

# WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS ABOUT?

*SERIES: MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM: WHY ARE WE HERE?*

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The Bush administration has been explaining its rationale for going to war with Iraq. It has been trying to establish that there is a clear and present danger; that is, that the threat of inaction is greater than the threat of action. As I was thinking about what I wanted to share with you in this message, I realized that this is somewhat the burden that you and I have when it comes to evangelism and missions.

Western culture has brought us to a point where it is very difficult to talk about anything in absolute terms, especially spiritual matters. Yet the Scriptures speak very strongly in absolute terms. For instance, Jesus himself said in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." Peter, preaching in Acts 4:12, said, "There is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." Those are just two of many absolute statements in Scripture that make profound claims about the person of Jesus Christ and about faith in him as the way to come into personal relationship with God.

But does it really matter that we make those kinds of claims about Christ? What we are told by our culture is that there are many ways to God, that different ideas about God are equally valid. Your truth may not be my truth. If that is the case, then what is all the fuss about missions and evangelism? Wouldn't it be better for us to simply enjoy our own worship and not worry about anybody else? That seems to be what our culture wants to dictate. Are there reasons why we need to ground ourselves in the absolute conviction that Christ is indeed the way to salvation?

## **The eternal consequences of sin**

At the end of the nineteenth century there was an era of great emphasis on the goodness of man. Everything was getting better, and there was no such thing as sin or evil. The twentieth century did a lot to debunk that idea, with world wars, rampant greed, and all kinds of issues. The twenty-first century has gotten a good start on continuing to prove the devastating power of man's sinfulness. So as we look at the larger culture and world issues, sometimes it's easy to say, "Yes, there is a lot of evil in the world."

At the same time it can be difficult for us to own up to our own sinfulness. But the truth is, the destructiveness of sin in our lives is readily apparent. Our selfish and sinful choices have impacted our own lives and the lives of those around us, and most of us could tell story after story of pain, suffering, and other problems that flow directly out of our own weakness and sinfulness. And when people who are operating out of selfish motives run into one another, the result is a constant fracturing of relationships, in devastation of families and devastation across societies. So there is plenty of evidence all around us that sin has a powerful negative effect in human lives.

The Scriptures, particularly the New Testament, teach us that sin is rooted in the internal issue of our self-designed independence from God. The New Testament speaks directly, even harshly, about not only the destructiveness of sin, but the eternal consequences of sin. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus warns his hearers, "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." In John 3:36 he says, "The wrath of God abides [takes up residence] on him [the unbeliever]." In Romans 1:18 Paul declares, "The wrath of God is revealed..." and in 3:5 he speaks of "the God who inflicts wrath."

In what may be Paul's strongest language he writes these words in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9 to encourage those who have been afflicted for their faith:

**For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power....**

These strong words announce that human sinfulness is rooted in a fractured relationship with God, and should people choose to follow their independence and rebellion, there are eternal consequences.

The mechanics of judgment--what it looks like, how long it will last, and so on--are beyond the scope of this message. But I want to highlight an extremely important statement that Paul makes: "These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord...." There is no idea in all of Scripture that is more haunting and perhaps more on point in regard to the consequences of sin than that of eternal separation from God.

In Romans 1:18-3:20 Paul speaks about the power and pervasiveness of sin. In chapter 1 he talks about the downward spiral of sin: Societies and individuals get locked into a pattern of sinfulness and willful separation from God that begins with failing to honor God for who he is, failing to give thanks for what he has done. That leads to all kinds of traps that continually spiral them farther and farther down into an abyss of sinfulness and farther and farther away from God. In chapter 2 Paul talks about the impotence of relying on religious privilege or ethnicity or some other sense of moral superiority. In 3:9 he profoundly sums up his understanding of the sinfulness of man: "For we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin...." In verses 19 and 20 he concludes, "Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight...."

So Paul establishes that every one of us is under the plague of our own sinfulness, which is rooted in independence from God and willful rebellion against God, and which has the inherent eternal consequence of separation from God.

Dallas Willard, a Christian professor of philosophy at University of Southern California, has written a wonderful and challenging book called *Renovation of the Heart*. In one chapter, "The Radical Evil in the Ruined Soul," he explores the devastation of evil and sinfulness in man. Here is an excerpt from his summary of the same material we have been looking at in this survey of New Testament passages:

"Thus no one chooses in the abstract to go to hell or to even be the kind of person who belongs there. But their orientation toward self leads them to become the kind of person for whom away-from-God is the only place for which they are suited. It is a place they would, in the end, choose for themselves, rather than come to humble themselves before God and accept who he is. One should seriously inquire if to live in a world permeated with God and knowledge of God is something they themselves truly desire. If not, they can be sure that God will excuse them from his presence. They will find their place in the "outer darkness" of which Jesus spoke. But the fundamental fact about them will not be that they are there, but that they have become people so locked into their own self-worship and denial of God that *they cannot want God.*" (1)

Paul's conclusion in Romans 3:19-20 is followed by two of the most profound words in all of Scripture: "But now." Paul has written almost three chapters reminding us of the incredible power of our sin and of the awful consequences of our independence from God. He has told us that we cannot, by pulling ourselves up by our own moral bootstraps, somehow make ourselves presentable to God, who we really wish were not who he is anyway, and who we wish would just leave us alone to be ourselves. We are too marred by our own sinfulness, too weak before the challenges of our own flesh, to be able to morally correct ourselves and put ourselves in a position of favor with God. We are absolutely destitute before him; we are what the theologian would call totally depraved. That's an awful word, but it expresses what we have seen laid out in Scripture. Paul has shown us that we are living under the curse of our own sinfulness. "But now"--there is a new possibility that Paul

speaks about in Romans 3:21-30. I want to highlight the incredible thing that God has done for us in Christ, and out of that, to show why preaching the gospel is so important.

**But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.**

**Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.**

## **The righteousness of God**

Apart from the Law, apart from any sort of standard we can meet ourselves, the righteousness of God has been revealed. And in that righteousness there is this new possibility. What about this righteousness? First of all, Paul says, “Don’t be surprised about this. This is something God has been talking about from the beginning. It is witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.” The nation of Israel had been entrusted with the Law and the Prophets, but had misunderstood them and misused them. But all along the sacrifices of the Law had always foreshadowed God’s ultimate gift of grace and the payment of the penalty for sin, and the Prophets had pointed to God’s own sacrificial provision for sin.

Paul says this righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ, to everyone who believes. This is the new possibility. God has revealed a way to himself, a way to become righteous men and women before him.

Now people have always debated and even fought wars over who the true people of God are. The Jews thought they were the people of God, and certainly they had a special role in God’s eyes. But they began to believe it was their ethnicity that marked them out as the people of God, so they became very exclusive about it. They became arrogant and complacent. Paul, himself an ethnic Jew, has spent a number of chapters in Romans saying this just isn’t correct. The real people of God are the ones who come through faith in Jesus Christ. And this includes all who believe; it is not limited by ethnicity, by religious background, or by presumed privilege. “For there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Jews, Greeks, people of every tribe and nation all have missed the mark and fallen short. All are in the same place of need, and all who respond to the provision for that need are welcomed freely. So there is a new possibility offered to us in Jesus Christ, a righteousness apart from our own efforts to live up to some code (no matter how high and noble that code, even the law of God itself).

Now what is it that God has done in Christ? In verses 24 and 25, Paul lays out a remarkable picture: “Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.” There are three powerful words packed into this one sentence in a sort of crescendo of what Christ has done for us: Those who believe are *justified* through the *redemption* that Christ made possible, because Christ was publicly displayed as a *propitiation*. Paul draws these words from different arenas in society to build a beautiful picture of what Christ has done. First, the word “justification” is a legal term. It presumes guilt; therefore, the consequences of our sin are justly due us. Second, “redemption” comes out of the marketplace, particularly the slave market where freedom was bought. This term implies bondage, that you and I are somehow caught and need to be set free. And third, “propitiation” is a theological term. It implies that we are under God’s righteous judgment, which needs to be satisfied. So we are guilty, we are trapped in bondage, and we are rightfully under the judgment of God. Those are the consequences of our rebellion and sinfulness toward God.

But Christ has addressed each of these needs of ours. We are justified--declared to be righteous, not guilty before God, because Christ took on all of our guilt. We are redeemed--in his death he has bought our freedom from the bondage of our sinfulness. And the judgment that we deserved has been satisfied, because he became the ultimate and complete sacrifice for our sin.

The word "propitiation" appears in Scripture only a couple of other times, in 1 John 2:2 and 4:10. It is the word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe the mercy seat, the place on the ark of the covenant where the blood of atonement was placed, where the wrath of God met the blood of the sacrifice and was satisfied. The shed blood of the sacrificial lamb of atonement foreshadowed that Jesus himself would be the blood sacrifice, the one who would take upon himself the full wrath that you and I deserved.

One of the problems we have is that we like to assume that we don't really need all this. One of my closest friends during my seminary days ended up as a pastor in rural Mississippi, not far from where I pastored. His name is Danny also. There was a woman in our area who was bitter, angry, and venomously derisive toward anybody or anything related to Christianity. (That was rather rare in rural Mississippi at that time, because almost everybody went to church.) But later she became quite ill. At the peak of her suffering she requested that a pastor come and talk to her. So my friend Danny went to see her, and she asked him, "Would you pray for me, that the pain would go away and that I would be healed?" It may sound terribly inhumane, but Danny gets away with all kinds of things. He looked at her and said, "You know, I will do that, but that's not what you need. What you really need is to be forgiven."

One of the interesting things about the way we approach God is that we want God to help us, but we aren't sure we really want God to be God. Paul is saying that when we step back and let God be God, we are in a heap of trouble because of what we have done toward him. When we let God be God, we stand as guilty, enslaved people, worthy of his judgment. But God has acted out of his mercy and grace to allow us a way out of the predicament we have created for ourselves. The way out is in Christ, and this salvation comes as a free gift through his grace.

What does this tell us about God? First of all, in verse 25, it tells us he has been righteous in his delay of judgment. God had told Adam and Eve that the day they sinned they would die (Genesis 2:17). Of course when they did sin, they didn't die physically at that point. God delayed the judgment. Paul says in 25-26, "In the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time..." It's not that God looked the other way and said sin didn't matter, even though sometimes it appears that is the case. Rather, in his mercy he said, "I am not going to exact the judgment that mankind deserves immediately. I will patiently withhold it." He has now acted, pouring his judgment on Jesus, and has said decisively, "Sin does matter. There is a real need for judgment and salvation. And here it is: I have poured out my wrath on my own Son Jesus so that you can be free from the wrath you deserve." So in Jesus we see that God is a holy God, "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

What is the result?

## **Justified by faith**

Verse 27: "Where then is boasting? It is excluded." We are sinful and rebellious. We choose our own way. We deserve God's wrath and judgment and our own enslavement. We have gotten ourselves into this predicament, yet we are set free from it. This should produce in us a profound humility. Arrogance has no place, because we couldn't do anything to fix ourselves. We can't proudly say, "See, I figured all this out, and now I'm a Christian, and I'm cool; I've got it all together." There is no boasting because the devastation of our own guilt and the reality of our own weakness continue to drive us to our knees in humble adoration of a God who would do what it took to unleash his love for us personally and give us the freedom we did not deserve. What incredible love he has for us! There is no room for arrogance in the heart of the believer.

Finally, he says, because this is the nature of salvation, it is open to all. It doesn't matter where you've been, what your background is, what privilege you might want to rely on, how devastating your sin might be, or how ashamed you might be. The high and the low, the rich and the poor, no matter where they are or where they come from, all stand in need, and are all welcome to receive of the bounty of God's grace.

How should this affect the way we live? First of all, as I said, we can't be arrogant. I think arrogance is one of the problems we've had as evangelical Christians in our world. I think that's one of the reasons it's difficult to talk about these things. Our posture toward people is that we're better than they are; we've got things all figured out. Rather than seeking to serve needy people out of humble, thankful hearts, we have almost adopted the problem that the Jews of Jesus' day had, which was to wrap themselves in the idea that they had the truth and become very proud of it. I suggest further that we have the appearance of arrogance even when we don't intend it because of our disengagement from the needs of the world. When you and I live in a so-called holy huddle, when the extent of our experience of Christ is that we want to enjoy our fellowship at church on Sunday mornings but we don't want it to impact the way we live, and we certainly don't want it to cause us the discomfort of having to reach out to people around us who are wrestling with difficult problems and needs, then there is a perception that we are arrogant. If we have nothing to offer the world, it seems as if we are living in a little cocoon.

Therefore, we must demonstrate the grace by which we are saved by living as the people of God. That means we have no higher allegiance in this world than to God. This is very important at this critical juncture in the life of our nation. I do not for a moment want to dismiss the complexity of the issues that we face as a nation, and all that we have to wrestle with in our role as citizens in the current political climate, in the things going on around us, in our families and our jobs. But the call to live as the people of God, redeemed by him, means that our highest allegiance has to be to God. Therefore, we have to prayerfully ask ourselves day by day, "How do I live as a kingdom person in this world?"

We need to have compassion. How do we love the Muslims? How do we love the homeless? How do we love our neighbors who are cranky and ornery and obnoxious in the way they live? How do we love those people down the street from us whom we don't understand, or the people sitting across the aisle from us in church whom we don't particularly care to get to know? As followers of Jesus, redeemed by his blood and set free through this incredible gift of God, we must become the people of God and live compassionately toward others. Therefore we must love and proclaim the love of God without shame or fear of consequences. If we really love the world, then we want to live in the world through the power of Jesus and to share the gospel of Jesus, not out of arrogance or a sense of moral or religious superiority, but out of a heartfelt belief that Jesus is the answer to people's problems, that he is the only one who can bring forgiveness and liberation and freedom to the lives of the hurting people around us.

Paul himself speaks passionately about this. In Romans 1:14 he talks about being under obligation to the nations to preach the gospel. In Romans 9:3 he says he would give up his own salvation if he thought it would help bring his Jewish brothers according to the flesh to the knowledge of Christ. That is a profound, passionate statement that grows not out of arrogance but out of a compassionate sense that this is where people's needs can be met. If we really love the world, then we will without fear of consequence to ourselves and without a sense of shame, boldly proclaim the love of Christ.

Once again, Dallas Willard hits the nail on the head when he says:

"Should I say nothing to you merely because you might find it insulting? I must think more highly of you than that." (2)

The real needs of people's hearts demand a real Savior, the one God has given us, Jesus Christ, who reveals his holiness, satisfies his wrath, and offers deliverance and forgiveness. It is in Christ that we can find the liberation and healing that we seek, and then out of gracious, humble hearts, extend his love to others.

So evangelism does matter, not because Christianity is a better religion, not because we are somehow the

privileged few who have it right, but because “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself...and He has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19). God sends us forth to love this world as he loved it, sacrificially and passionately, with the gospel of Christ.

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## NOTES

- (1) Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, © 2002, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 57.
- (2) Willard, p. 58.

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