

TEXT: Colossians 3:1-11

SUBJECT: The Gospel Changes Everything #2: Self Image

A couple of weeks ago we began a discussion on *How the Gospel Changes Everything*. If you' ve been to church more than, say, four or five times in your life, you know I and other pastors are prone exaggerate. One week we say, *This is the greatest, grandest, most glorious doctrine in the Bible*, and the next week we say the same thing about *another* doctrine. Pardon us for overdoing it a bit and remember—unless we' re phonies—we do it only because we' re caught up in the glories of Christ—and it *is* hard to say which one of His glories is the best!

The habit of overdoing it at times has not inflated the title of our afternoon studies. When I say, ' The Gospel changes *everything*' I mean it. It is *the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes*—and ' salvation' is more than conversion, more than ' asking Jesus into your heart' as some say. It is the believer' s whole life.

The Gospel fixes what' s wrong with us—and not only the religious things wrong with us. When it is sincerely believed and properly applied, it changes everything: how we work, play, spend our money, treat our families, read the newspaper, get sick, and die.

It also changes our self-image. This is the topic we' ll talk about today.

## **THE GOSPEL**

Before we do that, however, let' s remember what the Gospel is and what it isn' t. The Gospel is not a set of rules—not even the rules we find in the Bible. The Rules have their place, but they must stay there. When they get out of their place, they do more harm than good. Most Christians I know are (or have) suffered terribly under the weight of the Law and the guilt it brings with it.

They try and fail; they try harder and fail again; they try even harder, and once again, they fail. Then they quit trying and fall into despair.

The only thing sadder than these dear people are the ones who try and succeed. It goes to their head, making them proud of themselves and look down on people who are not as successful as they are.

Rules bear only poisonous fruit: despair, self-loathing, pride, and contempt.

The Gospel, on the other hands, brings freedom, peace, joy, and good works. How? By announcing what God has done for us in Christ, and by freeing us from our guilt and fear, thus enabling us to live as children of God, sure of our Father' s love and eager to please Him.

This is the big idea of our series.

## **THE QUESTION AND THE ALTERNATIVES**

How does the Gospel change our self-image?

Let' s start with defining the term and weighing the options. Self-image means just that: *How we look at ourselves*. Do I matter or not? Am I worth something or am I worthless? Have I done enough or have I got to prove myself again? Can anyone love me or am I hopelessly unlovable? Must I keep on pretending to be the person I' m not? This is what I mean by self-image.

What are the alternatives? I thought of four.

*The first is the traditional view*. Two generations ago, nearly everybody felt this way. Your worth is based on who you are or what you have done. An American of 1935 might say, ' *I' m an important person because I' m a Rockefeller* ' ; his friend in Germany might add, ' *I matter because I' m a member of the Master Race!* ' His worth comes from his family or ethnicity or class or level of income, education, whatever is valued at the time.

People not so proud of their breeding found their self-image in what they could do: work hard, make money, buy a house, take care of a family, send the kids to college, and so on.

This is one option: tie my self-worth to an illustrious family (if I have one) or to personal achievement.

*The second is the entitlement view*. This is what our kids are taught in school and bombarded with on Sesame Street, Oprah Winfrey, and everywhere else. It is summed up in the immortal words of *Jack Handley*: *I' m good enough, I' m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me*. It has nothing to do with who you are or what you' ve done. You' re entitled to feel good about yourself, whether you take care of your family or abandon them.

The people behind this may be fools, but they' re good-hearted fools, in my opinion. They know that people who hate themselves and feel guilty and worthless do bad things: they commit suicide, join gangs, become depressed, and live unproductive lives. They feel for these people and want to help them by building their self-esteem.

*The third view is a Christian version of the second.* It disconnects self-image from what you' ve done or not done. It says, ' You' re a good person because God created you, and you' re so precious to Him that His Son died for the privilege of having your fellowship forever' .

There' s enough truth in this to make it plausible, but overall it isn' t true. If being God' s creature makes you good, the devil is good! And, as for the death of Christ? It' s not designed to demonstrate your worth, but to exalt God' s grace!

*The fourth view is the one we' re prone to: the gloomy Christian.* Some believers are never happier than when they're wallowing in their sin and worthlessness. J.I. Packer went to a church like this, where he and his friends stayed awake in the service by counting the number of times the pastor called himself and his people *worms*. By the way, there is only one reference to this in the Bible, (Psalm 22:6), and so, it shouldn' t come up every week! But in his church, it did—several times a week!

I doubt no one' s motives: I believe the men who promote this view are aiming for humility, but what they get is despair and that' s a form of unbelief.

## **THE GOSPEL VIEW**

What we have to do is find a way to combine gratitude and freedom in Christ with humility and meekness. We' ve got to strike the balance Paul finds in I Corinthians 15:9-10—

*For I am the least of the Apostles, who am not worthy to be called an Apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; for I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.*

The man is deeply aware of how sinful he is, yet he glories in the redeeming grace of God, and works his fingers to the bone in advancing His Kingdom in the world.

This is the kind of self-image we need, and—I hope—the kind we want.

## **WHERE IT IS**

The only thing that can provide this view is the Gospel. Unlike the self-esteem people, the Gospel doesn't lie to us. It agrees with our consciences; it tells us we're a mess, and worse than a mess, it tells us we're sinners—

*There is none righteous, no not one;*

*There is none who understands;*

*There is none who seeks after God;*

*They have together become unprofitable;*

*There is none who does good, no not one.*

The first Gospel sermon did not begin with, 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life'. It started with, *Repent*—and not just of one or two mistakes you've made along the way—but of your whole life. It's all wrong, not because you're always mean to your kids or never have a kind word for strangers, but because it is not God-centered.

The Gospel, though does not leave it with, 'You're a mess'. It goes on to say that God has come into the world to clean up its 'messes' by forgiving our sins, giving us His Spirit, and finally, raising us from the dead and making us as much like Christ as we can be.

What does this do for us? It humbles us, it makes us grateful, and it energizes us to serve God and others with cheerful hearts.

Thus, our lives are totally changed by the Gospel. We become what Paul says we are—

*New creatures in Christ.*

## **THE GOSPEL AND SELF-IMAGE**

If you're paying close attention, you know I've gotten off topic. Wonderful! The Gospel changes our lives, but what about our self-image? With all my sins and needs and failures and insecurities, how can I feel better about myself?

You don't need to feel better about yourself! You also don't need to feel worse about yourself! What the Gospel does is..Get us off ourselves, our failures and fears and problems, and put us where we belong—

*On things above, where Christ is.*

Remembering the exalted Christ and our sure hope of being exalted with Him is the very thing that frees us from the self-centered conduct listed in vv.5-9, of which bad self-image is a part.

Tim Keller calls this state of mind the thing we need most: *Blissful self-forgetfulness*. God give it to us, for Christ' s sake. Amen.

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