Treasuring Jesus Together

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0:00] Well, good morning, everyone. It's appropriate to start a sermon like this, quoting the great John Stott, a British pastor and theologian, on this issue that we've been wrestling with over the last number of weeks.

He has written, it is simply impossible with any shred of Christian integrity to go on proclaiming that Jesus, by his cross, has abolished the old divisions and created a single new humanity of love, while at the same time, we are contradicting our message by tolerating racial or social or any other barrier within our church fellowships.
I wonder if anything is more urgent today for the honour of Christ, for the spread of the gospel, than for the church to be, and should be seen to be, what by God's purpose and Christ's achievement it already is, a single new humanity, a model of human community, a family of reconciled brothers and sisters who love their father and love each other, the evident dwelling place of God by his spirit.
And then he says, only then will the world believe in Christ as peacemaker. Only then will God receive the glory due to his name.
That's from his commentary on the book of Ephesians, written in 1979. Let's pray. Gracious Father, we pray that as your word is open to us this morning, we ask for the grace to, and the presence of your Holy Spirit, to search our hearts.
[1:55] Help us to be mindful of our own heart, and not dare to search the heart of another person across the room, or someone who immediately comes to mind. And we ask it so that you might be glorified, and our world might see that Christ is the peacemaker.

Amen. This vision series that we're in is about us taking the next steps to bring glory to God by treasuring Jesus together, so that our world may come to know, and to see and believe that Jesus is in fact the peacemaker.
And if you just joined us for the first time, maybe on stream, on live stream for the first time, we have been discovering over the past number of weeks the necessary foundation to such a corporate life as we've journeyed through the Bible.
That is, what we've been trying to lay out in front of us is a Christian worldview, and the way that it impacts our daily experience, and therefore how we understand the world, and how we understand other people and issues within our world.
We started off by seeing that all of humanity is made in the image of God to show forth His glory, that is, there's a purpose to the image of God. We've also seen that right from the very first people, we have rejected that purpose, and we lived without God as our ruler, and therefore we pursued another purpose, and that is our own personal glory.
[3:24] The Bible calls that sin. All people are not just united in carrying the image of God, but also united in their rejection of God. And then we saw how God, the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the perfect image of God, came into His creation as one of us.

Humanity. He started with us in order to redeem us. He paid the price for our rebellion against God by His death on the cross. And His work on our behalf restores our image as God's much-loved children, but also sets us free from sin in order to pursue the original purpose that God has for us, and that is to bring glory to Him in all of life, and not just as individuals, but as a radical new humanity.
Last week, James unpacked the implications for each one of us in relation to God and our understanding of ourselves and our sense of identity and self. Jesus gives us the only identity that is secure, the only identity that you don't have to work for, and it's a perfect identity.
It's a full identity that is meant to fill us up in every way. Now, in the next couple of weeks, I plan to unpack what the implications are for our relationship with each other as a local church, particularly

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around the issue of our unity and diversity as people from different generations, ethnicities, cultures, preferences, et cetera, et cetera.
If you've got the St. Paul's app, you can open up. There's a few points there that I want to go through in this morning's message. Now, first of all, gospel thinking is the first point there.
[5:16] The theology of the apostle Paul helps us to move in the right direction of ending racial pride and ethnocentricity as he brings the gospel to bear on this particular topic.

Paul leaves little doubt what the heart of the gospel is. You don't have to go any further than Galatians. The passage in Galatians, which is read out, verse 16.
We see it there. We who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.
So we too have put our faith in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law, no one is justified.
So the heart of the gospel for the apostle Paul is what we call the doctrine of justification by faith. And it's justification by faith alone, apart from any works that we might contribute, any good thing that we might do.
[6:30] Now, justification is what a judge does in a courtroom. It is a declaration that a defendant is found innocent because they actually are innocent.

They are truly innocent. The defendant is declared to be just because they're found to be just. And so the question is, how can God, the judge, the true judge, the just judge, declare us righteous and innocent and just when we're clearly not?
And the answer is, is what we saw a couple of weeks ago, that Jesus Christ lived and died to provide our righteousness and to bear our punishment.
Justification by faith puts every single person on a level playing field, level ground, in utter dependence on grace, God's grace. None of us contribute anything to our salvation.
And therefore, justification by faith has to smash pride in the human heart. There is no room for pride in the human heart. That's the heart of the gospel.
[7:51] And many new, sweet, tender, deep, strong, beautiful, noble, humble, kind, wise, patient, caring, servant attitudes and behaviors flow out from that.

And one of which is the breaking down of ethnic hostilities and suspicion and creating unity and harmony. Justification by faith alone has overcome all the divisions, all the divisions that exist between those who are in God's new humanity, his people, his church.
Galatians 3, 26. He's very clear on that. You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.
For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
If you belong to Christ, then you are all Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. Now I'm going to come back in a little while, like in a couple of weeks probably, and explain that there's neither Jew nor Greek, explain what that means.
[9:21] But basically what it means here is very simply, it's a level playing field. Your heritage contributes nothing. I'll unpack a little bit more.

You see, when Paul says here to this group of the Galatians there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, what he does is he strikes at the three major barrier-forming divisions of human society, and certainly in the human society in the first century, and certainly first century for the Jew.
Ethnicity, economic capacity, and sexuality. There was a Jewish prayer in the first century that went like this. Blessed be he that he did not make me a Gentile.
Blessed be he that he did not make me a slave or an ignorant peasant. Blessed be he that he did not make me a woman. Now I imagine a prayer that was only said at the bacon-free men's breakfast on a Saturday morning.
The Christian gospel smashes those barriers. And it forms a radical new society. But it does not obliterate the differences.
[10:38] Greeks are still Greeks. Slaves are still slaves. Females are still females. What's obliterated here are the barriers that formed by those differences. And a person's status among the people of God based on those differences.

That is, no race, no nation, no class, no gender has a favoured status with God.

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That was a radical theology in the first century. because it flew in the face of all traditional cultural norms and it set people free.
And it continues to be a radical theology today because it conflicts with many of our cultural norms as well. The gospel brings unity not uniformity.
Secondly, what the gospel does is it produces gospel living. So let's go to Galatians 2 verse 11 to 16. Just read out for us. The key phrase that I want to focus on is verse 14.
[11:55] When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel. That verse implies that there is a conduct, there is a behaviour, there are actions, things that we can do that are out of step with the truth of the gospel.

Or to put it another way, the gospel governs not just our belief structures, but all of our behaviours as well. All of our actions, our attitudes.
There is gospel belief that must be grasped but there is also gospel action that must be lived. Some beliefs contradict the gospel and some actions contradict the gospel.
And Peter's actions here in Galatians 2 was a contradiction of the gospel. And that's an important question that we can ask about any of our habits, any of our actions, any of our behaviours.
Do they contradict the gospel that I say that I believe? Or positively, is this in step with the truth of the gospel?
[13:18] Does this attitude and action say true things and bring glory to Jesus? Does it do that? Does it reflect the gospel?

Does it look like the kind of action that flows from the gospel? gospel? But at the end of Galatians 2 12 we see that Peter was governed by fear and not the gospel.
And Paul rebukes him for it. Verse 11, when Peter came to Antioch I opposed him to his face because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James he used to eat with the Gentiles but when they arrived he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.
The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy and so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.
The son of encouragement was led astray. You see Peter had been experiencing the freedom of the gospel as a Jew. He was crossing ethnic and religious barriers to eat with Gentiles something that was forbidden and then it says in verse 12 that certain men came from James.
[14:44] They were Jerusalem conservatives who believed that Gentiles because of their uncircumcision and their unkosher food you know they ate prawns for instance their dietary habits their failure to keep holy days meant that they were off limits to associate with even if they were Christian religious and ethnic issues were inseparable for them they were not they were afraid of maybe his own group maybe his mates back in Jerusalem or something but what's clear is that fear in this instance ruined practical gospel faithfulness fear did it he was free he was eating with his brothers across ethnic lines and fear at least in this particular moment fear destroyed the diversity and the harmony and so

I think at the very least what I can say from this passage is don't let fear ruin your joyful freedom in living and working and worshipping and relaxing and eating with brothers and sisters different from you or to put it positively fall in love again with the gospel rejoice all over again that you were justified by faith alone justification by faith alone means that this faith and nothing else is the great eternal unifier of all the peoples of the world who trust in Christ we need to keep putting Jesus front and center in our life together as a church we need for Jesus to be our greatest treasure we need to remember that the divide could not have been larger between sinful human beings and the infinitely holy
God but Jesus did not despise us he came to us he loved us he died in our place to give us life and he did that for us when we were more alien to him than anyone has ever been alien to you or to me anyone even across political divides us when we think or feel or act with disdain or disrespect or avoidance or exclusion or malice towards a person simply because he or she is from another race another ethnic group another political viewpoint we are ineffective saying that Jesus acted foolishly in the way he did coming to the earth to the cross for us and you don't ever want to say that and so what does it mean for us to develop a gospel shaped heart now this church faces divisions of all kinds ethnicity age gender social status financial status theological awareness historical connection political ideology we don't have signs up anywhere here at

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St Paul segregating people depending on what political group you vote for what race you come from what generation you want we don't have any of those signs up here structurally segregating people at all in fact we've done multiple things over the years to break down structural segregation as a church the issue of this series is the prejudice and the implicit beliefs that linger in our hearts that can lead to anti-gospel actions and behaviours that's what this series is about it's about searching the heart it's about looking at the implications of my heart and your heart that's what it's about it's sort of like a you know a motor mechanic implicitly assuming that girls can't fix cars as well as boys and therefore gives less attention and fewer opportunities to the female apprentices it's that kind of thing it's the implicit stuff that happens that's what we're seeking to address and my hope is that this series is that we will put to death the remaining corruption in our hearts that thinks or feels or acts with ill will towards others because of difference and in particular in ethnic and racial difference so what

I want to do here right now is try to help us to see and remove one of the subtle sinful prejudices in our hearts and it's subtle it's that subtle I don't think another person can see it this is for your heart to assess it's that subtle but I want to do it anyway I want to focus on John chapter one that passage is read out to us in verse 43 Jesus calls Philip to be his disciple in verse 45 Philip finds Nathaniel and says to him we have found the one Moses wrote about in the law and about whom the prophets also wrote Jesus of Nazareth the son of Joseph in other words Philip in this moment has believed in

[21:09] Jesus as the Messiah and he's eager here for Nathaniel to know him too he identifies this one written about by Moses and the prophets by calling him Jesus of Nazareth he identifies Jesus with a town a group of people who live in that town and for whatever reason we're not told Nathaniel responds to Philip in verse 46 Nazareth can anything good come from there his question in this moment amounts to a foregone conclusion nothing good can come from Nazareth what was the nature of Nathaniel's mistake now one way to describe it would be to say that it was sinful prejudice because of the people of Nazareth he had what we call a stereotypical view of the people of Nazareth and he made this judgment about

Jesus based on that negative stereotype another way to look at it is that Nathaniel did what every one of us does every single day he made a generalization based on multiple experiences and in this case biblical evidence and then formed a probability conclusion based on that generalization so let me try and reword Nathaniel's response if you like my experience is that the people of Nazareth are ordinary I don't see in the Old Testament anywhere that the Messiah can come from Nazareth therefore from that biblical evidence and my experience my general observations

I think it's highly improbable if not impossible that this Jesus is the Messiah now before we go any further I should say generalizing from our experience and drawing a probability conclusion is both inevitable and good inevitable and good the human brain works that way it's part of God's good gift to us it works that way and in fact I would go as far as saying that your life depends on your brain working that way for instance you observe that mushrooms with certain features such as yellow with purple dots are poisonous never personally tasted one but there's enough evidence to say that's true and when someone offers you a mushroom that's yellow with purple dots on it you turn it down you don't go well I shouldn't be prejudiced here against this mushroom you've never you've never tested the mushroom but you see it and it belongs to a general class that raises alarm bells that says poisonous and so you form a probability conclusion and you refuse to eat it your life depends on you not treating that individual mushroom in isolation from your experience of what others have done when they've eaten that mushroom now of course sometimes our judgment seems totally legitimate and proves to be dead wrong and so what about

Nathaniel was his a non sinful fully warranted probability judgment that proved to be wrong or is Nathaniel guilty of sinful prejudice I think he's guilty because he doesn't say can the Messiah come from Nazareth it wasn't a biblical conclusion he says Nazareth can anything good come from Nazareth now if his heart was right gracious loving patient hopeful towards the people of Nazareth he might have been legitimately skeptical about whether the Messiah could come from Nazareth and so he would not have likely said at that point Nazareth can anything good come from there you see Nathaniel has moved from a legitimate probability conclusion to a sinful prejudice at that point his view of these people is so negative that he sweeps all of them into a stereotype including the one perfect human being

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Jesus of Nazareth notice too that his reaction to what Philip says is immediate does not consider the possibility that Philip might know what he's talking about he's temporarily blinded by his prejudice at this point and notice Philip's response here he doesn't go racist doesn't jump on his Facebook feed and immediately call him out for his racism simply says in verse 46 hey come and see let me challenge your probability statement come and see come and see the potentially the one Nazarene who doesn't fit your bill give this man a chance judge him by his glory not his group now here's the point
[27:42] I want to make there is a fine line between legitimate probability judgments and sinful prejudice it is a real line and it's a real line that often in fact in every instance God sees it even if we don't always see it we do need to be careful to not allow genuine and rightful assessments of people and circumstances to function in our heart in such a way that it makes the shift and sometimes it's a subtle shift towards a self justification for sinful prejudice us now my sin as I mentioned a few weeks ago was to allow past experiences to assess every person in a particular racial group in such a way that I treated them all with suspicion and even contempt our hearts are deceitful still and corruption remains and we must put it to death and may the

Lord give us absolute honesty with ourselves and him may he expose every remnant of sinful prejudice in our hearts and may we never use the legitimacy of generalizing to cloak the sin of prejudice so I think it's important to clarify something here after speaking of my experience that night in Alice Springs one of our church family rightfully and helpfully pointed out to me that while they don't have a particular you know racial prejudice towards the group that I was mentioning they likewise like me would have felt threatened in that moment but it wasn't a racial prejudice that would cause them to be threatened in that moment that is a quick assessment of that scenario is a feeling of powerlessness and threat that's helpful that's a helpful probability assessment at that point they were right and so we need to be careful of just calling out situations as racial prejudice when it just might simply be an appropriate reflection on experience and there may be another explanation that is we need to be more like the
Philip and say come and see rather than racist come and see we need to be so careful of making assessments of each other's hearts and motives when we just see practice and I am therefore apologising for overstating my case several weeks ago I believe that sin has ruined every heart but we are not ruined in all the same way if you were an onlooker with me in that moment in Alice Springs in 2005 you couldn't tell on that moment by my behaviour what was happening in my heart can I also add
I didn't understand my heart fully in that moment either I wasn't aware I was threatened by my circumstances which led into a sinful prejudice a right threatening of circumstance in an area that I didn't know which most people would have but it led into a sinful prejudice and it was so easy for me in that moment to justify my response simply as self preservation how did I know that I'd slipped over into sinful prejudice the next morning the next morning it was so it was it wasn't so easy to justify my heart when the tables are turned and I was in a position of power the next morning
I was preaching in a local church I was doing what I do here there were no signs up in this particular church saying segregation black people at the back white people at the front there was formal indication that this is how you sit but that's what happened white people at the front black people at the back I was the guest of honor I was the preacher I was the in my domain the position of power no threats were happening to me in that moment at all and when it came time in the middle of the service for us to greet one another I found it so hard to cross the imaginary divide which was existing in the room not a single person in that room in that moment would have questioned my actions not a single person I walked around the room I greeted people as the preacher
[33:32] I had other things happening on they couldn't see my heart but when I finally did cross the imaginary divide the response I received from the two individuals that I shook hands with started to break my heart on this issue God was revealing something to me in my heart unbeknownst to anyone else in that room in that moment I performed in a way that everyone expected me to perform on that day I want to keep coming back to this point it's about your heart my heart don't assume to know someone else's heart come and see so let me close with three indications of a good heart as we struggle with the line between inevitable generalizations and sinful prejudice forgiveness it's a heart that has received

Christ knows forgiveness and is indwelt by the Holy Spirit so this is very brief number one the good heart desires to know people and to treat people for who they really are as individuals not simply as

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a representative of a class or a group if this were not so Jesus could never be recognized for who he truly is as the son of God and so my question for us as a church is do you desire I mean really desire to know people and treat people as individuals not merely as samples of a group number two this good heart is willing to take risks to act against negative expectations and belittling stereotypes when dealing with another person Paul said 1 Corinthians 13 love believes all things and it hopes all things
I think he meant that love strives to believe and hope for the best and not the worst and thirdly the good heart is ready like Nathaniel to repent quickly and fully when we have made a mistake and judged someone wrongly this is what I want for my heart to be towards you yours towards me and ours towards all people you across

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