

Excerpts From A Sermon

Gospel-Centered Ministry

1 Peter 1:1-12 and 1:22-2:12

By Tim Keller



I am here to talk to you about what ministry shaped by the gospel, profoundly shaped by the gospel, really looks like . . .

In this letter, Peter was not writing to the same type of situation Paul addressed in his letter to the Corinthians. Paul was writing into a situation where there were doctrinal factions, divisions, and party divisiveness . . . Peter was speaking to a persecuted church – a church which was both passively and actively persecuted . . . they were being beset by a culture around them with very different values that they do not know how to relate to. So, of course, you can never divide the doctrinal from the practical issues. However, I would say that Peter here was less concerned about expounding on the content of the gospel as Paul was in 1 Corinthians 15. I'll show how the gospel should shape the way in which we live, our ministry, and how the church operates as a community.

When I was looking through 1 Peter 1 and 2, I found seven features that Peter uses to describe the gospel . . . Since everything in these seven points has already been explicated in the previous sermon, I am simply going to draw out the implications for ministry. I am going to read a nice long section: 1 Peter 1:1-12, 1:22-2:12. Chapters one and two are remarkable at giving you all the features of the gospel and helping us to understand the ministry implications:

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: may grace and peace be multiplied to you. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the

word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you. So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," and "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation."

I hate to do what I am about to do, which is a "flier-over." I hate to go by some of these verses. These verses are deep wells, as we know. I know at least three or four men of God who would probably base their entire lives on one or two of these verses. I thought of Ed Clowney as I went by verses 2 and 9. Nevertheless, we are here for an overview. And therefore, I would suggest to you that Peter shows us in these two chapters that there are seven features of the gospel that we have to tease out of the ministry. I will say them here so you can write them down. The gospel is: historical, doxological, Christocentric, personal, cultural, to quote Don Carson, "massively transformational," and wonderful. Each one has a ministry implication.

The gospel is historical . . . The word "gospel" shows up twice. Gospel actually means "good news." You see it spelled out a little bit when it says "he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ". Why do we say that the gospel is good news? Some years ago, I heard a tape series I am sure was never put into print by Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones. It was an evening sermon series on 1 Corinthians 15. He clarified how the Gospel is based on historical events in how the religion got its start. He said there was a big difference between advice and news. The Gospel, he would say, is good news, but not good advice. Here's what he said about that: "Advice is counsel about something that hasn't happened yet, but you can do something about it. News is a report about something that has happened which you can't do anything about because it has been done for you and all you can do is to respond to it."

So he says think this out: here's a king, and he goes into a battle against an invading army to defend his land. If the king defeats the invading army, he sends back to the capital city messengers, envoys, very happy envoys. He sends back good newsmen. And what they come back with is a report. They come back and they say: It's been defeated and it's been all done. Therefore respond with joy and now go about your lives in this peace which has been achieved for you. But if he doesn't defeat the invading army, and the invading army breaks through, the king sends back military advisers and says . . . "Marksmen over here and the horseman over there, and we will have to fight for our lives." Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones says that every other religion sends military advisers to people. Every other religion says that if you want to achieve salvation, you will have to fight for your life. Every other religion is sending advice saying "here are the rites, here are the rituals, here's the transformation of the consciousness and here are the laws and the regulations. Marksmen over here and horsemen over there and we are going to fight for our lives." We send heralds; we send messengers and not military advisers. Isn't that clarifying? It's just incredibly clarifying. And it's not like there's nothing to do about it, my goodness. Both the messenger and the military adviser get an enormous response. One is a response of joy and the other one is a response of fear. All other religions give advice and they drive everything you do with fear . . . as you know, when you hear the gospel, when you hear the message that it's all been done for you, it's a historical event that has happened, your salvation is accomplished for you, what do you want to do? You

want obey the Ten Commandments, you want to pray, and you want to please the one that did this for you.

If, on the other hand, military advisers say you have to live a really good life if you want to get into heaven, what do you do? You want to pray and you want to obey the Ten Commandments. It looks the same, doesn't it? But for two radically different reasons: One is joy and the other one is fear. In the short run, they look alike. But in the long run, over here we have burn out and self-righteousness and guilt and all sorts of problems. And that's fascinating.

But having said that, what's the ministry implication? The ministry implication is this: the significance of preaching, of proclamation, of declarative preaching, is irreplaceably central in Gospel ministry. Declarative preaching is irreplaceably central.

Why? If basically we are sending people "how to", if we are saying here's the "how to" to live the right way, if that's the primary message, I am not sure words are necessarily the best thing to send. You want to send a model. If I was to teach an advanced seminar on preaching (and I never have) I would make everybody read CS Lewis' *Studies in Words*. It's amazing because we are wordsmiths and he shows you how important it is to craft your words properly. The last chapter is called "At the Fringe of Language" and he says language can't do everything. He says that one of the things language cannot do is describe complex operations. On the other hand, when it comes to describing how, to explain to somebody that Joshua Chamberlain, without any ammunition, charged down Little Round Top in an incredible, risky adventure at the height of the Battle of Gettysburg, and as a result changed the course of history. You don't show people that, you tell them that. It's something that happened, you describe it. You tell them that. If you are going to give them how-tos, very often what you want is modeling and dialogue, action and reflection and so forth.

Therefore, if you believe the gospel is good news, declarative preaching (verbal proclaiming) will always be irreplaceably central to what we do. However, if you subscribe to the assertion that the gospel is simply good advice on how to live a life that changes people and connects to God . . . dialogue would be alright. Stories and modeling and reflection would be more important. In other words, you would believe what some people would quip: "proclaim the gospel, use words if necessary". You've probably heard that. That shows, I think, that they don't quite understand what the gospel is all about.

Point 2: The gospel is Doxological. The purpose of the gospel is not merely forgiveness of individuals, but to bring people to full flourishing through glorious worship. Now where do you see that?

Karen Jobs, in her commentary of 1 Peter, points out what all commentators point out, but I like the way she titled it. Chapter 1 verse 3 to verse 12 is all one sentence in Greek. Therefore, there is a main clause. All that follows are subordinate clauses to the main clause. Here is the main clause: "Praise be to the God and Father and our Lord Jesus Christ". She entitled the whole section, (and that's what I like about it), "Doxology and Basis for the Christian Life," because everything in there, even the new birth, is to the praise of the glory of God. Now why is this so important?

One of the most life-changing and especially ministry-changing things in my life was reading Martin Luther's "Larger Catechism" a few years ago. In "Larger Catechism," he lays out his understanding of the Ten Commandments. Luther says that the first commandment is first because (he thinks) all the other commandments are based on it. In other words, when you break any of the commandments two through ten, you have already broken or are in the process of breaking commandment one. So, Martin Luther says you don't lie unless you have already made something else more than God your functional savior; something else is your greatest joy. Why do you lie? You lie either because the approval of other people is more important than God's or because money is more than the security you have in God. So you wouldn't lie unless you already have first made something else more important than God in your life . . . something more fundamental to your meaningfulness in life or happiness or joy. And then Luther went one step further and said underneath every sin is idolatry in general. And underneath every idolatry in general is always some form of work-righteousness in general, in particular some kind of self-salvation project . . . whenever you make something more important than God, that thing is essentially a savior of your making.

Martin Luther says of the first commandment, you have to believe the Gospel. You can't look to anything else for your justification . . . you have to believe in the Gospel and you can't look to anything else for your justification . . . If he were here today, he would say that underneath everything from eating disorders to racism is a self-salvation project, a failure to believe in the Gospel, and is some form of idolatry. You have either made an idol of thinness . . . or of your race and your blood . . . your heart's imagination is captured. Your heart is essentially adoring and dotting on something other than God . . .

Some years ago . . . I was talking to a young woman, a fifteen year-old girl in my church in Virginia . . . she was really struggling and said this: "I really understand this, I am a Christian. I have clothed myself in the righteousness of Christ, I have a guaranteed place in heaven, and I am the delight of the Father. But what good is that when the boys in high school won't even look at me?" She was absolutely honest. You might say: is she even a Christian? Of course she was a Christian, as far as I can tell. If I look back on it and she looks back on it, there have been changes. Here's the point: boys were on video, and God was on audio . . . if you have an audio and video happening at the same time, you know which one wins. Right?

Jonathan Edwards would say that the ultimate purpose of preaching is not just to make the truth clear, but to make it real. Of course for it to be real, it's got to be clear. If it's confused . . . sorry, no worship happens.

But you can't stop there. We are, I think, afraid of the spirit of the age, of subjectivism, because we believe in objective truth. As a result, our expository messages are too cognitive. Jonathan Edwards did not tell stories, he was incredibly rational. But he was also unbelievably vivid. He was incredibly logical, and precise, and clear because he knew that unless the truth is clear, it will never be real. It's got to be crystal clear, amazingly clear. But it also has to be vivid.

I don't think this is going to be very easy. I see the narrative preaching approach which works superficially on people's emotions. And you have a kind of an expository preaching that tends to be like a Bible commentary that works more on the head. But the heart is not exclusively the emotions, and certainly not just the intellect . . . Therefore, the preaching has to be gripping . . .

What I love about Edwards is how incredibly rational he is, how logical and persuasive he is and yet at the same time, so vivid. You go into his messages and there's the sun, the moon, and the stars. There are mountains and dandelions . . . it's just astounding . . . he understood that telling stories to tweak the emotions, is like putting dynamite on the face of the rock, blowing it up and shearing off the face but not really changing the life.

One the other hand, if you bore down into it with the truth, and put dynamite in there, if you are able to preach Christ vividly, and you are able to preach the truth practically and you are able to preach it out of a changed life and heart in yourself (which obviously isn't the easiest thing by any means) then when there is an explosion, it really changes people's lives. I don't think we have the right end of the stick in general, either in the movement of the people who are working towards telling stories because they want to get people emotionally or working towards giving people the truth because they want to be sure that people are doctrinally sound.

The Doctor, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, was not a touchy-feely type . . . based on his understanding of Edwards, he asserts that the first and primary object of preaching is not to give information. It is, as Jonathan Edwards said, to produce an impression. This is the Doctor, now. It is the impression at the time that matters, even more than what you can remember subsequently. Edwards, in my opinion, understood the true notion of preaching. It is not primarily to impart information . . . while you write your notes, you may be missing something that will impact your spirit.

As preachers, we must not forget this. We should tell our people to read books at home and to take notes at home; the business of preaching is to make such knowledge live. Now, by the way, I don't mind if people are taking notes in my sermons, in the first part of the sermon. But if you are still taking notes at the end of the sermon, I don't think that I have made it home . . .

Thomas Chelmers puts it like this:

“It is seldom that any of our bad habits or flaws disappear by a mere nature process of natural extinction. At least it is very seldom it is done by the instrumentality of reasoning or by the force of mental determination. What can not be destroyed however may be dispossessed. One case may be made to give away to another and to lose its power entirely has the reigning affect of the mind. Here’s an example: A youth may cease to idolize sensual pleasure but it is because of the idol of wealth. The desire to make money has gotten ascendancy, so he becomes disciplined. But the love of money might have ceased to be in his heart if he was draw to ideology and politics. Now he is lorded over by the love of power and moral superiority instead of wealth. But there is not one of these transformations in which the heart is left without an object. The human heart’s desire for one particular object is conquered. But its desire to have some object of adoration is unconquerable. The only way to dispossess the heart of all its affection is by the explosive power of a new one. Thus is it not enough to hold out to the world the mirror of its own imperfections, it is not enough to come forth with the demonstration . . . of the character of their enjoyment, it is not enough to just simply speak the conscience, to speak its follies. Rather, you must seek, as a preacher, every legitimate method of finding access to the heart for the love of Him who is greater than the world.”

Point 3. The gospel is Christocentric. The gospel, as Don pointed out, in a certain sense, the gospel is just Jesus. What is the gospel? It is who Jesus is and what He did for us. The Gospel is Jesus. Of course, you see this in 1 Peter 1:10 where it says, “About which salvation the prophets sought out and searched out, prophesying concerning the grace for you; searching for what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ made clear within them, testifying beforehand of the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that should follow.”

What’s intriguing to me is this: reading in Luke and Acts how Jesus got His disciples together during the forty days before He ascended after He was resurrected. What was He doing? I am sure He was doing more than what we are told. But if you look in Luke 24, it looks like He was giving them a New Testament hermeneutical seminar. This should give professors a lot of hope . . . even Jesus thought running a seminar on hermeneutics was a good idea! If he was running them in those forty days, maybe it is a good idea to run them now. Basically, He was saying that everything in the Old Testament points to Him . . .

He told Cleopas and the other disciples on the road to Emmaus and in the upper room that everything in the Prophets and the Psalms and the Law points to Him. It’s intriguing, we see that in Luke and now here in 1 Peter we have an echo of it. Peter was in on that seminar . . . now he is explaining that concerning this salvation, the salvation of the gospel of Christ, the Prophets had the Holy Spirit in them pointing them towards Jesus . . . Peter is saying what Jesus was saying . . . that everything pointed towards Jesus. Every text in the Old Testament was pointing toward Jesus.

Now my ministry implication is this: The basic subject of every sermon ought to be Jesus, regardless of what passage is at hand. It doesn’t matter whether it is Old or New Testament; it’s got to be about Jesus. By the way, you might say this is only about Old Testament hermeneutics; no, you need to know that my friend Sinclair Ferguson says most evangelical ministers don’t preach Christ. Not only do they not preach Christ in the Old Testament . . . they don’t preach Christ in the New Testament. I will get back to this in a second.

I know this is somewhat of an internal debate here and I’ve got to be careful. I don’t want to be a party guy and say “I follow Chapel, or I follow Goldsworthy.” And you know there are people who say that you preach everything in the Bible pointing to Jesus and there are other good men that just don’t think that’s right. You shouldn’t preach Christ from Jacob wrestling with God . . . you should preach about wrestling with God in prayer or suffering or something like that. Honestly, I believe those good and sincere men are wrong on the basis of reading the Bible and the understanding of hermeneutics and so on.

But part of this goes back, I remember, some years ago, to when I sat down with my wife. You know what that's like - on the way home - after the sermon. First you are hoping she will say: "Great sermon, honey." But if she doesn't say anything, you fear the worst. I remember one day we really got into it. I said "let me ask you, how often do you think it was a great sermon? How many weeks out of the month?" And she said "no more than one in every four or five weeks." So, we sat down and here's what she said: "For a good part of your sermon, your sermons are great. They are rational and biblical, and they are exegetical. They show me how I should live, and what I should believe. But every so often - suddenly at the end - Jesus shows up. And when Jesus shows up, it suddenly becomes not a lecture but a sermon for me, because when you say this is what you ought to do, I think to myself, 'I know, I know, okay. Now I am a little clearer about it and I am a little more guilty about it. Fine.' But sometimes you get to the place where you say, 'This is what you ought to do, though you really probably can't do it; but there is one who did. And because He did it on our behalf, and because He did it in our place, we believe in Him. We will begin to be able to do it.'" This is true only to the degree that we understand what He did for us. And she says: "That's different. One time out of four or five, your lecture becomes a sermon when Jesus shows up and I want to do that. I have hope. And I begin to see how I can do it."

I really didn't understand . . . but basically, now I do. Here's the thing. Your preaching will never be doxological and it won't be central unless it is Christocentric. Here's why: if you tell people they need to be generous, and ask why they aren't being more generous . . . I happen to know about people being generous. Sometimes you don't know about the lust in someone's heart week to week, but you know if people are being generous week to week.

Why aren't people being more generous? Are they just being sinners? Let's go back to Martin Luther. Let's go back to the catechism. If you are not being generous, then there is something going on there, is there not? You are saying your status or your security, which is based on money, is very important to you. You need to be able to buy certain cloths and live in certain circles and go to certain places. Human approval, security, there's idols underneath the lack of generosity. The money is more than just money. It's security, it's significance, it's status. You've got to make more money, then you will give it away.

How do you do that? You have to show that Jesus Christ is their true wealth. You have to show them what their idols are. You have to get to Jesus.

As a result, if you don't get there, you are going to find that you are wailing on people's wills. You are beating on wills. Sinclair Ferguson wrote a book . . . called *Preaching Christ in the Old Testament*. And this is what he says: Not only do most ministers not preach Christ in the Old Testament, they don't preach Christ from the New Testament. The preacher has looked into the text, even in the New Testament, to find himself and the congregation . . . not to find Christ. You can do this even in the New Testament, in the Gospels. The sermon, therefore, is consequently about the people in the Gospels and not the Christ in that Gospel. The more fundamental issue is this question: What is the Bible really about? Is the Bible basically about me and what I must do or is it about Jesus and what He has done? Is the Bible about the objective and indicative?

Here's an example. Hermeneutics is important. You can't just find Jesus in every little twig. And there needs to be a way where you are following the trajectory of the text no matter what that text is to Jesus. You have to show how Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of that particular trajectory of the text. You've got to be responsible. And yet, like Sinclair said, it's more like an instinct. It's not so much just the right hermeneutical principles; it's an instinct. Do you believe the Bible is basically about you or basically about Him? Is David and Goliath basically about you and how you can be like David and Goliath or about Him, the One that took on the only giants in life who can kill us? You see. And His victory is imputed on us. Who is this all about? That's the fundamental question.

And when that happens, you start to read the bible anew. Jesus is the true and better Adam who passed the test in the garden. His garden is a much tougher garden and his obedience is imputed on us. Jesus is the true and better Abel, who though innocently slain has blood that cries out: not for our condemnation but for our acquittal. Jesus is the true and better Abraham, who answers the call of God, who leaves all the familiar comforts of the world into the void, not knowing where He went. Jesus is the true and better

Isaac who is not only offered by his father on the mount but who was truly sacrificed for us all. While God said to Abraham: "Now I know you truly love me, because you did not withhold your son, your only son, from me." Now we, at the foot of the cross, can say to God: "Now we know you love us because you did not withhold your Son, your only Son, whom you love, from us."

Jesus is the true and better Jacob, who wrestled and took the blows of justice that we deserved so we like Jacob only receive the wounds of grace that wake us up and disciple us. Jesus is the true and better Joseph, who is at the right hand of the king, and forgives those who betrayed and sold him and uses his power to save them. Jesus is the true and better Moses, who stands in the gap between the people and the LORD and mediates the new covenant. Jesus is the true and better rock of Moses who struck with the rod of God's justice now gives us water in the desert. Jesus is the true and better Job, He is the truly innocent sufferer who then intercedes for and saves His stupid friends.

Is that a type? That's not typology. That's an instinct.

Jesus is the true and better David, whose victory becomes the people's victory even though they didn't lift a stone to accomplish it themselves. Jesus is the true and better Esther, who didn't just risk losing an earthly palace but lost ultimately the heavenly one, who didn't just risk His life but gave His life, who didn't say if I perish I perish but when I perish, I perish for them . . . to save my people. Jesus is the true and better Jonah who was cast out into the storm so we can be brought in. He's the real Passover Lamb; He's the true temple, the true prophet, the true priest, the true king, the true sacrifice, the true lamb, the true life, the true bread. The Bible is not about you. And that's an instinct.

Until that shows up in your sermons, it will be lectures and not sermons. It won't be doxological, it won't be central.

Point 4. The gospel is personal and individual. Don already said this. In 1 Peter 1 and 2, we see a lot of references to the new birth. What does the new birth mean – think about the metaphor of the birth – you can't make yourself a Christian? You can make yourself a Buddhist. You can make yourself a Muslim. You can make yourself an Atheist. But you can't make yourself a Christian. To become a Christian, you have to be converted . . . notice that's a passive. You don't convert yourself, something happens to you. Through faith you're born again. You are confronted with you sin in front of a holy and jealous God. And you see the provision. Now, that's individual conversion. This is very important, at this moment, in all our lives as Christians, especially in North America, but I am sure in other places as well. There is an erosion in the confidence of the thing that I just said. It is the idea that we have sinned against a holy and jealous God, the wrath of God has to be satisfied, Jesus Christ stood in our place, substitutionary atonement is provided, and when we believe in this, both in His suffering and obedience is imputed to us . . .

J.I. Packer, in his little chapter on grace in *Knowing God*, said there are two things you have to know in order to understand the concept of grace. Grace isn't the opposite of Law. First of all, you have to understand how lost you are, how bad you are, how dire your condition is, and how big the debt is. You have to understand that . . .

Now if somebody says, "I believe Jesus died for me, He shed His blood for me and I have given my life to Christ. I accepted Him; I walked forward and invited Him into my life," but you don't see any change in that person's life, you don't see identify shifting, behavior transformation and joy, what's the problem? It's clear that this person doesn't understand the size of the debt, and therefore the size of the payment . . . Jim Packer used to say to understand grace, and for grace to be transforming, first you have to understand the debt. The second thing you have to understand, besides the size of the debt, is the magnitude of the provision. There are people who do understand that they are pretty bad. They do understand how flawed they are. They do understand how far-short they fall. But they aren't convinced of the magnitude, sufficiency, freeness, and fullness of the provision. They may only believe that Jesus died the death that we should have died. And maybe they also don't believe Jesus lived the life that we should have lived . . . And you also see Pharisees - people who are really under the burden of guilt. As a result, they are withdrawn and hostile and moralistic and legalistic. And we look at these two groups of people and the evangelical world is filled with them. Easy-Believeism is really deadly. *The Cost of*

Discipleship book by Bonhoeffer explains why Easy-Believeism was the reason Nazism could come into power. That's pretty dangerous. Why Easy-Believesim? Why the Moralism? Because they don't understand the gospel; the old gospel, the historic gospel. The gospel of salvation by grace through faith and the work of Jesus Christ alone, and substitutionary atonement . . . they don't get it.

So what's the solution to all the Easy-Believeism? Why is it that we don't have people living the life they ought to live? Why do we see people culturally withdraw, being really negative and narrow? Because people think the solution is "let's change the gospel" . . . I can't imagine that anybody is going to write a hymn that goes like this: "my chains fell off and my heart was free, I rose forth and followed thee." It's just not going to happen . . .

Point 5. The gospel is cultural. What do I mean by cultural? The gospel creates a culture called The Church. It's not just an aggregation of saved individuals. It's a culture. The gospel is so different in what it says about God, you, and your standing with God. It's so identity-transforming; every other religion or system motivates you through fear and pride to do the right thing. Only the gospel motivates you through joy . . . the fear and trembling joy . . . the fear of God joy. That doesn't mean that now we are a bunch of saved individuals with wonderful internal fulfillment. It means that when we get together we want to do things differently. We will do everything differently. The gospel is massively transformational and it creates a counter culture but it also makes us as people relate to the culture around us. And this comes out especially in 1 Peter 2. I will be brief on this but it's crucial.

Those of us who believe in that individual gospel often miss the communal aspects of the gospel. And in 1 Peter 2:12, he says "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." Right before this, he says, "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers." In 1 Peter 1:1, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world." There's been a lot of discussion about this. There's pretty much a consensus. The word "strangers" there means not a tourist who's just passing through the world briefly, but not a citizen of the world either. Somebody who's going to be there a long time whose true citizenship and value belongs somewhere else.

Peter makes an amazingly balanced statement and we have to understand this. The gospel, I believe, is radical. The nature of the gospel, on the one hand, does say "you need to engage" to the legalists who are afraid to be polluted by the culture and have the tendency to bolster their fragile sense of righteousness by feeling superior to the sinners around them. On the other hand, the gospel also confronts the secular, irreligious, liberal Christian, who asserts that we really can't believe in sin or the holiness of God and hell because it offends people.

The gospel says that there are dangers on both sides: cultural accommodation, culture withdrawal. Most of us as Christians today think that most of the dangers today are on one side. We tend to get together with a group of people and say: the main danger, the main danger today is cultural accommodation. On the other side, there are Christians who think the main danger is cultural isolation and irrelevance. No one will see the good deeds of those who withdraw from the world and just hate the world. They don't glorify God. They are not involved with caring for the poor; they are not engaged. On the other hand, people who accommodate the culture are never persecuted. How do we know that the radical gospel is turning us into a counter-culture for the common good? This counter-culture should be distinct, very different from the side we have inside of us, but a side that shows that we love the world and care about the world. We love our enemies because we are saved by a man who died loving His enemies.

Therefore, this balance is awfully hard to maintain. In Jeremiah 29, the exiles, wanted to stay outside of Babylon and remain pure. The Babylonians wanted to come in to Babylon, and lose their cultural identity. God told them through Jeremiah to do the hardest thing possible. In a sense, He said, "I don't want you to stay out and be different. I don't want you to go in and become like them. I want you to go deeply in and stay very different." And that's exactly what 1 Peter is talking about. Peter calls them exiles. He knows that the relationship with the culture around them has to be the same relationship as the Jewish exiles had with the Babylonians. We need to seek the welfares of the city. We need to care about that. We need

to follow in the footsteps of the one who serves His enemies and forgave His enemies and died for His enemies.

At the same time, we have to be telling people that they are going to hell. Now, generally speaking, by and large, the people who want to be prophetic don't want to be priestly. The people that want to talk about going to hell do not just sacrificially pour out themselves and say we are going to love you and we are going to serve you, whether you really like what we do or not. And the people who are serving like that are afraid of talking about things like hell or wrath. I don't know whether we can become a movement of people who understand what 1 Peter is saying: that the gospel creates a counter culture, but a culture that engages the community around us at the expense of persecution . . .

New Yorkers love what the Bible says about forgiveness and reconciliation and caring about the poor. They hate what it says about sex and gender and family. Go on to the Middle East and find people who love what the Bible says about sex and gender and family, but abhor the idea of forgiving people, 70 times 7. I think what 1 Peter 2:12 is trying to say is in every single culture, if you actually live distinctively in an engaged way, you will get persecution AND you will get approval. It will always be different depending on the culture. You will attract people, you will influence people. You will be salt and light and at the same time you will get punched in the mouth.

If you are only getting punched in the mouth, or if you are only getting praise, you are not living the gospel life. Either you are falling into legalism and withdrawal or you are falling into accommodation. When I say the gospel is massively transformational, I am just saying the gospel creates a worldview, a basis of worldview that actually touches every area of life; the way you do business, the way you do art, the way you conduct your family life. What do I mean when I say the gospel is wonderful? 1 Peter 1:12, "It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things."

Angels love to look into the gospel. They never get tired of it. So what does that mean? It means gospel ministry is endlessly creative. It means you can preach the gospel and never have to be afraid of boring people . . .

Isn't that amazing? The gospel is not the ABC's of Christianity, it's A to Z. It's not just the elementary and introductory truths. The gospel is what drives everything that we do. The gospel is pretty much the solution to every problem. The gospel is what every theological category should be expounding when we do our systematic theology. It should be very much a part of everything.

Even angels long to look into it. And you should. Let's pray.

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