

## The Importance of the Gospel — Dr. Keith Plummer

Good morning. Show of hands, who was at the gala? Okay. I want to know who to watch to see if they stay awake. In his 2012 book, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church*, theologian Michael Horton wrote the following, "The greatest threat in the church today is not heresy nor rank apostasy, but rather the subtle tendency to assume the gospel." He goes on to argue that when churches assume the gospel rather than explicitly preach and teach it, they eventually lose it. And he traces a pattern that can be discerned over the history of the church. With the first generation preaching the gospel, proclaiming the gospel, boldly preaching salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the next generation, he says, assumes the gospel. They still believe it, but they don't emphasize it. And as a result, the next generation confuses the gospel. It becomes mixed with moralism and pragmatism or cultural trends as being of greater import. And finally, the gospel is lost. The church moves into legalism, liberalism, or therapeutic deism. Jared Wilson, the author of a more recent book, an excellent book called *Lest We Drift*, published just this year, titled *Lest We Drift*, Agrees with Horton's assessment from almost 15 years ago, and he writes, "We desperately need again today a rediscovery of the gospel." And he's not talking about out there. He's talking about the church. As Christians, we are most spiritually in danger when we think we are so well-acquainted with the gospel that we no longer need to hear it, to be reminded of and refreshed by it, to revel and rejoice in it. One of the ways we can come to assume the gospel is by paring it down to catchy slogans, abbreviated forms. Well-meaning believers on what was formerly known as Twitter, challenge each other to explain the gospel with three words, for example. The problem is that in miniaturizing the message about Jesus like that, so much is lost. And eventually, we can mistake familiarity with a tweetable gospel snack for the delectable full course meal of the message about Jesus and the treasures of redemption that are found in him. Take the question, why did Jesus die? What was the purpose of his death? What end did he, his Father and the Spirit, have in mind? What did he intend to accomplish? There are numerous biblical answers to that question. He died to demonstrate God's righteousness.

He died to glorify the Father. He died so that those who believe in him could be forgiven of our sins and have eternal life. No one response says all that could be said about the purpose of our Lord's death. Each is true, but each is a facet of a magnificent jewel. That means that if we're content with treating any one of them as though it captures all that the Bible has to say on the matter, we're neglecting other truths, and consequently, our Christian life and worship will be diminished. This morning, I want to look at only two answers to that question, why did Jesus die? They appear in the apostle Paul's greeting to the Galatian Christians. It was read for us this morning, but I'm going to read it again, chapter one of Galatians 1 through 5. "Paul, an apostle, not through man, but through Jesus Christ and God, the Father, who raised him from the dead. And all the brothers who are with me, to the churches of Galatia, grace to you and peace from God, our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever.

Amen." I'm going to pause here. I wanted to pray, and I forgot, but let's pray. Our Father, we do pray that you would open our eyes that we might behold wonderful things in your word so that we might see with greater clarity and appreciate with greater wonder and awe the beauty and the perfection of the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom it bears witness. We pray through him. Amen. Paul wrote this letter to the Galatians to remind them as to why it is that Jesus died and rose again, because they were drifting. Some of them had drifted from the gospel because of falling under the influence of certain Jewish teachers who were saying, it is necessary to adhere to the law of Moses, especially the command to be circumcised. It's necessary to make one right with God and to produce wholeness of life. The two reasons Paul gives for Jesus's death and resurrection correspond to their erroneous teaching. No matter how long we have been Christians, we need to pay attention because just like the Galatians, we are prone to stray from a confidence in the gospel and gravitate to alternative and faulty foundations on which to try to build our assurance before God and our striving to live godly lives.

Therefore, I stand in continual need of being reminded why it is that Jesus died and rose again. This isn't elementary truth that we graduate onto something else from. The gospel is not a 101 class that we leave behind to do a 301 or 401. It's truth that God intends to continually shape our lives and so we need to keep returning to it. The apostle Paul gives two answers to the question, why did Jesus die? In verse 4. And the first is this, Jesus died to remove our condemnation. Our justification, as we speak of it. See what he says in verse 4, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins. One Sunday morning, many years ago, while I was preparing for church, I was flipping through the channels on the television as I was ironing a shirt. I stopped to watch something that was called The Hour of Power with Dr. Robert Schuler. I heard that grunt. Amen. But Dr. Schuler was the pastor of what at the time was called the Crystal Cathedral. And he was a well-known author and TV preacher, whose message focused not on sin and salvation, but on positive thinking and self-esteem.

He, in fact, wrote a book, a best-selling book called *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*. In it, he ridiculed classical Orthodox theology for insisting that theology be God-centered rather than man-centered. And he defined sin in that book as follows. This is a quotation, "Any act or thought that robs myself or another human being of his or her self-esteem." Well, because I was familiar with Dr. Schuler, and it wasn't my practice of watching Dr. Schuler every week, I just want you to know. My interest was piqued when the song leader announced that they were going to sing as their next hymn, A hymn, whose title I was familiar with, "Lift High the Cross." And I was getting really excited, because I was thinking, "Oh, maybe this is a revival, the Crystal Cathedral. They're actually going to be singing about the cross." And so I waited. The orchestra, and they did have an orchestra, began the beginning strains of the introduction, and then the first verse appeared on the screen of the television. "Lift high the cross above the crowded earth, that men and women everywhere might know their own self-worth." Needless to say, I

was disappointed. Contrary to those misguided lyrics, the cross of Christ is not, principally, the affirmation of our worth, but a display of the gravity of our sin.

In his commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther says this about the words of verse 4 of Galatians 1. This sentence also defines our sins as great. So great, in fact, that the whole world could not make amends for a single sin. The greatness of the ransom, Christ, the Son of God, indicates this, the vicious character of sin is brought out by the words "who gave himself for our sins." So vicious is sin that only the sacrifice of Christ could atone for sin. The Galatian's foolishness, and sometimes ours, was thinking that crimes committed against an infinitely holy God could be paid for by partial acts of obedience, because even our best obedience is partial. Trying to earn God's acceptance on the basis of our own work is striving for what cannot be attained. It's a fool's errand. If you and I have any hope that we can earn God's acceptance by anything that we might offer him, it's evidence that we think too highly of ourselves and too poorly of him, that we overestimate our goodness and underestimate his absolute purity and wholeness. God's law is a mirror that reveals the filth of sin, but it is not a washcloth that can remove it.

As Paul says later in the same letter, "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died needlessly." So much is packed into those few words who gave himself for our sins. I just want to mention three. First, Jesus' death was voluntary. He gave himself. You no doubt know the words of that familiar verse, John 3: 16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." In response to the thought of God, the Father, giving his Son to bear the sins of the world, some object, and you probably have heard a variation of this objection. What kind of tyrannical, bloodthirsty God would give his innocent son over to experience a torturous death and bear punishment he didn't deserve so others could go free? Some have gone so far as to refer to the Orthodox teaching of the Son bearing the Father's wrath, what's called penal substitution, on behalf of sinners as an instance of cosmic child abuse. Yes, God, the Father, gave his Son. But God, the Son gave himself.

Jesus was neither the helpless victim of of humanity nor deity. There was no conflict or discord, or dissension within the Godhead. The plan, the execution, and the application of redemption are the work of the Triune God. Jesus laid his life down willingly, so that with Paul, everyone who trusts in him says, "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." Secondly, Jesus's death was substitutionary. He gave himself for our sins. He bore the condemnation we deserve. And when we turn to him in repentance and trust, his perfect record of obedience is assigned to us as though it were ours. Just as sure as his father credited my sin to him and treated him accordingly, he promises, "You trust my son, and I will treat you, according to his righteousness, as though you lived in complete conformity to all that I have commanded." Think on that, Christian. There is, therefore, now no

condemnation for those who in Christ Jesus. Christ has completely, fully absorbed the condemnation that I deserve. There is no remainder. This is the great doctrine of justification by grace through faith.

And I want you to hear carefully. If someone next to you is dozing, nudge them. Because I want you to hear the following application, again, from Luther, the counsel that he gives to the believing sinner with respect to those words who gave himself for our sins. Listen to what he says. "We are not to look upon our sins as insignificant trifles. On the other hand, we are not to regard them as so terrible that we must despair. Learn to believe that Christ was given, not for picayune and imaginary transgressions, but for mountainous, sins, not for one or two, but for all, not for sins that can be discarded, but for sins that are stubbornly ingrained. Practice this knowledge and fortify yourself against despair. Say with confidence, Christ, the Son of God, was given not for the righteous, but for sinners, if I had no sin. I should not need Christ." Thirdly, and we sang about this as well, Jesus' death was sufficient. Christ's offering of himself as a sacrifice on behalf of sinners completely satisfied God's justice. Elsewhere, Paul connects Jesus giving of himself for our sins and the Father's satisfaction with his offering.

Ephesians 5:2, where he says, "Christ love us and gave himself for us a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." God is pleased with it. No one who genuinely trusts Christ's death and resurrection as the full and final payment for his or her sins ever needs to worry that God will find it wanting. But as wonderful as the news of justification is, that's not the only reason Jesus died. In fact, Paul says, Jesus gave himself for our sins in order to accomplish another goal and that's the second point. Again, in verse 4, "Jesus died to rescue us from our captivity to the present age." Look again at verse 4. It says that Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver, to rescue us, from the present evil age. The cross and resurrection, therefore, were divine means of rescue. But what does it mean that he rescued us from this present evil age? After all, we're in the present, are we? This is not a reference to God taking us out of the world now. To understand what Paul has in mind, we need to understand that the Bible divides history into two major epochs or periods, the present age and the age to come.

And we see this in a number of places in Jesus' own teaching, in warning of the grave consequences of blaspheming the Holy Spirit in Matthew 12:32, he says, But whoever speaks against the Holy spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. In Mark's gospel, Jesus gives these words of assurance to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers, or sisters, or mother, or father, or children, or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecutions, and in the age to come, eternal life." I really like what one theologian named George Eldon Ladd had to say about this present age and the age to come. This is what he had to say, "This age is the period of

Satan's activity, of human rebellion, of sin and death. The age to come will be the age of eternal life and righteousness when Satan is destroyed and evil swept from the earth. In brief," Now here, I really want you to follow what he's saying here.

"In brief, the redemptive realities are the blessings which belong to the age to come. But in Christ, they have been given to believers who still live in this age. Christians live in two ages. They enjoy the powers of the age to come while living in the end of this age." So Paul says that Jesus gave himself to deliver us from the present evil age. Peter says something very similar in the first chapter of his second letter, verses three and four. He says that God's divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature. That doesn't mean that we become gods, but it means that we become partakers of God's likeness, morally, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. That's the same thing that Paul is talking about, deliverance from the present evil age. Through the cross of Christ, the age to come, characterized by resurrection, restoration and righteousness, has penetrated this present evil age to rescue sinners from its power in this life.

Now, Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith, in his book, *On the Road with Saint Augustine*, has a few lines that capture this point well. He says, "Grace isn't just forgiveness, a covering, an acquittal. It is an infusion, a transplant, a resurrection, a revolution of the will and wants. It's the hand of a higher power that made you and loves you, reaching into your soul with the gift of a new will. Grace is freedom." Yes, Jesus died for my pardon, for my acceptance by a Holy God. Thank God. But if your understanding of the gospel never progresses beyond that glorious truth, you are short-circuiting your pursuit of practical wholeness and transformation. In fact, the worst case scenario that we could enter into is that I can abuse the truth of my justification to excuse not striving to kill sin in my life by the power of the Spirit. I can get into the habit of indulging unrighteousness and shrugging it off because, "Hey, I'm forgiven."

And if that's my attitude, I'd say that there's good cause for me to at least consider whether my faith is real. I want you to imagine something. Imagine someone offers to give you a car, and it's a nice car.

I mean, this is a really nice car. And you see it and you say, "Man, that's a really nice car. I'd love to have that. Can I give you something for it?" They say, "No, I don't want you to give me anything because anything you could give me, you couldn't afford it anyway. I just want to give it to you." And you are just beside yourself. And then you say, "You sure I can't give you something for it?" They say, "No, I'm giving you the car." And you look around the car, you sit in

the car, and you're just really overcome. And you say to the person who wants to give you the car, "I really like the car, but I don't want the trunk." And they look at you and say, "Well, what do you mean you don't want the trunk?" "Well, I really like the car. I just don't want the trunk. I'll take the car without the trunk."

They're going to tell you, "If you don't want the trunk, you don't want the car." Because the car is part of the trunk. The trunk is part of the car. It's a package deal.

It's not up for you to select which portions you want. And we can do the same thing with salvation. We can say, you know what? I'm all about the forgiveness. I really want that. But I don't want what Jesus said that he died for, which is to rescue me from the present evil age. To which Jesus is rightfully justified in asking, then do you want me? Because death to the present evil age, delivery from the present evil age, and justification are a package deal. Listen to what pastor and hymn writer John Newton, wrote about this. "Whoever is possessed of truth faith, will not confine his inquiries to the single point of his acceptance with God, or be satisfied with the distant hope of heaven hereafter, he will be likewise eager to concern himself with how he may glorify God in the world and enjoy such foretastes of heaven as are attainable while he is yet upon the earth." In other words, who will enjoy whatever foretaste of the age to come and the rescue from this present evil age can be experienced now. The cross accomplished more than just covering our sins. It rescued us from the dominion of sin and Satan, so we can do battle with sin in our hearts with confidence and expectancy that significant change, not perfection, but significant transformation is possible because that is one of the reasons why Jesus died and rose again.

Do not assume the gospel. If anything, always assume that there is always more of it than you currently know, and it is deeper and richer than you have any idea of. With that assumption, we can be safe. Let's pray.

Our Father, we do acknowledge that to answer the question as to why it is that your Son died and rose again is a multifaceted jewel. We've only looked at a portion of that. But Lord, we thank you for these truths. We pray that you would guard us and help us to help one another guard against assuming the gospel. Lord, if we think that we have reached its depths, correct us. Lord, there will be for eternity more of your redemption in Christ to know, to experience, to enjoy. Lord, I pray that you would move upon our hearts, especially as we consider these two aspects of why it is that Jesus died. For those who may be despairing, losing sight of their justification and courage. For those who have been presuming, not really living in accord with what it is that Jesus gave himself for, deliverance from the present evil age, help us. And Lord, we pray that we might delight in the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ to your glory and our soul's welfare.

Amen.