

## "Speak To Me Of God"

It was a cold, drizzly night in June during the Second World War. Troops in one of the regiments of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division were waiting for 2 a.m., when they would make the first serious assault into enemy lines since the Normandy invasion, a few days before. Gordon Cosby was chaplain of the regiment. Realizing that by the next day probably half of the men would be dead, he decided to visit as many of the men as he could before the assault.

He crawled into one of the foxholes: "I'm the chaplain. Just wanted to talk to you a bit." "I'm glad you're here," a soldier said. "I wanted to talk to you. I have a premonition that I'm going to die tonight – that I'm going to meet God before the night is over, and I don't know Him. I want you to talk to me about Him." Then he added: "Don't give me any stuff about philosophy or theology. I just want you to talk to me about God."

Elizabeth O'Connor, writing about the incident, comments: "In that moment the young chaplain discovered that he did not know nearly so much about God as he had five minutes before." But the chaplain, with some uneasiness, began, "I'd like to talk to you about a verse of Scripture which means a lot to me..." "God so loved the world...". And in as simple words as he could, he shared what John 3:16 meant to him. The next morning the chaplain checked the casualty list, and the young man had died.

Gordon recalled: "I wondered about him. He had been so close to me, and I wondered how those last words had hindered or helped him now that he was in the presence of God. Then it occurred to me that this man was *every man*. What difference does it make whether it is two hours, or two years, or twenty years. Every (person) is going to be in the presence of God one day, and every(one) is crying out: 'Speak to me of things which are eternal. Speak to me of God.'"

That happened a long time ago, and I guess you could argue the point that not as many people in our more secular-minded culture are crying out, "Speak to me of God." We've got other, more temporal, things on our mind. But isn't the ultimate question of life still related to God, and our relationship with God (if there is a God)?

What would you have said if you were Chaplain Cosby? How would you respond if someone said, "Tell me about God." Or maybe you still haven't settled that question – just coming to church doesn't necessarily mean we've made our peace with God.

Today I want to share the message of the gospel as simply as I can. It's an old story...a simple story...but profound beyond measure. First of all: ***We are sinners. Human nature is fallen and sinful.*** You may say, "That's a bad place to start!" "Nothing like getting off on the wrong foot!" But it's where we must begin.

Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?" Romans 3:23 sums up humankind's basic problem very bluntly: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

The Biblical view of human nature is that we are a classic mix of good and evil. We have a tremendous capacity for good because we've been created in the image of God. But there is also a dark side to human nature, a fatal flaw called "sin" that colors and spoils so much of what we do. And this "sin" alienates us and separates us from our Creator.

Now a lot of people today don't see it that way. They think people are basically good. It's just a few that are "bad" – drug dealers, rapists, murderers, and politicians of the opposite political party! Most all of us are good people, and if we just live a decent life, and do good works, we're in good standing with God.

*"Sin" basically means we put ourselves at the center of life rather than God.* We want to live our own life, our way. We want to be the captain of our ship, and get God out of the pilot seat! So, we can be a "good", decent person – but we're a sinner, because we of this propensity to live self-centered lives. One person put it this way: "(Humankind) is saddled with a perverted reason, a dull grey conscience, a will chained to self-interest...self-will is (our) natural style of life."

There's a million mile difference between our goodness and God's holiness. And *our goodness* pales compare to the *goodness of Jesus* – who was the only person ever to live life as God intended it to be lived.

Years ago Nancy and I bought an older house. It had one of those old radiators that stood on the floor. The one in our dining room had a metal cover over it. When I painted the room I also painted that cover. It was late at night when I got to it. I turned all the lights on I could. When I was finished, I looked it over, and it looked great! The next morning when I came downstairs, a bright sunlight was shining through the window into the room. I looked at the radiator cover, and discovered I had missed some spots that were very noticeable. When I compare my goodness with other people, I can look pretty good! (Especially if I compare myself to some "lowlifes" I may know)! But in the dazzling light of God's Son Jesus, I'm not that all spotless after all.

It makes a difference whether we believe in our natural state we are flawed sinners, or whether we see ourselves as being basically good. *If just being good is all that's needed, why did Jesus die for us?* If we believe the Biblical view that there is a dark side to every person, this should help explain why there's so much evil in the world: wars, violence, lying, cheating. And why even with our best intentions, we often fail to be the person we'd like to be!

Illust. Rudyard Kipling wrote a famous poem, called "If". It's a jaunty appeal for a man to be a man! The late Halford Luccock liked to tell how his seminary roommate always would quote Kipling's poem whenever he preached. One night his roommate was preaching at a bowery mission on New York's East Side. As usual, he concluded with Kipling's poem, part of which goes: "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you; if you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, but make allowance for their doubting too...yours is the Earth and everything that's in it, and which is more – you'll be a Man, my son!"

Suddenly, a whiskey-soaked voice shattered the inspirational spell: "Well, what if you can't?" That's the question we all face: What if I can't forgive that person who hurt me so much? What if I can't free myself from being so self-focused, self-centered? What if I can't overcome that nasty habit I hate in myself? What if I can't lift myself out of loneliness and despair? What if I can't face death with courage and certainty?

The young soldier wanted Chaplain Cosby to tell him about God...cut through the theology and the churchy talk and just tell me how I can experience and know God. The place to begin is to realize that in our natural state we are flawed sinners, separated from our Creator. But the next step is so important! **God loves sinners.** God...loves...you! No matter who you are, what you've done or failed to do, what you're like. John 3:16 (Martin Luther called this "The Little Gospel") says, "For God *so loved* the world that He gave His only Son..."

I once saw a bumper sticker that said, "God is love". It was in letters that were bright and colorful, creating a sense of joy and hope! I like that! Jesus revealed what God is like more than anyone else ever did. He said God is like a woman who sweeps her house looking for one lost coin, like a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep safe in the fold to seek out 1 lost sheep, like a father who welcomes back with open arms a foolish son who deeply insults his dad, then goes off and blows his whole inheritance! (Check out these stories in Luke, chapter 15).

I think of an old hymn called "The Love of God". It begins: "The love of God is greater far than tongue nor pen can ever tell. It goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell." Then the chorus: "Oh, love of God, how rich and pure, how measureless and strong! It shall forevermore endure, the saints, the angels song." The last verse in this hymn was inscribed on the walls of a narrow room in an old insane asylum, written by a man said to be demented. These words were found only after the man had died: "Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made; were ever stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade. To write the love of God above, would drain the ocean dry; nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky."

"Speak to me of God." We are sinners. God loves us sinners. Then: **God saves and transforms those who come to Him through Jesus.** Jesus' death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead, opens up the way into the presence of God. Through Christ we can be forgiven of our sins, reconciled to God, and adopted into God's family as His sons and daughters. *Our part* is to receive the gift God offers us. To turn from our sins and self-centered living, to surrender our life to Christ. Faith in Christ means not just believing there is a God and there is a Jesus – but to trust Him, to offer Him our lives (our past, our present, our future) – to dedicate what we are and what we have to Him.

Now, to be honest, we're not talking about just a casual belief in Jesus; it's a total commitment of our will to His will and His service! A chicken and a pig were one day walking by a restaurant, and saw a sign saying they served ham and eggs. The chicken turned to the pig and said, "See, what a contribution we've made to life." The pig replied, "Listen, for you it's a contribution, for me it's *total commitment.*"

Christ asks not just for a "contribution" – giving Him bits and pieces of our life. He asks for a "total commitment"! "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily, and follow me" Luke 9:23. This is what "believing in Jesus" really means!

When we surrender ourselves to Christ in this way, He changes our life! Wallace Fisher, who was pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Lancaster for many years, summed it up well: "Every Christian knows the agonizing tension between the (person) he naturally is and the Christ-like (person) he yearns to be. Those who allow the gospel to stir this inner tension and cultivate it by daring to want what Christ wants are delivered from their bondage to sin. They still sin, but their love of sinning is gone, and their burden of guilt is lifted as they are drawn closer to Christ. Through faith they become convinced that the imperfect *can* become perfect, the unrighteous *can be* crowded out by righteousness, that death *can be* overmatched by life." All this...because God loves us sinners, and has given us His Son to save us!

*Speak to me of God!* "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

As we begin the New Year, it's a good time to remind ourselves of the power and simplicity of the gospel – and to evaluate our commitment to Christ! Are we willing to surrender all we are and all we have to Christ, so He can redeem us from sin, save us for all eternity, and use us for His purposes?

Pastor and author Bruce Larson tells of a layperson who became one of the pioneers in land reapportionment in the world's underdeveloped areas. He worked for the United Nations, and private agencies. His leadership changed the conditions of thousands of people, and he has personally introduced many of them to Christ. He tells how God called him. He was not a Christian, but was intrigued by a group of Christians and the way they lived. Their example made him dissatisfied with his own life. Yet he was afraid of the total commitment that Christ demanded. A Christian friend asked him if he would be willing to turn his life over to Christ's management for a 1 week trial. "Too long," he answered. "How about a day?" "Can't do it," he said. The friend finally asked, "Would you be willing to turn your life over to Christ for one hour?" He hesitated, but finally said, "Yes." He did, and his life was never the same again!

Jesus did a lot for us, but He also demands a lot if we are to follow Him. Are you and I willing to turn our life completely over to Christ for this year? For a week? A day? Even an hour? And see what happens!

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