



Communicating Christ

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Leader’s Guide for Lecture #3

The Hope of a Christ-Centered Message

Goal of this Lesson: To understand how Christ-centered messages affect the Christian life. (The *real* subject is, “What is your theology of change?”)

I. Stimulating Holiness Through Christ-Centered Messages

A. What Makes People More Holy?

What makes redeemed people more holy—threat of condemnation or promise of grace? It is not a new question as a review of Romans 6:1 will assure you. Yet the question is debated in every generation of believers.

[Example of Bunyan in prison]

The concern with the idea of assured grace is similar to that surrounding perseverance: “If we tell people they do not have to worry about rejection, what’s to keep them on the straight and narrow?” Such people reason, “We can’t tell them God will never reject them or they will just do what they want.” “Once saved, always saved” is equated with “have perseverance, will party.” The same reasoning asks, “What reason will God’s people have to be holy if all you do is keep assuring them of grace?” So I ask you again, “What better leads to true holiness—threat of punishment or promise of grace?”

1. What do our Standards say?

Westminster Confession of Faith XX.1, 6, 7:

The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the Gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and in their being delivered from . . . the dominion of sin; as also, in their free access to God and their yielding obedience to him, **not out of a slavish fear, but a child-like love and willing mind.**

. . . [A] man’s doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourageth to the one and deterreth from the other, is **no** evidence of his being under the law; and not under grace.

Neither are the forementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the Gospel, but do sweetly comply with it; the Spirit of Christ subduing **and enabling** the will of man to do that **freely, and cheerfully**, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.

ROOTED IN GRACE FOR A LIFETIME OF MINISTRY

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[Note that what is done under compulsion or threat, far from being righteous, must actually be pursued for self-protection or self-promotion and, thus, “falls short of the glory of God” in that it is but sanctified selfishness.]

2. What does the Bible say?

2 Cor. 5:14: “The love of God constrains us . . .”

Rom. 8:15: “You have not received the spirit again to fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship whereby we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’”

1 John 4:18: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, because fear hath torment.”

Luke 1:68, 74: “He has come and redeemed his people . . . to enable us to serve him without fear.”

<> Apparently our holiness is never primarily a result of responding to threats.

Ridderbos, Paul: *An Outline of His Theology*, 1975 (p. 253):

No less striking in this respect is Colossians 3:3ff., where in response to “For you have died, and your life is hid in God,” the command at once resound: “Put to death therefore your members which are upon the earth: fornication uncleanness,” etc. Having once died with Christ does not render superfluous putting to death the members that are on earth, but is precisely the great urgent reason for it. . . . *The imperative is thus founded on the indicative . . . it is immediately clear that the imperative rests on the indicative and that this order is not reversible.* For in each case the imperative follows the indicative by way of conclusion (with “thus,” “therefore,” Rom. 6:12ff.; 12:1; Col. 3:5, et al.).

Key Idea: “. . . the imperative rests on the indicative and this order is not reversible.”

Thus, the rules do not change; the reasons do. (Be what you are.)

3. Why the Debate?

Why then is there the debate over whether we should threaten with guilt? Christians feel the need for a corrective. We wonder how we shall compel others, ourselves, who are sinful to stop sinning. The most obvious and often the most efficient method—at least in the short term—is to threaten rejection or retribution, or to introduce doubt about one’s salvation. Such comments can be very effective in changing people’s behavior—but are such comments proper and, if so, what are their proper limits?

Ultimately the question boils down to what we believe is the relationship between our conduct and God’s acceptance:

Are we holy for God's acceptance?

OR

Are we holy from (i.e., because of) God's acceptance?

[My pastoral experience: Persons obeying without becoming healthier.]

4. What is the Formula for Holiness?

The dynamics of contrary beliefs about the relationship between holiness and acceptance can be formulated:

If, in order to become acceptable to God and avoid (or abrogate) guilt, we must correct our behavior, then our spiritual lives reflect this formula:

Guilt → cancelled by behavior change = legalism/Pharisaism.

If acceptance precedes and motivates holiness, our spiritual lives reflect this formula:

Guilt → cancelled by cross → causes gratitude.

Behavior Response = repentance.

<> The Father welcomed the prodigal before and after his words of Confession were uttered. The son assured himself of his father's care before he returned (cf. Rom. 2:4).

II. Proper Motivation in Christ-Centered Messages

A. Presenting the Whole Counsel of God

Commanding people to do what is right without explaining why or how inevitably hurts them because they are left to consider their works and abilities as the cause of God's acceptance or affection. As a result, well intended instruction dispensed with the motive of helping people inevitably hurts them. On their own no believers can do what they are told they should do. Thus, if all they hear are the "shoulds," they inevitably will face despair or pretend self-righteousness.

If grace is not put into the equation of human works and divine acceptance then legalism or moralism results whether one is talking about salvation or sanctification. We are acceptable to God by grace alone. Our sanctification is by grace alone (since our best works are filthy rags). God graciously accepts our works offered to Him in gratitude for our salvation, but our acceptance and our sanctification is never a result of anything but grace.

We cannot gain or earn any more of God's love since grace has already granted and secured all the love He has. While we may experience more of God's blessings and fellowship as a result of our obedience, we do not risk rejection by our failures.

We may experience discipline as a result of our sin but, fatherly discipline, even when harsh, is still an expression of love for a child's welfare.

As a child is healthier emotionally when there is never any question about his parent's unconditional love and favor, God's children are spiritually healthier when they are taught that there is no question about their Heavenly Father's unconditional affection and perpetual favor.

We are saved by grace alone.

We are sanctified by grace alone.

We are secured by grace alone.

B. Proper Motivations for Behavior Change

1. A gratitude response to the love shone us by Christ

Note: Can guilt be used as a motivation for holiness? Yes and no. Improper use of guilt causes Christians to question the certainty of God's love and calls for holiness as a means of securing or restoring God's acceptance—in such cases obedience is a guilt response to gain love or remove remorse. Proper guilt (i.e., good guilt) is a love response that desires a return to obedience because one recognizes that his sin betrays the love God has shown in the sacrifice of His Son.

Gazing on Christ, not fleeing God is sin's greatest threat.

Good guilt is a gratitude response to the provision of grace that draws us close to God in joyful obedience rather than "slavish fear" or "servile dread" (see WCF XX.1), which are antithetical to the victorious Christian lives of those who are heirs of the Kingdom and co-heirs with Christ.

Heidelberg Catechism #86:

Since we are redeemed from our sin and its wretched consequences by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why must we do good works?

Because just as Christ has redeemed us with his blood he also renews us through his Holy Spirit according to his own image, *so that with our whole life we may show ourselves grateful to God for his goodness and that he may be glorified through us*; and further, so that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits and by our reverent behavior may win our neighbors to Christ.

Biblical support:

Rom. 12:1: “Therefore, I urge you brothers *in view of God’s mercy* to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship.”

2 Cor. 5:14: “For Christ’s love compels us [to preach] . . .”

Titus 2:11 ff.: “For *the grace of God that brings salvation* has appeared to all men. *It teaches us* to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. These, then, are the things you should teach.”

2. Avoidance of the consequences of sin revealed by a loving God

(Biblical “fear” properly defined never makes God the ogre in the sky.)

Rom. 1:24, 26, 28: “God gave them over . . .”

Cf. saving discipline vs. punitive damage (cf. Heb. 12:5–11)

3. Love for others loved by God

Phil 2:3–5: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus . . .”

Col. 3: 13–17: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

<> The rules do not change, but the reasons do as one parents, preaches, teaches, speaks, counsels, and lives with a Christ-centered, redemptive approach.

<> Motivate by grace not by guilt.

<> Nothing is more powerful than “love.” We are talking about a relationship more than a “science” when discerning how biblical theology affects our reading of the Bible.

Realize that many preachers think the goal of good preaching is to make people feel guilty, just as many people believe it is their obligation to feel bad in order to merit grace. For such people guilty feelings are penance of which they do not wish to be deprived.

V. Proper Application in Christ-Centered Preaching

A. Take people away from themselves as the instrument of healing. This is the “Bottom Line” in Christ-centered testimony and teaching.

Cf. WCF, XX.7: “. . . the Spirit of God enables man to do what God requires to be done.”

B. Make sure you know how to “plug in” to Christ’s . . .

<u>Grace</u>	and	<u>Power</u>
Offering Confession		Prayer for H. S.
Claiming Sonship		Confidence in the Word (1 John 4:4: “Greater is he . . .”)
		Belief in New Creation (<i>posse non peccare</i>)

Conclusion: Bowing Twice