

The Lord's Supper and the Centrality of the Gospel

Christians have a habit of shelving the gospel. That is, we have the habit of thinking the gospel is the key we use to open salvation in the first place, and the key we offer to others in evangelism, but aside from those applications, we think the gospel is not for everyday life. The gospel is what starts the car, but we don't think of it as the fuel, or as the carburetor.

In fact, fundamental to a right love for God, right worship, right discipleship and sanctification is the gospel. The meaning of the gospel, its effects, its principles remain vital for the Christian. And we are very prone to becoming like work-oriented legalists or religionists in our Christian lives, even though we have embraced the gospel for salvation.

One of the things I would like to achieve this year in our eleven remaining occasions to partake of the Lord's Supper is to understand how to become Gospel-Centred Christians. The Lord's Supper is a gospel-oriented service. It is all about Christ, the cross, the atonement and our faith in Him, our reception of Him, the forgiveness of our sin, His life in us, his soon return. And so, it is the ideal time for us to adopt the gospel mindset for everyday life.

Let me list out several ways the gospel ought to be central to us. In the coming months we'll take these one by one and look at them in more detail.

- 1) The gospel reveals God's love for you
- 2) The gospel reveals your sinfulness apart from Christ and the holiness of God
- 3) The gospel reveals your position in Christ, with its privileges
- 4) The gospel reveals your helplessness and teaches you humility
- 5) The gospel reveals why you are able to approach God
- 6) The gospel teaches you how you ought to approach God, the posture you adopt before Him
- 7) The gospel reveals what your motives are for obeying Him
- 8) The gospel reveals the power you have over sin, and the power to obey God
- 9) The gospel reveals the beauty of God's glory
- 10) The gospel reveals the process of sanctification
- 11) The gospel reveals the nature and basis of prayer
- 12) The gospel reveals the attributes and person of Christ.
- 13) The gospel reveals how God gets glory from my life

There are many, many ways, that being Gospel-centred will shape our whole outlook and approach to God. I would love for us to be increasingly gospel-focused.

Today, I want to take just one of the effects of being gospel-centred, and bring it out.

It is the truth that the gospel reveals how much God loves us. People who are gospel-centred are going to be often brought back to the truth that God loves them.

One of the signs that we are not gospel-centred is that we doubt that God loves us at certain times. Particularly when we have had what we might call, 'a bad day'. We have missed our quiet time in the morning. We rushed out the door. We lost our temper in traffic, or with the kids, or at work. We hardly gave God a thought. In a place of weakness, we gave in to an old habit – we look at something we shouldn't have, we indulge in something we shouldn't have, we spoke in a way we shouldn't have. By all accounts, it's a bad day. Maybe not in our theoretical theology, but in our practical theology, we believe that God's love for us must not be what it would be on a good day. We reveal that by the fact that we avoid praying, we hide among the trees of the Garden. We want

this day to end so we can start again to morrow and have a really good day. And maybe we do. We read our Bible, we pray, we're thinking about Scripture on the way to work, we respond differently to people. We come home and we feel, maybe not theoretically, but practically, that God really does love us.

When we act or feel that way, what do we believe about God's love? Firstly, we believe it varies. Secondly we believe it varies with our performance. What is another word for saying that my acts can cause God to love me more? Legalism. Too often, we believe salvation is by grace through faith, but sanctification, that's up to me. And if I do well, God loves me more, and if I do badly, He loves me less.

Certainly God can be more or less pleased with our actions. But there is a world of difference between love and being pleased. My love for my children is based on their being my children. I am sometimes more pleased with them than at other times. But even in my times of deepest displeasure – I love them. In fact, if I didn't love them, their bad and self-destructive behaviour wouldn't bother me.

To be gospel-centred is to take the truths of the gospel, and believe them on both your best day, and your worst day. The gospel teaches us things about God's love for us.

1) The Gospel teaches us that God loved us before we were born.

Ephesians 1:3-6 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, ⁵ having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, ⁶ to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved.

The beginning of the gospel is foreknowledge and predestination.

In eternity past, God chose to create you. Why? Because He wanted to. He desired to. Or to put it another way, because He loved to. And before God made the actual you, He loved the idea of you. He loved the idea of you being in His Son. Now before you were born, how many good or evil things could you do? How many things could you do that would endear you to Him?

Romans 9:10-12 And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac ¹¹ (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), ¹² it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger."

The truths of election and predestination take the matter of impressing God and making Him love us out of our hands. God stretches His love for us before we were born.

2) God loved us when we were still sinners

Romans 5:6-9 For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Much more then, having now been justified by

Humanly speaking, we sacrifice ourselves for the worthy, and for those who we already love. The gospel is: God chose to love us while we were sinners. See, the gospel is not that God couldn't stand us, and then He died for us, and after that He loved us. If that were true, He would never have died for us in the first place. He loved us, and in His love for us, He chose to die for us to reconcile us to Himself.

Now does this mean that God saw something in us that He loved? Well, Ephesians 2 paints a pretty bleak picture of how we looked to God.

Ephesians 2:1-5 *es and sins, ² in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, ³ among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),*

We were pretty unattractive to God. So how did God love us? He loved us in Christ. It's as if Christ is this lens. God holds the lens over these sinners, these corpses, these enemies, and what He sees through that lens He loves. He delights in it. It is precious to Him. And it moves Him to make all the provisions to save us. He loved us not to make much of you, but because loving us through Christ glorifies the lens – Jesus!

A question I cannot answer, and that Scripture provides no answer for, is why He chose to view us through that lens at all. Why did He will to love us in Christ? That I do not know, and it is seemingly hidden in the wonderful heart of God. He didn't love you for you, He loved you in spite of you.

3) God loves us now as saints who still sin

Romans 8:1 *There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus,*

What does it mean that there is no condemnation? It means there is nothing you do or will do that will condemn you and change your relationship with God. You are in Christ Jesus – you are loved for His sake.

What will interfere with that love? Will your sin interfere with that love?

Romans 8:31-34 *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.*

Will trials interfere with that love?

Romans 8:35-37 *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." ³⁷ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.*

Will anything interfere with that love?

Romans 8:38-39 *For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Underline that last phrase – in Christ Jesus. That's why you're loved. That's humbling and freeing. It's humbling in that He loves me not because of me, but because of who I am hidden in. It is freeing because He will not cease to love me because of me. Nothing I can do can make Him love me less. Nothing I can do can make Him love me more. That's the Gospel.

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is our opportunity to become Gospel-Centred people. The last time we broke bread together, we considered how being gospel centred must affect our view of God's love. We saw that if the gospel, and not our performance, or the law, is what we are focussed on, we will remember that God loved us before we were born, He loved us before we were saved, and He loves us now as believers who still sin.

What I want to do today is to meditate on how being gospel-centred affects our approach to God. What do I mean by approach? I'm using the term in a literal sense: how we come near to God, how we draw near to Him and commune with Him.

If we have read our Old Testament, we should know that drawing near to a holy God is a problem for sinners. There seems to be two problems. The first problem is from God toward the sinner. God will not let sinners approach Him as they are.

Psalm 5:5 The boastful shall not stand in Your sight; You hate all workers of iniquity.

Psalm 1:5 Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

Just think how God illustrated this for Israel with the tabernacle, and specifically with the Ark. The Ark was representative of the very presence of God. When the Tabernacle came to rest, where was the Ark placed? In the Holy of Holies. Who was allowed into the Holy of Holies? The High Priest. How often? Once a year, and only once he had made sure he was ritually clean. Israel had it made very clear to them that while each and every one of them could pray to God in their hearts, and love Him, they could not simply amble up to the glory of God just as they were.

Even when Israel was on the march, who carried the Ark, and how? What happened to someone who touched it? God was very protective of this symbol, this image that man does not approach the very innermost presence of God on your own, by yourself, on your own merits.

The second problem in drawing near to a holy God is the sinner's own conscience. Once a sinner knows that God is absolutely holy, approaching God can feel like being stripped and humiliated. It can feel like your sin seems to grow, like an ultra-violet light gets switched on, revealing what couldn't be seen before. Or like when you have a skin infection of some kind, and when you put it in hot water it gets itchier, so when you approach God, your sin seems all the more sinful. So for many people, approaching God seems very painful. They are trying to outrun their conscience, not have it intensified. We only have to think of Adam, hiding in the trees of the Garden, or David asking in Psalm 139, *where can I flee from your presence.*

Proverbs 28:1 The wicked flee when no one pursues, But the righteous are bold as a lion.

So there is this dual problem in approaching God – the sinner's sin which God will not stand, and God's holiness, which the sinner's conscience can't stand.

If we are to be honest, when we shelve the gospel, when we put it aside and use it only for initial conversion, only for entrance into heaven, we find ourselves with precisely the same problem. Firstly, we find that God does not accept sinners, and we know, by ourselves, that's what we are. The New Testament God is not a different God to the Old Testament God. God did not change between Malachi and Matthew. God has not 'loosened up' or 'softened', or else He has changed, and a God who changes is not God. So when we read of God's angry stance toward sin, His hatred of sin, His perfect standards, we are not to dismiss that and say, "Well, that's Old Testament!" We need to stare the Old Testament accounts in the face and say, that is still my God. But if we are

not gospel-centred, we can feel much like Israel did about approaching God in worship. We also feel the same pangs of conscience, warning us off approaching. We want intimacy with God, but we fear it. We want openness, transparency, realness, but we fear being exposed. We fear the searing pain of having nothing to cover our nakedness as we approach God. This is a natural fear, but it is not a gospel-centred mindset.

In the Scriptures we have read, we read about the access we gain in Christ. Christ has given us access. How has He done that?

Let's read in Hebrews – I'm not really going to comment much on these verses, because they are self-explanatory.

Hebrews 9:1-14 Hebrews 9:1 ¶ Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. ² For a tabernacle was prepared: the first part, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary; ³ and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All, ⁴ which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; ⁵ and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. ⁶ ¶ Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. ⁷ But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance; ⁸ the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. ⁹ It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience -- ¹⁰ concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation. ¹¹ ¶ But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. ¹² Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Hebrews 10:11-22 And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. ¹⁴ For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified. ¹⁵ But the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us; for after He had said before, ¹⁶ "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them," ¹⁷ then He adds, "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." ¹⁸ Now where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin. ¹⁹ ¶ Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, ²¹ and having a High Priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Christ has done both. Christ has forever cleansed His people. Christ's sacrifice is not a swinging door. The Old Testament sacrifice felt like that, because they had to be repeated every year. But Christ's atonement is as permanent as He is.

Hebrews 10:12 But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.

From God's side, Christ's atonement has forever opened the way. Christ is the eternal High Priest, and He is both of the Yom Kippur goats. He provided the sacrifice, and He applied it. Those who are His have permanent and complete access to God.

To be gospel-centred is to have before you the truth that Christ is your eternal High Priest, who ever lives to make intercession for you. *As long as He lives, you have access.* So then what about the

other side? What about my conscience? Twice we saw in this passage what Christ has done to our consciences.

¹⁴ how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

The conscience is an imperfect witness to God's Law in your heart. It can be a broken alarm that goes off when it shouldn't, or doesn't go off when it should. But what the sacrifice of Christ should do to our consciences is to say – there is nothing I can offer God to make up for my sin, and there is nothing I owe God in terms of the penalty for my sin. God is satisfied with Christ, and therefore, dear conscience you need to be as well.

When your conscience demands Christ-plus, Christ-and, your conscience is side-stepping the gospel. Your conscience, or perhaps more truly- your heart, is seeking a law-based, performance-based religion again.

Being gospel-centred says, rest conscience in the judgement of God: Christ has paid my debt in full, and His righteousness thoroughly pleases the Father.

Now, if the way has been permanently opened by Christ, and my guilty conscience has been calmed and purified, what attitude does the Scripture suggest needs to characterise our approach?

*Hebrews 10:19 Therefore, brethren, having **boldness** to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus,*

Hebrews 10:22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Hebrews 4:16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

That word for boldness means outspokenness, frankness, confidence and openness. It doesn't mean cockiness. It doesn't mean cheekiness. We will only think boldness means being cocky if we lose the Old Testament images.

This is the image: Israel is gathered around the Tabernacle, waiting for the High Priest to go in and offer the sacrifice on the Mercy Seat. They are quiet and trembling. And suddenly the High Priest comes, but He is accompanied by someone else, it is a Higher Priest – Messiah Himself. And He leaves the High Priest at the door of the Tabernacle, and there goes in to the Most Holy Place, and offers His own blood on the mercy seat. And then He emerges, and says to all the people, come. Come to my Father. Approach Him. What is the dominant emotion? Hesitancy, fear. Jesus says, my sacrifice has opened the way. Your sins are forgiven. Don't fear, be bold. Come to My Father.

So the thought I want us to meditate on is, has the gospel so affected my approach to God, that I no longer dodge Him? Do I no longer avoid meeting Him? Do I know that the way is always open – on my good days and on my bad days? Regardless of my performance, Christ has opened the way permanently. My conscience should not require anything more than Christ's righteousness.

Gospel-centred people keep approaching. Law-centred people want to offer some dead work as a sacrifice to open the way again.