

Seeing God's Big Picture

Session 29

There are some things I have been thinking about that I believe are worth considering as we step back and get our minds wrapped around God's big picture again.

I have used this illustration before, but I think it is helpful. Imagine a timeline stretching back before time began and continuing all the way to the end of time.

Way back there, before the earth was created, what was there?

God.

There was God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. That's all there was. There were no angels, no people, no devil—nothing except God.

"In the beginning, God."

Now move all the way down the timeline to the end. What will be there?

There will still be God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

There is one significant difference, however. The Son came here. He took on the form of a human being, became a man, died, was raised, received a glorified body, and ascended into heaven. So there is already a man in heaven in a glorified body, and that man is Jesus, the Son of God. He has changed in that physical sense, but nothing about His knowledge or His thinking or who He is has changed.

And then, at the end, there will also be a multitude of people from every tribe, nation, and tongue. What is their relationship to Jesus, the Son of God? They are His children. They are joint heirs with Christ, brothers and sisters of His, and partakers of the divine nature. They too will have glorified bodies.

So we go from God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit at the beginning, through all that happens in between, to God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and a multitude of redeemed people at the end.

There will also be people who are in torment. Something has happened to them as well.

That whole story—the story of the Bible, what we believe as Christians, and what it means to be a Christian—takes place in that middle portion of the timeline.

So why did God do all of this in the first place?

Why Did God Create Us?

Before anything was created, there was already fellowship and love within God Himself. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit communicated with one another. There was love, companionship, and friendship.

So why create people? Why didn't God simply remain the way He was?

One thing that stands out to me is that God wanted to show His mercy in Christ Jesus. But there were no people to whom He could show mercy. So He created people.

He created Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve fell, and God promised a Redeemer.

Did God know before He created Adam and Eve that He would need a Redeemer, or was He simply hoping everything would work out?

He knew.

The Bible says that Christ is the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. So this was not something that caught God by surprise. It was all part of the plan, somehow, all in the works.

And God wanted to show His glory.

That is the big picture we are living in right now.

God Wants Fellowship

One of the things that has been on my mind is God's desire for fellowship with His people.

When Adam sinned, he broke that fellowship. Remember what happened in the garden? God came looking for Adam and said,

"Where are you?"

God wanted fellowship with him. That idea of God looking for people appears in several places in Scripture.

In 2 Chronicles 16:9 we read,

"For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that he may strongly support those whose heart is wholly devoted to him."

The context there involves a king who had acted foolishly, but the picture is still striking. God's eyes are moving throughout the earth, looking, searching, seeing what is happening.

There is another passage in Ezekiel 22:30 where God says,

"I searched for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the breach for me."

A breach is a gap, a break in the wall. God was looking for someone who would stand in that gap on behalf of the land so that He would not bring it to ruin.

And how does the verse end?

"I found none."

God is pictured as searching for people whose hearts are right toward Him, people who would stand in the breach, and He finds none.

Paul makes the same basic point in Romans. God has declared that there is none righteous, no, not one. Nobody seeks after God.

So how does anybody find favor with God?

That takes us right back to Abraham.

Abraham Believed God

Think about Abraham again. He was simply going about his life when God came to him and said, in effect, "Abraham, here's what I am going to do for you."

And what did Abraham do? He believed God.

That has been the big doctrine we have been talking about. Abraham believed God.

God made promises to him, and Abraham believed those promises.

We sometimes say that we are believers, that we have faith, but we do not always stop to think about what that actually means.

Abraham had to trust God. He had to believe what God said. That is why Genesis 15 says that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

A One-Sided Covenant

This also takes us back to the covenant God made with Abraham.

We talked about this a couple of weeks ago. It was a one-sided covenant.

Abraham was essentially put over to the side, and God Himself walked between the pieces of the animals that had been cut apart as part of the covenant-making ceremony.

God was saying, "This is what I am going to do for you."

Abraham did not have to perform some corresponding part of the covenant in order to make God's promise effective. He simply believed God. That is very much like the New Covenant.

Jesus said,

"This is the blood of the new covenant."

When we look at the passages in the Old Testament concerning the New Covenant, we find that it involves a new heart, a new spirit, God's Spirit, new motivation—a changed heart. That is what we are the recipients of.

Second Corinthians 5:17 summarizes that transformation:

"Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away; behold, all things have become new."

That is a remarkable thing to think about. God is not simply giving us another list of rules to keep. He is doing something inside us.

God Wants Us to Trust Him

So let me change the picture just a little bit.

God basically wants us to believe Him—to trust Him. I am not talking only about believing on Him for salvation, although that is certainly the first step. We trust Christ for salvation because He gave us a promise:

"Whoever believes on the Lord Jesus Christ shall be saved."

But God has given us many other promises as well. He wants people who will follow Him, love Him, and have fellowship with Him. I think that is something we sometimes lose sight of.

I was raised in a pastor's family and in a church like this. I have been involved in church life for about sixty years, and as I have grown older I have thought about these things over and over again. We sometimes begin to see the bigger picture as we get older.

I think what has happened in a lot of cases is that we have adopted an American sort of religion called Christianity. We have taken Christianity and turned it into a religion of rules and routines.

But God wants a relationship. He wants people who believe Him and trust Him, people who follow Him, love Him, and have fellowship with Him. That distinction becomes important when we begin talking about what it means to be a disciple.

The next part moves from that distinction between **religion and relationship** into what it means to be a disciple of Christ, including the violin and ice-skating illustrations and the meaning of taking up the cross.

What Does It Mean to Be a Disciple?

This brings me to something I have been thinking about for quite a while: What does it actually mean to be a disciple?

The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. We use the word *Christian* very casually today, but what did *disciple* mean in the world of the New Testament? A disciple was a follower. Someone suggested the word *imitator*, and I think that is a good way to understand it. A disciple subscribed to the teachings of his master and followed him.

People had disciples long before Jesus. Socrates had disciples. Others had disciples. The disciples would gather around their teacher and, when he traveled from one town to another, they would go with him. Along the way they would listen to him and learn from him.

We might compare it to an apprenticeship today.

One of my granddaughters plays the violin and has taken lessons for several years. She has become very good. Imagine a master violinist and someone who comes to that master and says, "I think I have some ability. I want you to take me on as a student. I want to learn how to play the violin like you do."

The master agrees and establishes a demanding schedule. "We'll start Monday at nine. We'll practice for three hours. Then I'll give you three hours of homework and practice to do at home. We'll meet Monday, Wednesday, and Friday."

Now imagine that on Monday the student arrives, begins the lesson, and an hour later looks at her watch and says, "Oh, I have to go babysit. I can't stay for the whole thing."

The master says, "All right, but you need to be here Wednesday."

Then Wednesday comes, and something similar happens. Suppose that pattern continues for two or three weeks. What would you conclude about that student's desire to follow the master? You would probably say, "She's not very dedicated."

And that is the point. A real disciple wants to follow the master.

Wanting to Be Like the Master

I remember another illustration that made this particularly clear to me.

We went to see some ice skaters training at the Olympic facility in Colorado. There was a man and a woman practicing together. The music started at a particular point, and they went through their routine. The man threw the woman into the air, she landed, and then the instructor stopped them.

"Wait. When you launched, you didn't put your foot down correctly. You need to put your toes more in this direction and get into the proper angle."

So they went back to their positions and did it again.

Then they did it again.

And again.

They might have repeated that same little section ten or fifteen times. Sometimes the woman didn't quite do it right. Sometimes the man didn't quite do it right. The instructor would stop them and tell them what needed to change, and they would go back and do it again.

I remember asking my high school students about that.

"Why did that man and woman put up with that instructor?"

I wouldn't put up with somebody stopping me ten or fifteen times to tell me I was doing something wrong. Would you?

But they wanted to be the best. They wanted to be like the masters. They wanted to become masters themselves. They wanted to be good at what they were doing.

That is what a disciple wants.

A disciple of Christ wants to be like Christ.

Were the disciples flawed? Yes.

Did they do it perfectly? No.

But they wanted to be like Christ.

And it was those people who were called Christians.

Christian and Disciple

That makes me wonder about the way we use the word *Christian* today.

I cannot judge individual people, but it seems to me that not everybody who calls himself a Christian really wants to be like the Master. What has happened is that we have sometimes

separated the words *Christian* and *disciple*. We say, "If you want to be a disciple, that's for somebody who really wants to get serious about following Christ. I just want to be a Christian."

I may be wrong, but I don't think that is the biblical distinction. I think a Christian and a disciple, in the biblical sense, are really the same person.

We have changed the definition. Christianity has become a religion. You can be a Christian, come to church, and go through the routine. Then, if you really want to get serious about God and follow His ways, perhaps you can become a disciple, too.

I don't think that is right.

Jesus said, "Take up your cross. If you want to be my disciple, you have to take up your cross and follow me."

We have even changed the meaning of the word *cross*.

When somebody is going through a difficult period in life, we sometimes say, "That's my cross to bear." But what is a cross?

You die on it.

In our day, we might say, "Pick up your electric chair," or "Pick up your gallows and follow me."

That is the kind of picture Jesus was giving. He was saying, in effect, get your execution stuff ready, because that is where this path leads. There is persecution associated with following Christ.

Jesus also said, "If you want to be my disciple, count the cost."

We hardly ever ask anybody to count the cost.

There is something that comes before taking up the cross: **deny yourself**. There is a progression there—deny yourself, take up the cross, and follow Christ, even to the point of crucifixion.

That sounds like a tremendous burden, and it is. But as I have said throughout this teaching, the big burden comes with a lot of grace.

There is no condemnation.

God gives us complete pardon. Then He says, in effect, "Now work at being My disciple."

There is no punishment attached to that work. That is what the no-condemnation provision is for.

Jesus asked,

"Why do you call me Lord and don't do what I say?"

That is a question we need to take seriously.

Obedience Is Not Merely Law

I want to change the way we think about obedience just a little. Sometimes we look at obedience as though it were simply another form of law. We think, "I have to do this because I want to be righteous."

There is truth in that, but I think there is another way to look at it.

Sin damages us.

Sinning damages us.

And I want to personify this a little, although I may not be describing it perfectly. God is sad to see us suffer the consequences of our sin. He hates to see the destruction and heartache that sin produces in our lives.

God has forgiven our sins, but He has also separated us from our sins.

When Matthew says that Jesus would be called Jesus because He would save His people from their sins, I see two aspects to that:

Certainly He saves us from the penalty of sin. That is what we often teach, and I am not disagreeing with it.

But the verse says He will save us **from our sins**.

Our sins hurt us.

Sin does damage.

So part of what Jesus is doing with us as His disciples is saving us from the sins themselves because they are hurting us.

Take something obvious such as adultery. If a husband commits adultery, it hurts the family. That sin should be abandoned so that peace and wholeness can return.

But there are many more sins than those we usually identify as the "big" sins. There are all kinds of ordinary human sins that are still wrong.

Jesus came not only to forgive us from those sins, but to save us from them.

Learning to Live Without the Things That Hurt Us

Consider worry.

Jesus told us not to worry about tomorrow and not to fret. Those may seem like little sins compared with adultery or some other obvious transgression, but they are still sins.

What if Jesus could save us from worrying?

I don't mean only that He saves us from the penalty of worrying because He has forgiven that sin. What if He could actually save us from worry so that worry would no longer be a regular part of our lives?

Worry is destructive.

Anger is destructive.

Grumbling is destructive.

Paul says,

"Do everything without murmuring or complaining."

Murmuring is a sin.

When I point these things out, someone might say, "Now I'm really guilty."

That's why we have Romans 8:1:

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

There is no condemnation for the grumbling.

But grumbling still hurts you and hurts your family. It ruins your peace. It can damage your relationship with another person when you are continually complaining.

So I think part of the gospel is that Christ came to save us from our sins as well as from their penalty.

What are we trying to do in this life?

We are trying to be like Christ.

We are trying to be His followers.

We say we want to be godly.

Usually, when we say, "I want to be like Christ," we mean that we want to be loving like Christ was loving. We want to share like Christ shared. We want to comfort people like Christ comforted people.

But we rarely say, "I want to be worry-free like Christ was worry-free. I want to be grumbling-free like Christ was grumbling-free. I want to be anger-free like Christ was."

What else did Christ do perfectly?

The Bible says,

"Meditate on my word day and night."

I don't meditate on God's Word day and night, do you?

And I'm hurting myself because I'm not following Christ in that way.

God Wants Us to Grow

This was the point where these things began to fit together in my mind.

God is looking for people who believe Him. He tells us what He wants us to be like, and He wants us to follow Him.

He gives us commandments, but His commandments are not grievous. They are for our benefit.

When He says, "Don't grumble," He is not merely giving us another rule to follow. He is saying that grumbling is a messy, destructive thing. Stop doing it.

Most of us know these things. The question is whether we will actually choose not to do them.

We need to be faithful and obedient and do what God says.

And then we say, "I can't do all those things."

That's right.

None of us can.

That's why we have Romans 8:1. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We live in that freedom.

There is a lot of good news here for all of us.

The question of how to do it is another matter. Paul struggled with that in Romans 7. His struggle involved covetousness—one of the Ten Commandments. He knew he should not covet, yet he found himself coveting repeatedly.

How do I get rid of that?

Romans 8 is the answer.

We need to remember that it is God who works in us both to will and to do. God works in us and gives us the desire. That is part of the New Covenant. He causes us to walk in His ways.

That is what Christians do.

Christians are flawed people. Real Christians—disciples who were called Christians—are real people who want to do things God's way. They have a desire to do things God's way.

They confess, "Lord, I'm not doing very well at this. Give me the strength. Help me to know how to do it. I want to improve in whatever it is—my anger, my grumbling, my Bible reading, whatever it may be."

And God wants fellowship with us.

Talk to Him about it. Ask Him for His help, and He will work in your life to accomplish that.

Learning From the Master

Too often we are more concerned about tradition than Scripture.

That is one of the things Jesus addressed when He said,

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden."

The people of His day were burdened down with tradition, and we can have that same problem. We beat ourselves up over our inability to keep the religion going.

But it is not primarily a religion. It is a relationship.

One of the other things Jesus says in that same section is,

"Learn of me."

What do disciples do? They learn from their master.

Think about Mary and Martha. What was Martha doing?

She was doing the dishes and complaining about Mary.

And what was Mary doing?

She was sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to Him and learning from Him.

That is what we do as Christians.

We should sit at Jesus' feet and learn from Him.

That does not mean trying to memorize everything or turning our Bible reading into another legal obligation. We don't need to say, "I'm behind on my Bible study, so now I have to read five chapters today because I missed yesterday."

That's religion.

What God wants is a real relationship with Him. He has forgiven us, and He wants us to enjoy a life with less sin in it. There will be growth.

We will become disciples.

Making Disciples

There is one more thing I want to say.

The Great Commission tells us to go into all the world, preach the gospel to every creature, and **make disciples**—make other followers and teach them.

That is a real burden I have on my heart.

All of us should be disciples of someone.

All of us have people around us—children, grandchildren, perhaps great-grandchildren, neighbors we are close to. We can disciple people.

This is a particular burden I have for my own family. When we go to family camp, we do memory verses and sermons because I want to help my children and grandchildren learn what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

And in your own way, with the gifts you have, you can do the same thing.

We shouldn't simply say, "I don't know how to do that."

Find a way.

Read Bible stories to the little children. Teach them what you know. There are things you can do to help make disciples of future generations.

This is what God is calling us all to do.