

The Wounds of Grace

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[0 : 00] Well, I've been given the task of explaining to you what cherubim and seraphim are, so I'll start with that. And the way I'll do that is by telling you that David will be back at the church in the back there, immediately following the service.

Any very difficult questions you have, you've always wanted to know about the Christian life, you can ask him after the service. And he'll be glad to spend all afternoon, if necessary, working with you on that one.

I can tell you about cherubs. There is an eight-week-old cherub in the Gifford household who was awake all night last night, and that's why I asked God to be with us tonight instead of this morning. So, hopefully that won't affect the sermon at all. This sermon is a wonderful undertaking. These six verses are powerful. They are the center of the gospel, the Christian life that we have together. And as I was reading them, I was encouraged deeply, and I was also reminded of when I lived on the Sunshine Coast, I used to be, for whatever reason, the target of Jehovah Witnesses' visits very frequently.

[1 : 18] And it got so I made appointments with them. So, you know, they have the spiritual gift of coming at the exact wrong time. So, as you're coming out of the shower, as you're getting ready to go, or as you're having people in, that's when they would come.

So, I would say, okay, we're going to get together at one o'clock for one hour, and we're going to talk about one thing. And one day they came with a pamphlet that was wonderfully illustrated in sort of 1950s Sunday School pictures of this perfect-looking man.

And it's called The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived. And it was about Jesus. And I said, great, well, let's talk about Jesus then. And so they talked about the fact that Jesus was the perfect person, that he is the example of everything that we could be if we really put our minds to it.

And it stops there. And so I said, well, you've left some things out. And I explained what I understood about Jesus. And they came back and they said, well, that's fine, but Jesus was not God.

He did not die in our place for our sins. And he did not literally rise from the dead. And there was a bit of silence there. It was a conversation stopper.

[2 : 41] And I said, well, okay, but how will you have eternal life then? And the answer came back. They said, the way we have eternal life is by living a good life.

If we are very good and carry through with it to the end of our life, we will probably be able to live with God in paradise. Well, I asked the next question, how good, how can you be sure that you will be in paradise?

And they said, we can't. And there was a pause. And they said, we really don't know for sure. We hope that we can keep up our good lives until then, but one never knows.

And that was sort of the end of our conversation. And there was a sadness. There was the sense that they had a great burden that they were carrying with them.

Because here were wonderful people who sincerely wanted eternal life with God, but they were living a life of uncertainty. There was this real possibility in their mind that they might be found wanting in the end, that they might not measure up.

[3 : 54] And it all came from what we talked about at the beginning, a wrong understanding of Jesus. And that uncertainty about salvation, that wrong understanding of Jesus, is not confined to Jehovah Witnesses.

This is something widespread in our culture. It is widespread among people who have a background in going to church. It is something, actually, that we can drift into.

This idea that somehow we can establish ourselves before God. By the things we do, by the things we say, by how we look to other people. If you ever get into a conversation about eternal life and heaven, with a co-worker or friend or family member, you're very fortunate.

It doesn't happen very often, does it? But if you do, you'll often hear that kind of thinking. And it's the kind of thinking that says, well, I'm not sure what's going to happen when I die, but I'm pretty sure that I'm a pretty good person, and I'll probably go to heaven.

Now, if you haven't had that conversation, the way that you get one is, sit on the plane next to somebody and tell them, in the trip, that you are a minister. And it's true.

[5 : 11] You are all ministers of the gospel. And you'll have some very interesting discussions. And listen to how people understand what will happen when they die.

What about eternal life in heaven? There is this uncertainty about heaven, because the common thinking is a vague belief that good people go to heaven, and bad people end up in a sort of penalty box.

And there's varying times they might stay there. And it is through good behavior that we go to heaven. That's the human inclination. It's what we're bent towards, that somehow we accomplish a reward.

But the uncertainty in people's minds come because people aren't exactly sure how good you have to be to get to heaven. That's where the crunch is. And that's why you often hear, I hope I go to heaven, but I won't know till I get there.

Well, Galatians, the Galatian people were beginning to think this way. They were drifting. They were becoming uncertain about the gospel. And there is spiritual danger in thinking that way.

[6 : 21] They thought that maybe we do have to perform certain religious tasks in order to be sure that God is accepting us. And the hard thing about it was that certain Christian leaders, as David preached about a couple weeks ago, were tolerating this kind of thinking.

Paul is very concerned about it. Because what this does is it compromises the gospel. It actually distorts who Jesus is. It actually weakens the incredible power of the gospel that is in Jesus Christ for us.

The power to save us. The power to transform us. The power to give us eternal life. And so Paul, in his concern, makes three things very clear to them.

And this is a word for us that is so important because our natural drift is again to establish ourselves before God and forget about our utter dependence upon God's mercy and his love and his grace.

So let's look at verse 15. The first thing that Paul tells us very clearly is, we are sinners. Well, that's a wonderful thing to hear on a Sunday morning.

[7 : 34] We are sinners. Verse 15. And the way that he puts it is that he says, we ourselves who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, sinners, yet we know that a man is not justified by works of the law.

You see what he's saying? He says that I, as a Jew, who have all the right sorts of behaviors and look very godly and righteous in the eyes of other people, am in the same boat as Gentile sinners, people who are defined by sin.

We are in this boat called the HMCS sinner. And we are all going down together. The way that Paul wrote this is that he said that we, Jews and Gentiles alike, are under sin.

We have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. It's the thing we have in common with everyone in the world. All of us are born with a natural inclination, a heart that rebels against God, that wants to put ourselves in his place and not accept the free gift that he gives us.

We have no ability to make things right with God. We can't, by our own effort, even come close to the point where God accepts us because of wonderful things that we do.

[8 : 57] And that's why it's great in the Anglican Liturgy that at St. John's we confess our sins publicly. It's a humbling thing to do, isn't it? We are saying we are all affected by this heart condition.

And together we depend on Jesus for his forgiveness every day. And that's not an easy truth to affirm in our culture. There's no other place where people confess their sins publicly like this Sunday by Sunday.

We are saying that, no, the culture is wrong. The culture says we have a notion that it's bad for self-esteem to talk about sin.

That we are basically good and there may be any evil in our life as an illusion that we're not really responsible for. Something else may have made us do it, but it didn't come from within us. But if we believe that, we deny our need for Jesus. We deny the need for his good news. It's not incredibly good news if we don't sin.

[10 : 02] The first thing John said when he saw Jesus was what? He said, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And the world means you and me. He can't take away sin if there's nothing to take away. If we are not sinners, there's no need for the Lamb of God to come and to die in our place and take away our sins.

And verse 21 says that I do not nullify the grace of God. And he's saying by implication that we do nullify his grace. We say no to his grace if we say that we do not sin and don't have that heart condition that only God can change.

So that's the first thing. Paul is saying to us, we are sinners. Here on this wonderful Sunday morning when we're gathered together and look very godly and righteous, from this viewpoint anyway.

But the second thing that he tells us is that only Jesus justifies you. Only Jesus justifies you. And I'd like us to read verse 16 together.

[11 : 13] Because here is the heart of the Christian faith. Verse 16. Yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.

Even we have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law. Because by works of the law shall no one be justified.

Now we need to be clear about that word justified, don't we? Because it comes up three times in this one verse. And very simply, justified means to enjoy the status or standing of being in a right relationship with God.

of being accepted by Him. That's what justified means. Being in a right relationship with God and having that standing, that permanent status of being accepted by Him.

It sounds like a technical word, but this is a word that describes the precious gift that God gives to us. It is the most precious gift we can possibly receive.

[12 : 24] Because to be justified means that you, as a sinner, are perfectly accepted by God, not just today, not just for the rest of your life, but for eternity.

You see, this is the gospel that the Jehovah Witnesses needed to hear, that I was talking to, my friends. It is a gift that only happens when the Lamb of God takes away your sin by living the perfect life in your place, and then dying in your place on the cross, and rising again in power.

You see, the work of forgiveness is so powerful that Jesus permanently makes you right with God. I liked what one speaker said about how to understand what it means to be justified.

It means, he said, that Jesus forgives me in such a way that God looks on me just as if I'd never sinned. Just as if I'd never sinned.

That's an extraordinary thing. It's what the psalmist says, that as far as the east is from the west, that is how far God has put our sins in Jesus Christ. It is remarkable status, a spiritual reality that's given to us.

[13 : 40] And it's a precious gift, this act of justification, because it's about being at peace with God. It's about knowing his love forever. And this is the thing that the human heart yearns for and desires above all things.

It's something that's hidden often, but if you go deep inside the human mind and the heart, that is what we want. That's what God made us for. But it's also a precious gift because it is something that we could never accomplish by ourselves.

It is completely unique that way. There is nothing that a person can ever do to be justified by works of the law. Something that we can do by good deeds, by religious behavior.

And in fact, Paul says three times, he says a person can never, never, never be justified by works of the law. It can never happen. And finally, it is God's precious gift because it's something only Jesus can do.

And we know through the scriptures that it is done at tremendous cost to himself. Look down in verse 20. Right at the end, he says, he talks about faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

[14 : 59] Well, that word gave is talking about dying, suffering and dying, an awful death on our behalf and giving to us this precious gift of a right relationship with God.

Now, in this church this morning, there very well may be somebody who has not yet received the gift of a healed relationship with God. And the Bible reading today says there is nothing to stop you from receiving the gift, that gift of being made right with a loving Heavenly Father.

You don't have to wait until you're good enough. You don't have to wait until you have enough faith because Jesus lives the perfect life in your place. And you are justified by his faithfulness, by what he has done on the cross.

And so when we think about receiving this precious gift, the way we receive it is like Bartimaeus in that reading we heard before where he wanted to receive sight.

And he said to Jesus, have mercy on me. And that is the way we receive this precious gift. It is not by earning it. It is by seeing that Jesus is with us, just like Bartimaeus saw in saying, have mercy on me.

[16 : 15] Give to me what I cannot make for myself. The way that Hebrews puts it is, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

He gives us the faith. And that's why the old translations say that you are justified by the faith of Jesus. In other words, by his faithfulness. And he gives to us the ability to say, have mercy on me. So there's a lovely invitation here to trust in his mercy and Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for you. And the wonderful thing about that gift is it can never be taken from you.

It is permanently yours. It's not based at all on your ability to believe or on your ability to look good. It is the gift that's based solely on the fact that the risen Jesus died for you and is perfectly faithful to you.

Jesus' work on the cross can never be reversed. And you know, that's a word that my Jehovah Witness friends needed to hear. That work that Jesus did is the basis of our acceptance by God.

[17 : 27] It can't be reversed. And for those of us who are Christians, we drift, you know, we drift into saying we are earning the salvation.

But here it is saying that we are only justified by the faithfulness of Jesus alone. It's a deep encouragement because those are burdens that we place on ourselves. The burden to earn God's acceptance.

We take that on. You know, it's a prideful kind of responsibility. But God says, give that to the rightful place, to Jesus, who earns that salvation, who he alone can give it to you.

And you know, the book of Common Prayer says that to be justified by faith is a wholesome doctrine and very full of comfort. You know, it's an encouragement because we are often tempted to two things, to either doubt our standing before God or to be self-righteous, establish ourselves before God.

And in one case, it gives us confidence, you know, that this is our permanent gift. And the other, we are necessarily filled with humility that this is God's gift, that we depend on him alone.

[18 : 38] And then finally, there is a third certainty in this passage. Besides that we are sinners, besides that Jesus justifies us, he alone, the third certainty is that we are freed for a new life.

We are freed towards a new life. And in verse 17, Paul is accused of being a sinner because he's more devoted to Christ than to doing all kinds of good, useful works of service.

And he answers that accusation by saying that the law taught me I can't make myself right in God's eyes. I can't keep all those things that God requires.

In fact, I would be transgressing back to this life of trying to earn God's acceptance. And so Paul says he died to that old way of life and he now has a brand new life.

Let's look at verse 20 because he describes this. He describes what it's like to live to God. I have been crucified with Christ.

[19 : 45] It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

You see, there is a new life that comes when a person is justified by Jesus. It is a life that's no longer self-centered or independent. It is a new life that's very different from that life that said I will earn the acceptance of God.

I will do good things for God on my terms. It says in a new life that Jesus is the center of my reality. Jesus lives in you and you will never be apart from him.

The center reality in your life now is that Jesus loved you and gave himself for you. And that is the unshakable truth that is meant to shape our priorities, to actually be the center of our decisions that we make.

When I was up in Pender Harbor, I was part of the fire department. And I used to get lots of... Anything religious was directed towards me. I was an easy target. I was a minister up there.

[21 : 00] And so we got into some very wild and woolly conversations. But one of the ones that was shot was, you know, I can describe the Christian life. And so one of the firefighters said, this is what the Christian life is.

Basically, you go to church, you get forgiven, and then you live any way you want for the rest of the week. And I thought, well, that's great. You've just summed everything up.

Maybe you can preach that in our church. But he missed out on the gospel, didn't he? Because what happens here, what Paul says, is that Jesus frees you to live in a new relationship with God. He frees you to have Jesus live in your life, to be the center of your life, to be the one that you live for. Not living for good things, to look good before God, but to live for the one who loved you and died for you.

And that's why our life mission is in that verse 20. And, you know, this would be a good thing to write on your refrigerator. Maybe on a piece of paper and stick it on your refrigerator, but write it somewhere up there.

[22 : 12] And this would be your life mission. It's this. I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

This is the life I live, by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. So any uncertainties about our relationship with God and our future are made clear.

It is about having Jesus in me forever. It is about depending upon him to bring me to see him one day. There is deep joy described here of being with the living Jesus and serving him forever.

And that's why Martin Luther said, you know, a Christian is greater than the whole world. That's quite a statement to make. And he said, this is why. For he has such a gift, such a treasure in his heart, that although it seems to be but little, it is greater than heaven or earth.

Because Christ, which is this gift, is greater. You see what we are receiving today from this passage. We are seeing what the most precious gift in heaven and earth is.

[23 : 27] And that it is ours only by saying, have mercy on me. Jesus, you are here. Have mercy on me. Come into my life. And God's grace is such that we are brought back from the drift of establishing ourselves before God and being brought into the place again of being dependent upon him, of living the new life with Jesus at the center and living for him in joyful obedience.

Amen. Amen.