through us. We beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

Now if this reconciliation is by God, from God by His will, by His plan, if it is a matter of God not imputing sin or forgiving sin, then what's our part? Well we have a part, obviously, or Paul wouldn't say, "We are entreating you, we are begging you to be reconciled to God." And we all know that our part is to believe...believe. Be reconciled to God, as many as received Him, they are the ones who become the sons of God. We call people to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, to believe that God has raised Him from the dead as Romans chapter 10 says. We send out preachers because how can they believe if they don't hear? How can they hear if somebody doesn't preach? And how can they have a preacher unless somebody is sent. So we go and we preach and we call people to faith, as the Apostle Paul said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," Acts 16:31, "and you'll be saved." This reconciliation by the will of God through the means of justification or the forgiveness of sins, comes to the individual by the obedience of faith. And so we call on people to believe and believe alone. Salvation is by grace through faith. And even that whole package is not of yourselves, lest any man should boast. It's not of works, it's a gift of God."

Now all of that to bring us to one culminating point in the brief time we have this morning. Reconciliation is by the will of God, it's by the act of forgiveness, it's by the obedience of faith. Now that doesn't answer the question, how can it happen? How can it happen? I don't understand this transaction. How can He reconcile sinners? How can He pass by our iniquities? How can He just not impute sin to us? How can He just treat us as if we hadn't sinned? How can He look on us who are sinners and desire any fellowship with us? How can He satisfy His just and holy condemnation of sin and give the full and deserved punishment to the sinner? And at the same time, embrace the sinner and take him to His holy heaven forever? How can God end the hostility and take those who hate Him into His own presence? How can He do that?

And the last verse in this passage answers that. And maybe the single most profound statement in all of the New Testament about the gospel says this, verse 21, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." That's how He did it. That's how He did it. In order to reconcile sinners, He made Him who knew no sin, sin. This is monumental. He made...that's God...God made Him who knew no sin...who's that? The field is very narrow, Him who knew no sin reduces it to one, the one of whom the writer of Hebrews says, "He was holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners, the One who Himself said, 'Which of you brings any charge against Me?' The One of whom Pilate said, "I find no fault in this man." The One of whom Peter said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God, the One of whom the Father said, and here is the most monumental testimony of all, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

There's only one who knew no sin. And in order for God to reconcile sinners, it had to be by the work of substitution. By the will of God, by the act of justification, by the obedience of faith, and by the work of substitution. He made Him who knew no sin, sin for us.

Do you understand what that means? I hear some pretty bizarre stuff about that, some very frightening things. What does it mean that God made Jesus sin? In what sense did God make Jesus sin? I've heard people say, "Well, on the cross, Jesus became a sinner. May I suggest to you that you not think that because that's blasphemy. Jesus was not a sinner on the cross, He was the sinless Son of God, He was the spotless Lamb, He was as holy, dying on the cross, as He ever was in eternity before, or has been since, or ever will be. He never became a sinner. If He had, He would have died and gone to hell for His own iniquities. I've heard people say, "Well, He was a sinner and

God had to send Him to hell for three days to purge Him and once He was purged, He let Him loose.” That too is a blasphemous statement. He is not and never can be a sinner. He was as much God, the holy God of the universe, hanging on a cross, as ever He was or ever will be. He was not guilty of any sin. Otherwise He couldn’t be a substitute. “He who knew no sin was made sin.”

Well, you say, “If He didn’t become a sinner, then in what way was He made sin?” Only one way, only one way...He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastening of our peace was upon Him and with His stripes we are healed.

He was the substitute for us. How am I to understand that? Understand it this way, are you ready for this? Though Jesus never committed a sin, God treated Him as if He had personally committed every sin ever committed by every person who would ever believe and punished Him for them all. Though in reality He had never committed one. That’s substitution.

You think that Lamb that went up on the altar in the Old Testament was guilty? You think that scapegoat in Leviticus that took the...symbolically took the sins and bore them into the wilderness was guilty? No. Neither was the Lamb of God. He was holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners. And that’s why in shattered devastation He cried out in the midst of the agony, “My God, My God, Why have You forsaken Me?” God treated Jesus as if He had committed every sin ever committed by every person who would ever believe.

And then He took the penalty for all those sins and just crushed the life of Jesus out with His wrath. It wasn’t His at all. But it was credited to Him as if He had committed it and He was punished for it. That’s the only sense in which the Bible indicates that Christ became sin for us. Galatians 3 says this, “He became a curse for us.” He didn’t deserve it.

Let me tell you the other side of it, the rest of the verse. This is mind-boggling. “In order that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. He became sin for us that we might become righteousness in Him.” Let me ask you a question...an honest question, and you know the answer.

Are you perfectly righteous? No. I’m not. Am I sinless? No. Am I as righteous as Christ? No, to say so would be blasphemous. Am I as holy as God? No. Does God treat Me as if I am? Yes. That’s the other side of substitution. That’s the other side of imputation. At the same time God was treating Jesus as if He committed all your sins, He’s treating you as if you never did anything but the righteous deeds of Jesus Himself. That’s substitution. That’s imputation. That’s the doctrine of justification. I’m not righteous and I’m not holy and I’m not sinless. But God in His mercy and grace treats me as if I am because He’s already poured His wrath out against all my sin on His Son. He treated Him as a sinner that He might treat me as righteous. That’s the gospel. That is the news, folks, that we must give.

I said to that guy on the airplane, “Are you interested in your sins being forgiven?” Yes. Yes. So we went through a discussion. He said, “Now I understand Christianity, it’s about forgiveness.” I explained the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ, his heart just opened to the reality. This is the word of reconciliation.

The most deadly virus on the planet is not the HIV virus, it’s the SIN virus. And like the HIV virus, it kills everybody it infects, not just in time, but in eternity, not just physically but spiritually and there’s

no cure for the HIV but there is a cure for the SIN and we have it. In the midst of all the stuff that we do, don't forget that this is the main thing.

God, we come to You this morning, thanking You that You reconcile sinners, that You forgive sin, that You accept humble faith. And we ask, Lord, that we might never lose sight of the message that is the gospel, that is the reason we live. We would long to come to be with You, we would long to hear the trumpet blast, as Alvin was singing, we thrill at the prospects. But like John, when he ate the little book in Revelation, it was sweet in his mouth, but bitter in his stomach for the sweetness of Jesus coming to us is bitter for the world. And, Lord, we would long to go to heaven. Even Paul said, "Far better to depart and be with Christ," but O how needful to be here so that while we're here we can relentlessly preach that God reconciles sinners. Give us a fresh new commitment to that. And may that message go across the airwaves that blanket this nation in the world because You love sinners and You long to reconcile them to Yourself. To that end we live, and pray, in Your Son's great name. And everyone said...AMEN, AMEN.

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