

Ash Wednesday 2016: Our Holy Calling

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[0 : 00] This is the way I default into thinking. And so Paul's reminding the Corinthians and us what his singular purpose is.

He says, I'm an ambassador of Christ. And my sole aim, my sole purpose is to implore you and convince you, by whatever means necessary, be reconciled to God.

And then he says this, for your sake, he, God, made him, Jesus, to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Now that's a huge phrase. We don't have time this morning to unpack all of that. But when Paul says that Jesus became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God, he's saying the entire reason Jesus came, the entire project of redemption, the entire reason that an innocent man was willing to become sin, is so that we would become righteous.

And what we need to understand is this means not only a transactional righteousness, where Jesus pays the debt and God says, well, now that the debt is paid, I'm going to from now on consider you righteous.

[1 : 23] Regardless of what you do, you're going to be righteous to me. Yes, that's true. That is true. But it's more than that, because God has initiated in Jesus a project of restoration and renewal of the heavens and the earth, a project of which we're a part.

And that grace that is gained through Jesus, that is what gains us entry into that redemption project, that renewal project. That's what includes us in that. But it includes us.

And what that means is that not only does God, through Jesus, declare us righteous, but then He begins to work in our lives to form and to shape and to transform us so that we become more and more and more righteous in our lives in ways that reflect the righteousness that has been declared over us.

That's a lot of theology. We'll state it simply. God's singular primary purpose in your life is to make you holy and righteous.

He is unceasingly, tirelessly, continually working to forge you into the righteous men and women that He desires you to be, that He sees you to be in Jesus.

[2 : 53] That is His singular goal in your life, is to make you holy and righteous. Holiness, not safety, is the end of our calling.

You know, as I've been thinking about that phrase, you could swap any number of words out, and it would still be true. You know, holiness, not happiness, holiness, not happiness, is the end of our calling. Holiness, not comfort, is the end of our calling.

Holiness, not companionship, is the end of our calling. Holiness, not successfulness, is the end of our calling. Holiness, not affirmation, is the end of our calling.

You should spend a little while, as I have done, thinking about what words you might substitute in. Chances are, whatever word you put in that blank, that has probably taken such hold in your life that it is actually hindering your progress toward righteousness.

It's become what we call in the Christian church a kind of idol. There's so much that we can't know about God's purposes in our lives.

[4 : 11] But the one thing that we do know is that he is relentlessly and unceasingly working to make us holy and righteous. So God uses everything in our lives toward that end.

So look at Paul's life. He says in verse 4, as servants of God, we commend ourselves in every way. And then listen to what he's endured. By great endurance and afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger, purity, understanding.

But then he goes on and he says, in truthful speech and in the power of God, with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left. Through glory. Through good report. Genuine.

Living on. So if you look at this list, you see that all of it, the good, the bad, the ugly, and the unmentionable, Paul sees as being a part of God's old folding purpose in his life. And here's the hard truth for us today. That for most of us, it is the hard stuff that is actually doing the most in us. It's the suffering.

[5 : 16] It's the struggling. It's the grief. That is what is forging in us the righteousness of God. That's what's doing the work.

One of the implications is this. There is no such thing as unanswered prayer. You know, people say, well, I've been praying and God just hasn't answered my prayer. That's not true. God always answers prayer.

You know, our kids recently have wanted to jump out a second story window with a bed sheet to use as a parachute. And they want to climb out that window and they want to grab an umbrella or a bed sheet and they want to dive off the roof.

Laura and I talked about it, considered it. And despite the convincing case that they made, we said no. And it's because we love them and we would love them to live a little longer.

God looks at us and he looks at the prayers that we pray and many, many, many, many times, if you're anything like me, God loves us so much that he says no.

[6 : 24] Likewise, have you ever considered that the good stuff in your life, the stuff that Christians very, very quickly say, what a blessing.

Have you ever considered that that might be the form that spiritual attack takes in your life? That those might not be the evidence of God's blessing, but rather a spiritual attack.

Because if you're anything like me, when I look at the things that I very quickly call blessings in my life, a lot of them have the primary effect of making me less dependent on God. So I'm not sure that God would bless me in that way if he really loved me and believed that I needed him.

So it makes us reevaluate what do we consider blessing and what do we consider a lack of blessing.

So as we enter this season of Lent together, I suppose I'm encouraging us to look at our own lives, to examine our hearts, to see how and where God might be at work, realizing that it's probably not in the ways that we expect.

[7 : 36] Recognizing that in all things he's forging in us the righteousness and holiness that he has pronounced over us in Jesus Christ. So if you are fasting this Lent, I encourage you to fast from the good things that may actually be drawing you away from God.

And even more challenging, and I know it's easier said than done, to consider embracing those places of great struggle and great hardship. Understanding that those may indeed be the blessings. Because they're changing you and forging you into the very image of Jesus Christ. And in all things may we remember that holiness, not safety, is the end of our calling.