

I Want To Earn It

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[0 : 00] There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and all are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ.

And flicking back to the second half of verse 10, there is no unrighteous, not even one.

There's no doubt that grace is a great subject to look at. In fact, grace is very, very beautiful, but it's also hugely dangerous.

And when we understand more about grace and its context in God's Word, there's no doubt that at least our God world is going to be turned upside down.

Our comfortable, safe, neat concept and understanding of God is going to be utterly blown apart as the more we understand about grace.

[1 : 02] And I'm convinced today that you're not going to like this sermon. I know it's going to make you, because it makes me feel uncomfortable.

And if I were hoping to market the gospel and encourage people in, this would be a madness type of sermon to preach. It would be crazy. It would be just ecclesiastical suicide to preach this sermon and to preach on this theme.

But I want you to know that this week I have trembled, and I hope you've prayed, that unwritten covenant we made together last week.

I'll tremble and you'll pray, and it causes us to tremble the subject. It should. And yet there's much more to it, of course, than that.

But ultimately, and primarily today, we're recognizing a solemn and serious truth from God's Word, which tells us that we are guilty before God, naturally, as people were under a death sentence, and more than that, because we can all be kind of comfortable with that, more than that, we deserve everything that we get from God.

[2 : 24] We deserve banishment from His good and holy and perfect presence, eternally. We deserve that, uncomfortable, though that may be.

I'm going to ask a couple of questions. What do we often claim as the first one? And then the second one is, what does God claim in relation to this subject?

Well, I think if we don't often, or if we don't personally make some of these claims, there's certainly ones that we've heard, ones that I've heard in many ways, and maybe subconsciously we do make these claims one way or another.

God is a monster. God is an absolute monster. I hate God. I hate God for what He's doing. I hate God for the world that we live in. I hate God for my mistakes and for my errors and for the misery of my experience and my suffering.

I hate Him for His message. I hate Him for the condemnation that He brings through His Word. And He says that I'm guilty before my hate. He's a monster. He's completely nowhere.

[3 : 33] Has He got any right in this enlightened world in which we now live? He's a monster. Or people will often say, and we may often say, well, God's really just a man-made construct.

Construct. Construct. He's a man-made construct. He's a mishmash of people and cultures and thinking throughout the centuries. And we've come up with the Bible.

That's the end of it all. That's it all molded together. He's been brought into this kind of serious and solemn kind of divine, wrathful being who looks down from on high.

And it's a means of controlling people and a means of controlling societies. It's for the unenlightened and for the unintelligent, for those with closed minds and closed hearts.

A man-made idea. Or within the concept, as I mentioned last week, we will often say, consciously or not, I am basically good.

[4 : 34] I'm a decent person. And I'm sure the decency of my life and my works and my behavior will, even if it's just by the skin of the teeth, will allow me entry into heaven and into God's presence.

And grace, when the Bible and when the minister speaks about grace, I can see that. But it's kind of a good top-up. I fail in some things. I do well in other things.

But grace is the kind of good thing that tops it all up and that makes up for my deficiencies. I can go so far to God and it's great. And they'll thank me for that.

And I've tried my best and these ways. And what I fall short in, grace will simply make up. It tops up my ability to be God's friend and in God's presence.

These are some of the things, and I'm sure they're not in any way exclusive or it's an exhaustive list that we might claim, which ultimately robs grace of its beauty and of its significance and of our dependence on grace.

[5 : 46] And until we see our need and we will never recognize grace and relief to the light of grace and relief to the darkness of our need, we'll never appreciate it.

We'll never really need it ultimately unless we see our need of it. So what does God claim, secondly, is a second question I'm asking. God is claiming in His Word that He is who He says He is.

So as simple as that, that He is not a man-made construct, that He's not someone that is just a mishmash of ideas, that He is a genuine, independent, divine, gloriously complex, loving, just, good being.

That's who He is. He is true. He is sovereign. He lives independently of us. He's not just a figment or in any way a figment of our imagination.

He's a perfect God. He's a creative, creating, sustaining, just, loving, good, holy being.

[7 : 03] He is who He claims to be, and His Word, the Bible, is what it claims to be in its self-proving claims of authenticity as being a God-breathed revelation of Himself and of His purposes for this world in which we live.

I know that we struggle with bits of the Bible. I know that there's mystery in some of the teaching and an understanding of the Bible, but at its simplest, at its core is redemptive love.

The Bible isn't a history of the universe. It is a history of God's redemptive love with the cross, bang in the middle of it, and everything before pointing towards that work of Jesus and everything, after it pointing back to it.

And His Word is a word of redemptive love. The gospel of grace is the perspective that we must look at and understand the Bible and what it says.

And He maintains His real being, and He maintains that the Bible is a revelation of Himself and of our need for a relationship with God.

[8 : 27] And within that Bible He says this very important truth, and it helps us to understand grace. He says no one is righteous.

There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And I want to focus on that for a few moments. This morning we started a bit later, so I'm kind of going to rattle through it a little bit.

But I'm going to continue in the theme of two. If I've asked two questions, I'm going to now give what I think are two descriptions of God that we might have or we might take from this passage. And the first is that God is an unwelcome intruder today. There is an unwelcome intruder into our thinking and into our mindset.

Sunday mornings, they should all be about walking on this sidewalk. They should not, about lions, about coffee and bagels and coming together for nice church experiences and just loving one another and singing and worshipping and being jolly.

[9 : 34] We don't really want to come to church and hear about this unwelcome intruder with his challenge to who we are and what our needs are and what we're like.

I know what I'm like. I know the basic goodness in my life. I don't want to be challenged with something that challenges that.

Well, can I give an illustration if you are not feeling great or no, I shouldn't say you are somebody not feeling great and they go to the doctor because they're not just not feeling 100%.

And after a few questions, the doctor says, well, I'm going to take some hexrays and some blood tests, come back in a week and you go back in a week's time and the doctor's kind of looking really gray in the face and he says, I've got some extremely bad news.

You have inoperable cancer and you have days to live, days to live. Your world at that moment is turned upside down.

[10:43] You went with your own and we would go with our own ideas of our health, of our future, of our plans, of what's going to happen and our world instantly has been turned upside down.

Our perspective on the next week is wholly different from what it was when we went in. We don't feel well. We certainly don't feel terminally ill and yet there is this clear, undisputable evidence that we have only days to live and we don't want to believe that truth.

But we wouldn't think it was right to rubbish the doctor and to badmouth him and to ignore what he said as if it disrupted our day.

Him being an unwelcome intruder as one bringing this message is a new reality. And we need God to bring us to recognize spiritually in our lives this new reality because it's true and because he says so.

And God's diagnosis may indeed feel for us like he is an unwelcome intruder. I've got my life to live. I've got my future to live.

[12:00] I've got my hopes and my desires and my understanding of what I am and hear God as diagnosing me in such a fearsome way that I belong to all those who have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

That's his diagnosis this morning for us. It's all encompassing, isn't it? All encompassing. And if you hear such bad news as that person who went to the doctor, if you're alone in that then it makes it even worse, doesn't it?

You feel that nobody understands what you're going through. But the reality of this message is that when God declares this, you don't feel alone in that message.

And today, can I say very humbly and very sincerely that nobody is pointing the finger. Nobody's pointing the finger today.

We can't and I can't and never will and I hope no one ever will in this pulpit preach from high moral ground. Preach from a position of pointing the finger and saying, we have it's us, we're right, your sinners, we're good.

[13:15] That is not the reality. The reality is not and I'm not sure and I've thrown this question out to this congregation many times why it is that the world thinks that Christianity is for those who think they're better than other people because that's the complete inversion of the truth.

Christianity is for those who have recognized that we all fall short of the glory of God. It's a universal human condition. Now in the back of many cars and on some buses just now in Edinburgh, you'll see the slogan 2, a 2 million Scots are good without God.

Now I know where the philosophical thinking is. Well I know where the practical thinking has come from that because from that humanistic society people they feel that the church is always simply condemning them and saying how bad they are without God.

The message isn't that some are bad without God and we are fine with them. The reality is and the understanding is that 5 million Scots are not good without God because I respectfully challenge that statement that is made and challenge its foundation and challenge what it means and challenge what it's saying because it's scary.

It's all encompassing, all of us. Human condition is universal. No one today is pointing the finger. You don't in your Christian life and I don't in mine ever give the impression that we stand on higher moral ground before God than anyone else.

[14:57] All of sin, he says, God says it. He's talking about our hearts and he's talking about our natures. He says that by nature humanity is anti-God.

That's what sin ultimately is. We don't love him. We don't have time for him. He's not a priority in our lives.

We don't like what he wants. We reject his laws. We reject his lordship. We trivialize and sideline his worship and we live lives that are independent.

That's kind of primarily what God is saying here. We belong to and associate with much though we would like to dissociate with a world of greed and dysfunction and pain and suffering and division. We are the ungrateful kids that never say thank you, that take all from God and yet do so on our own terms.

[15:57] Naturally that's what we do because God and even as we speak, we recognize, we feel that sometimes welling within us. Now who but right has God?

Who does God think he is? All of sin, the passage speaks about that in very strong and dramatic language which we don't have time to go into.

Maybe as we're going through this you'll say, well, here's Derek fitting into tight there. Like doer, Calvinistic, Presbyterian preacher, misery guts telling us all how bad and miserable we are.

What about all the good that we see around us? What about all that is positive? Of course, can't deny that. We thank God for it. We thank God for the moral goodness and for the virtue that we see every day that is a reflection of God's image in us even though it's a broken image.

We give thanks for the good things that people do but we recognize that these good things which are undoubtedly there and real speak a different language.

[17:12] It's a different currency to being right with God. Yes, a human level. Yes, as we kind of look at our own goodness relative to other people.

People are sometimes much more moral than others, we recognize that but it doesn't meet the criteria that God demands of us, the perfection he demands.

The Grand Canyon is nine miles wide and it's a good picture of the gulf between ourselves and God that we can't be right with God and we can't be infellowship with God naturally because of our sinful hearts as he says he himself.

It's nine miles wide. Now if two people come to that canyon at one side and one of them is an outstanding jumper, not a jumper, an outstanding athlete who can move a great distance between one area and another and he can say maybe jump 30 feet and someone else is there who's just quite ordinary and can only jump six feet.

Now the 30 foot jumper is very gifted and talented and athletic and able but really in terms of reaching the other side of the Grand Canyon, whether they can jump 30 feet or six feet is hugely irrelevant.

[18:39] It's relative to the nine miles that is wide isn't it? That it doesn't come near to getting to the other side. However gifted or talented the person is and it's a kind of imperfect illustration of the fact that however morally good we might be in comparison with others that in terms of reaching God's standard, reaching God's requirement, we're left all in the same boat entirely that we are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God.

Is it pessimistic? It's a different currency, it's God's currency. Is it realistic? Well I would argue today you need God to show you that.

You need God to open your heart. You need to ask God and I need to ask God to show him that his verdict, his diagnosis in her life is absolutely right.

But do consider for a moment the veil of decency that is around in this world. We are good without God, maybe five million of us are good without God but what of the parameters of decency and of law are taken from us?

Are we then ultimately are we good people? When the good stuff of life is taken from your salary, your home, your loved ones, your food, clothing, these are taken.

[20:09] If you know in the city tomorrow that there will only be ten loaves of bread and five bottles of water for the next month, how will our goodness express itself in that situation?

How will our ultimate goodness be shown when the good things of life are taken from us and we are stripped bare to our natures and to what we are? Thirty years ago just now there was a famous experiment which I have only just read about called the Stanford Prison Experiment forty years ago actually.

The psychological experiment in America where some students were taken and for experimental purposes half of them became prisoners and half of them became prison warders and they were asked to act out that environment for ten days and at first nothing happened but on the second day it spiralled out of control when they took on their new personas without any encouragement or without any particular guidance.

So much so that the experiment had to be finished early because prisoners suffered from mental breakdown and prison warders became sadistic and violent towards the experimentes who were the prisoners.

And Prof Zimbardo the controversial professor who was behind it and it was and remains hugely controversial. It is quoted as saying, it does tell us that human nature is not totally under the control of what we like to think of as free will but that the majority of us can be seduced into behaving in ways totally atypical of what we believe we are.

[21 : 51] So given the circumstances, given the situation, given the reality of a life around us we can act in hugely bad ways reflecting our nature and reflecting our spiritual condition.

Is it realistic, maybe you sit here today with a huge weight of guilt, where does that come from? What is the reality of how you have treated people, have I treated people, how we have failed and fallen?

Is it realistic, you may be fearful today of death, fearful of your own physical death, your natural, is it the end?

Is it natural? Is it just biological that we come to an end? Is the great reality of the atrophy of life, the decay of everything? Is that just a natural progression?

Or is it the outworking of a spiritual death that is already what God says in us by nature that reveals itself in a physical death, separation body and soul, separation eternally from God?

[23 : 02] We fall short, all have sinned and all fall short of the glory of God. What does that mean, falling short of the glory of God? Well, the glory just really means His worthiness, His weight, His power, His majesty and our sin causes our ability to be worthy of being in relationship with God, to be taken away.

We want to try to be worthy, you know, people spend their lives trying to be worthy of God's pleasure and God's favor in their lives.

But God is saying that we fall short of His glory, we can't reach, we can't be worthy because we're imperfect and sinful and separated and don't love Him as He requires us to do.

His holiness is awesome and we've totally, and I utterly include myself in this, that we've totally lost sight of the holiness of God and His separation and His purity and His perfection, our inability to come near Him naturally.

You imagine a beautiful relationship that you might have with someone who is really, really gorgeous, you're absolutely in love with Him and you've kind of been in a rubbish position in life and you've kind of, you're a bit down in your heels and this person, I'm not going to say either sex, which one, you can choose, boy or girl, depending on you, boy or girl.

[24 : 41] That they love you and you can't understand it, but they love you and they want to marry you and be with you and they give you their home and they've got this beautiful big home and a pool and a safe where you can just open up and take out the money and go down to Costco, not less.

It doesn't fit in, does it? Not Costco, I was going to say Costa and have nice coffee together, but all these things, you know, and it's just fantastic and they love you and everything's sweet and good and you can't believe how wonderful this relationship is.

But next door to them there's a miserable, horrible character and you go and sleep with Him.

You break that relationship, marriage and love with, that person's giving you everything, you're so wonderfully perfect and for some reason you choose to go and sleep with this wretched character who does nothing but lie and cheat and abuse, then the initial relationship is gone.

She or He just can't take you back and you've lost it forever. That is the picture naturally, very imperfect one granted of where we are with God.

[26 : 04] He's this glorious God who will give us all things, but we've chosen by nature and by behaviour to ignore and go our own way. We're sinners, we have, full and short of His glory.

That's where we are, that's the darkness of it. But can I just finish with one more description? I said there's going to be two descriptions of God in this chapter. The first is this unwanted and unwelcome intruder that we've talked about who leaves us exposed and ugly.

But the second illustration I want to leave with you is that he's a secret millionaire. Now those of you who are saddos who watch the television will sometimes have watched that program on Channel 4, which is about rich benefactors who go undercover, philanthropists who go undercover into deprived areas to find out those who need help and who bring them help, secret millionaires.

That's a great picture of God because it points us towards grace and it points us towards who He is because along with this darkness we have in relief to it His grace.

So we have from God's word both the diagnosis which is hugely depressing and dark, but we have His cure which is absolutely and completely fulsome and He takes our despair and our impotence and the damning verdict and it is overwhelmed by His grace because He has done what we couldn't do and He has done what He knows we needed was we needed and we need a redeemer in Jesus Christ who hides His glory and who lives among us as a sinless human being so that there is one

who hasn't sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

[28 : 00] Only one, only one who hasn't sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And yet this righteous one Jesus, this worthy one who could be in an open and free relationship with God in life and in love, if fully He's the one who is nailed to a tree and who dies as a law breaker, as a sinner.

She death had no hold in Him, death had no right to Him. God couldn't pour out the verdict of separation on Jesus yet He did because He was dying in our place.

He was dying and taking our guilt so that we might have what might we have? We should shout out all of us His righteousness, His righteousness with God.

It's a, it's, we're in this relationship with God where He takes all our guilt and we receive all His righteousness.

There is no difference for all of sin, fall short of the glory of God, but all are justified freely by His grace. You see that?

[29 : 26] We are made right, we are made right, we're not made right by trying our best and by doing what we can and by being good.

We're made right when we accept that Jesus is right on our behalf and we accept our righteousness and we accept and trust what He has done and we ask for His new life in our hearts so we start all over again.

That's why the Bible talks about being born again and if you're not being born again every day as a Christian, then probably we're struggling and I don't mean that theologically, I mean that pragmatically.

Going back to God, living a life facing God, turning God and being reliant on His grace, so that we're made right with God, not by one iota of anything we do, not one, because we have sinned and fall short, but by accepting His righteousness and His grace, by accepting His cure, by accepting what He has done and living in that grace for the rest of the seconds and minutes and hours and days and months and years that we live.

It truly is the greatest news that we can have. So I recognise that before we accept grace, we need to welcome an intruder, an unwelcome intruder into our lives to give us that medical, spiritually medical diagnosis that we simply don't want.

[30 : 59] We need our guilt, our darkness, our lostness, our depravity before God and the fact that we justifiably are banished from His presence eternally.

But then we accept His great grace. That is transforming. If we don't understand that, and that's why I'm laboring it and we'll spend until Christmas looking at grace, if we don't understand that we haven't understood anything.

We may be religious, we may have our own idea of God, but grace will be meaningless, not only for ourselves, but in the way that we share it with others. We will be mean-hearted, we will be bitter, we will be unforgiving, we will be gossiping.

It impinges on every aspect of our lives and our understanding of grace. So I ask myself today, and I ask you also, what are you doing with grace?

And what are you doing with His diagnosis? And how are we living it? Because I think as Christians, we have obviously given the impression to the world that actually we're good people who just are making ourselves better by coming to church.

[32 : 11] And that is utterly anathema to God. It is entirely heretical. It is completely damnable truth.

We don't come to church to make ourselves better with God. We come to worship Him for what He has done in grace and through the cross. And on that we rely.

Amen. May God bless us as we've considered His word together today. And we do recognise, and I recognise, that it's all kind of just water off a duck's back unless I'm trembling and you're praying and that genuinely we're seeking God to enlighten us as to His truth.

And I hope that we will come to these times of worship all the time prayerfully ready to receive God's word in our lives.