

July 20, 2008 – SERMON SUMMARY

The Paradoxes of the Gospel (Jn.3:16-19, 1 Cor.1:18-31, 1 Pe.3:13-16)

Introduction: During World War II, the resistance movement in France was an effort on the part of many French citizens who disagreed with the Nazi regime, refused to go along with its murderous policies, & took action to try to save lives & reestablish French liberty. As followers of the Messiah, we too are part of a resistance movement. As disciples of the Lord Jesus, we're called to resist the current of this world, to go against popular culture, to shine Christ's Light into the darkness of our generation, in order to save lives & reestablish human freedom in Christ. In order to be good resistance fighters, we must tune in to & embody the "logic of the resistance movement," the paradoxes of the Gospel.

- The Pharisees, focusing only on part of the biblical message, taught a kind of "mathematical righteousness": you do this much good & you'll be repaid with this much blessing. It was the law of reaping & sowing reduced to a simplistic formula of "balanced scales." It's not that there's no truth in this kind of wisdom; doing what's right does bring rewards, at least, generally speaking, in terms of an orderly life, security, well-being. But it's not the whole story, as the book of Job makes clear – things certainly didn't work out "mathematically" in Job's life! Ecclesiastes reinforces the same spiritual reality, & Jesus epitomizes this truth in the Gospels: goodness & righteousness are not simple mathematical equations, especially in this fallen world; they'd be more comparable to quantum physics! Spiritual truth simply doesn't follow Aristotelian logic, as the Bible clarifies over & over.

- Peter didn't want a "suffering Messiah," so it took him awhile to tune in to this higher spiritual truth, but he finally got it. He spoke in his first letter of *suffering for doing what is right* (1 Pe.3:14), which doesn't sound reasonable according to the Pharisees' logic; if you do what's right, you should not suffer. By this logic, the Messiah would never have become the Suffering Servant! When God speaks to Isaiah & says, "Come, let us reason together," He's not talking about standard human reasoning – this is divine reasoning we're invited to tune in to. And Peter understood it so thoroughly later in his life that he could say suffering for the right is true blessing! (The cross is our paradigm!) In God's economy there's a higher logic at work, as Christians in much of the world suffer for their faith (Nepal, China, India, Iran, Yemen, etc.).

- Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the mourners, the persecuted." Does this sound reasonable? The logic of this Good News is NOT standard common sense. In fact, it may even sound scary, but Peter's next advice is, "Don't fear!" As followers of Jesus, we don't have to be afraid of the things that scare other people; we don't have to be troubled or disturbed, Peter says, but simply "sanctify Christ as Lord in your heart." So we want to analyze some implications of this immensely significant phrase, a key element in understanding the practical meaning of Christian salvation.

1) "Sanctify" is translated "set apart" (NIV); the O.T. law emphasized the difference between the sacred & the profane, things dedicated to religious use, in contrast with everyday articles for ordinary use. Sacred things were set apart for God.

- For us to "set apart Christ as Lord" means, in effect, to consider Him our greatest treasure, our highest good & most cherished reality. To do this involves tuning in to a higher logic, the paradoxes of discipleship: "the first shall be last, & the last first"; "the one who seeks to save his life will lose it, & the one who loses his life for my sake & the Gospel's will save it"; "he who exalts himself will be humbled, & he who humbles himself will be exalted"; "if a grain of wheat falls into the ground & dies, it produces many seeds"; "if anyone would be greatest among you,

let him be the servant of all.” You will not find this kind of logic in philosophy books; in fact, Scripture says that worldly wisdom could never discover these deep truths; they’re simply not accessible to human investigation – they required revelation.

- The apostle Paul follows up with this same kind of other-worldly logic when he says that we fix our eyes on things that cannot be seen, & that he will boast in his weakness. Whoever heard of boasting about your weaknesses instead of your strengths? Yet Paul says he’ll also boast in insults, hardships, & persecutions, because when he is weak, then he is strong. How can you be weak & strong at the same time, or see the invisible, or suffer & be blessed at the same time? Followers of Jesus have to tune in to this “logic of the resistance movement,” because when we talk about that One whom we are to set apart in our hearts, Christ the Lord, this form of expression explodes into many more paradoxes.

2) Jesus Himself embodied these tensions & paradoxes, because He was the God-man, totally human & totally divine.

- The greatest Leader the world has ever known, the Lord of all, became a lowly servant; the Creator made Himself into a creature, & the Judge of the universe stepped down from the Judge’s bench to become our Advocate; as our Good Shepherd He laid down His life for us, becoming our Passover Lamb; on the cross the Author of life was put to death!

- Prov.17:15 says, “Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent – the Lord detests them both.” Yet this is exactly what God did at Calvary: the guilty were acquitted (humanity), the Innocent One was condemned (Jesus); so precisely through what God detests & abhors, He worked out our salvation! What a complex ironic paradox!

- As He moved toward the cross, Jesus Himself expected that moment of greatest shame to be His most glorious hour (how can shame add up to glory?). And there was no man more powerful in all of history than Jesus as He hung on the cross dying; in fact, He was most powerful to save precisely as He put Himself in need of salvation (whoever heard of a savior who needs to be saved?). As Jesus surrendered to His earthly enemies, He was conquering humanity’s greatest enemies (what general ever surrendered in order to conquer?).

- So the foolishness of the cross adds up to the power & wisdom of God for salvation! What could we possibly give back to this kind of God? He wants only our hearts. Who can understand such a love as this?! All these paradoxes our Savior embodied are intended to move us to worship Him, to stand in awe of Him, to treasure & set Him apart in our hearts.

3) Precisely in our hearts, because that’s where the root of our problem lies – not out there in the world somewhere, not primarily in the high spheres of government or the inner workings of society or the faulty educational system, but in the heart of each human being.

- That’s where our human dilemma also shows its immense complexity & the tensions within us that required this enormous salvation: we are mortal, frail creatures of dust, yet stamped with God’s own image & likeness. This creates yearnings for eternity in us finite creatures that we ourselves can never fulfill, because we failed to live up to our high calling as God’s children & representatives in the world. Instead, we became perpetrators of rebellion (through our self-will) & accomplices of God’s enemy, the evil one. As we sought our own good, we became trapped by our bad decisions, making us prisoners of our faults & shortcomings, slaves of our old nature, & victims of a cruel usurper who deceives & oppresses us. Yet how can we be both responsible & victims in our relationship to the evil in the world (both guilty & victimized)? This is exactly how Scripture describes us.

- The remedy that Jesus provides on the cross speaks paradoxically to both dimensions of our dilemma: He provides both forgiveness (canceling our debt & guilt, paying for our crimes) & liberation (breaking our chains, destroying our bondage, conquering the cruel tyrant whose authority we could never overthrow).

- So what is the only proper response to this “powerful weakness,” this “wise foolishness” of the cross? “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your heart,” meaning in your thought life, in your emotions, your ambitions & dreams. But remember that you cannot hold Jesus as sacred or exalted in your heart by your intellectual power (no matter how smart you may be), by your physical strength (no matter how strong you are), or by your moral rectitude (no matter how good, kind, or righteous you feel). You can only set Him apart in your heart by faith & repentance: you turn from your way & acknowledge His (it all belongs to Him); as we set our sights on the invisible, the treasure of God’s glory comes to dwell in “jars of clay!”

- To let Him save you is to die to yourself & let Him rule your life – life which comes through His death; we gain that life by dying to ourselves; all our pain & sorrow are canceled in the “Man of Sorrows” who promises us complete joy!

Conclusion: Jesus invites us to His table of communion, which brings about reconciliation among the most disparate elements imaginable (the church is full of tensions): all barriers are broken down in Christ – racial, social, gender – every tension imaginable resolved as we acknowledge Jesus as Lord. If the church didn’t embody reconciliation & grace, we’d have no Good News to offer anybody, no light with which to resist the darkness.

- We’re called to display the divine healing even now amidst the brokenness all around us (even though we may still be broken in some ways), to contradict the darkness (even though there may be dark corners in our lives where Christ is still seeking to shine His life), to minister to human ugliness by embodying the beauty of divine love in our fellowship. We resist the current & go against the grain; in the midst of the battle we already declare the victory of the Crucified One; we focus our eyes & our lives on the Unseen One, the Resurrected Christ!

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