

## **Hearing the Application of Redemptive Principles**

We have talked about the necessity of Christ-centered preaching, if we are to be true to Christ's own hermeneutic. Then, last time, we began to talk about how that Christ centeredness can be excavated from all the Scriptures. We talked particularly about that grace message in its various forms that either prepares for or predicts or reflects or results from the work of Christ. We discussed all of those components, and you will remember that we talked about macro-interpretation and micro-interpretation. A "macro" way of looking at the text would be when we ask where a text fits in the grand scheme of Genesis to Revelation. "Micro" ways of looking at the text involve when we ask whether there is a doctrinal statement there that is reflective of the grace of God or whether there are relationships, either of God toward His people or them toward one another, relational reflections of God's grace that will ultimately be more fully represented in the work of Christ.

A key thought that I would hope you would take away with you is the idea of two lenses, the glasses you can put on to look at any text and use to begin to think in redemptive terms. These lenses are just two simple questions: what does this text tell me about God? and what does this text tell me about me? By having those two perspectives, you begin to see that there is more in the text than just good behavior or even believing right doctrine. Somehow we must communicate how God is the hero of the text. How does God bridge the difference between who He is and who I am? If you approach the text that way, then there are dominant themes that begin to result in redemptive or Christ-centered messages, and our goal today is to diagnose those themes. Our larger goal, however, is to use redemptive principles in the application of Scripture in order to provide biblical motivation and enablement.

Now the reason for motivation and enablement is these dominant themes that begin to come out from a Christ-centered perspective. Obviously, central themes of a Christ-centered perspective are not "sola-bootstraps" or the deadly "be's." Rather, messages that will be consistent will relate to "grace despite our sin." These will be messages of God's assurance and adoption. Typical topics would be things like "Our comfort in God's love."

I want to explore how these ideas relate to the idea of "Sabbath." I know the word "Sabbath" may seem unusual in this context, because often the word "Sabbath" makes people feel uncomfortable in God's love. People often hear, "We do not keep the Sabbath; we do not do enough to observe the Sabbath; God has requirements for the Sabbath," but biblical theology does something to your perspective of why the Bible says certain things, even things like "Sabbath."

We remember that God created the earth in six days, and on the seventh day He rested. There was the first Sabbath, even for God. And while man existed in the garden, this resting continued. Not only does God rest from His labors, but He supplies food for mankind. There is a stewarding of the garden, but it is not the same as the labor that comes after the Fall in which the thorns and thistles will come and in which man will make his way in the world by the sweat of his brow. Labor takes the place of rest, and man is ultimately put out of the place of rest, and we see all the labor that continues until a time in which there is great bondage and labor in the land of Egypt. Here the covenant people of God are laboring in slavery, but God says, "I will take you out of the house of bondage," and promises them a new land. It is called Canaan, the Promised Land, but it has another name, too. It is called the land of Sabbath. The people will go from labor to rest. They go back to Sabbath-land, and even there God gives them commands: "Six days you shall labor, but the seventh day is a Sabbath." It is a time of rest. We even see Jesus saying that the man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was made for man. Man gets to enter rest in Sabbath-land and on the Sabbath day. He ceases from labor and from working his way

through the world. He gets to rest in God. Then, of course, the writer of the Book of Hebrews tells us that there yet remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. People are striving, working, and trying to get God's approval, but God has nonetheless by His Son provided a Sabbath. People can rest from their labors and from their striving, now not just in terms of making their way in the world but in terms of making their way to God. They are resting in Him. It is the idea of Sabbath again, so that we are actually told in Isaiah that when the new kingdom, the new creation, comes, we are finished with this vale of tears, this world of labor. Isaiah tells us that when the new creation comes, we re-enter God's Sabbath.

The result of all of this is that one way of preaching the Scriptures is to say, "You are not resting enough on the Sabbath, so be a better Sabbath-keeper"—and of course the Bible does say that, but the emphasis in a biblical theological perspective is "enter the rest that God has for you. You can cease from your wrestling. That is done. You are not striving to make your way to God anymore, and He even shows that to you with this regular rest that you may enter into that is emblematic of the spiritual rest that is yours forever. No longer do you work for God's approval. He has provided your rest." Now that is a different way of looking at the theme of "our comfort in God's love." If we are talking about grace despite our sin, we will also be talking about our confidence in God's love. If my son disobeys me, I may be very displeased with him, but he is still my son. The relationship does not change. Confidence in our sonship is part of the message of God's grace despite our sin.

A second dominant message that comes out of excavating the grace from all of Scripture is "Grace destroying the guilt of sin." These are messages of justification and forgiveness. Typical topics would be things like our repentance, obviously God's cleansing, and most particularly, the work of Christ's atonement. We might preach on Christ's atonement being prefigured or accomplished or the result of Christ's atonement. What are the implications of grace destroying the guilt of sin? We have to say that this was probably the key part of the Reformation doctrines that caused the movement of the church of which we are a part—the message of grace destroying the guilt of sin in justification.

"Grace defeating the power of sin" is probably more the issue of the moment. We will preach on issues of sanctification and enablement by grace also. We will teach that our power over sin for daily living is also by the grace of God. The Reformation really underscored grace in justification. You had to wait until some of the Scottish revival movements and things like the Marrow Controversy for people to begin to ask what the role of grace is in sanctification. While Reformers have almost always been very clear on the role of grace in justification, it is the role of grace in sanctification that sometimes troubles us. Typical topics related to grace defeating the power of sin are issues of our victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil. We will speak of God's provision of the Holy Spirit and His giving us the Word to enable our victory. We have power—not in our strength, not by our ability, not even by our will—but ultimately by the grace of God.

The final overarching topic that would come out of this is "Grace compelling holiness." These are messages about worship and obedience that is stimulated by the grace of God. Typical topics would be things like thanksgiving and praise and gratitude (a word to which we will return later) but most specifically loving service. Loving service is service to God that is driven by love, with grace being the thing that powers that love. It is this last topic—loving service—that is often the telltale sign, the key mark, of Christ-centered preaching. People worry that emphasizing grace undermines obedience. Consistently preaching the necessity and the proper motivation for holiness may be the most difficult task evangelical preachers face, because our culture defines grace as license rather than the biblical power of holiness. You recognize that. Many people say things like, "Oh, you cannot tell me that something is wrong. I thought you believed in grace. You are not requiring me to do anything, are you?" Actually, that is the world's definition of grace. The Bible's definition of grace is that it is the power of

obedience, not the antidote to obedience. It is actually what empowers obedience. Because we are so immersed in a culture that takes grace as license, people fear grace.

We have to ask ourselves seriously, “How does the Bible itself motivate us to be holy?” The sub-question, the sub-text is what is your own theology of change? What really causes people to change? Now my question is very specific: what makes redeemed people change? I am not talking about unredeemed, unregenerate people. I am talking specifically about the covenant people of God. What makes redeemed people more holy—threats of condemnation or the promise of grace? It is not a new question, as a review of Romans 6:1 will assure you. Romans 6:1 says, “Should we continue in sin that grace may abound?” From the very beginning, people thought, “Oh, grace, wonderful! I will just continue in sin!” Paul says, “No, no, no. May it never be!” He does not interpret grace to mean that we can just continue in sin. The question revolving around grace is really no different from the question that revolves around the perseverance of the saints as a doctrine. People say, “You cannot just say that people will not lose their salvation. If you do, they will just do whatever they want.” The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is interpreted as “Have grace, will party.” You say, “No, no, no. It is actually perseverance that drives holiness, when it is rightly understood. It is because I am held by God that I return to Him always as a Father, because I recognize that even when I have departed from Him, He has not departed from me.” Paul says it is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance. It is this knowledge of His faithfulness that ultimately brings us to faithfulness. It is very counter-intuitive. It is the opposite of human reflex to say that it is love that will generate obedience, rather than threats.

Despite the Bible’s teaching and emphasis of the fact that the grace of God leads to obedience, the question is still debated in every generation of believers. In your readings, I believe I quoted the famous account of John Bunyan, the writer of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Bunyan was not going to follow the establishment rules of being ordained by the king. He was going to preach because the church ordained him, not because he had come under the authority of the king, so Bunyan was thrown in prison. Of course, he was not the only one thrown in prison. The Anabaptists, people with very different theology from Bunyan’s, were also being thrown in prison because they would not come under the authority of the king. So this Reformed Baptist preacher and the Anabaptists are in prison, facing death, and so what do they do every evening? They debate theology, and the Anabaptists say to Bunyan, “You should not keep assuring people of God’s love. If you keep assuring people of God’s love, they will do whatever they want.” Bunyan’s famous reply was “No, if you keep assuring God’s people of God’s love, they will do whatever He wants.”

Long ago, in this place, we had a pastor come for a day of prayer, and he reminded us all of something. He said, “We are so scared of preaching to God’s people what they ought to do because we think they will reject us. But what we forget is that God’s people—not the rebellious, not the unregenerate, but God’s people—want to know what God wants of them.” They actually want to know, so if we are instilling in them love for God, it actually ignites in them a greater compulsion to obey Him. If you begin to ask what really motivates people, it is the compelling power of love for God. Reason asks, “Why should people be holy if all you do is assure them of grace?” Scripture answers, as Jesus Himself would say in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” We keep assuring people of God’s grace because Jesus said that if people love Him, they will do what He commands. That is why you assure them of grace. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:14, “It is the love of God that constrains us to preach the gospel.” Why would we go against persecution and oppression and disadvantage? Because of the love of God. It is love for Him that compels us to do these things that seem humanly impossible and certainly humanly disadvantageous, but the love of God compels us to do these most difficult and yet necessary things.

Most people—and sadly, I think, most preachers—think the goal of preaching is to get people to do what they do not want to do. However, preaching’s highest aim and greatest power lies in convincing others of the love of God in Christ that makes the heart willing and able to do what God desires. That is the glory of preaching, not to force people into doing what they do not want to do, but to actually have such love arise in them that they want to do and are able to do the things in which God delights. When we know that He delights in us, we desire to please Him. Conviction of sin is most necessary, but its aim is not simply to make people feel guilty, but to enable them to comprehend the greatness of God’s grace. If my guilt is so great, then the fact that I am forgiven makes my awareness of the grace of God all the more precious. It is why one of the old lines of preaching is “It is necessary to convict of sin, but the sermon is not done until you have convinced of grace.” If all I have done is convicted of sin, the sermon cannot be done. That is not the Gospel—not all of it. The sermon is not done until I have convinced of grace, because it is the convincing of grace that actually makes me want to overcome the sin and to strive against it. So conviction of sin is most necessary, but its aim is not simply to make people feel guilty but to enable them to comprehend the greatness of God’s grace.

Grace liberates us from sin’s guilt and power by filling God’s people with love for Him that makes them willing and able to please Him. I love how the Westminster Confession says this in chapters 19 and 20. “The liberty which Christ has purchased for believers under the Gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin.” Now that is a very interesting statement. If you are a believer, you are free from the guilt of sin. You may feel guilty, but you are actually objectively free from the guilt of your sin. Christ has taken away all of your past sin, all of your present sin, and all of your future sin. The guilt of it all is taken away, so we are free from the condemnation and the guilt of sin. “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.” I may feel guilty. That is subjective guilt, but objectively there is no more guilt because Christ has taken it all. What does that do? The Confession says, “The liberty purchased for believers under the Gospel consists of their freedom from the guilt of sin”—freedom from the condemning wrath of God, freedom from the curse of the moral law—“and in their being delivered from the dominion of sin”—that is, they are free from the power of sin, too—“as also in their free access to God and their yielding obedience to Him”—and here are some key words—“not out of slavish fear but a childlike love and willing mind.”

Have you thought about that as a goal of preaching, to convince people, to enable them, to serve God not out of anything but a childlike love and a willing mind? That becomes the ultimate goal. The last paragraph says this, too. “Neither are the aforementioned uses of the Law contrary to the grace of the Gospel.” So the Law is still there. It is still in effect in the sense of giving us standards, but “the fact that we have the Law is not contrary to the grace of the Gospel, but sweetly complies 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, requires to be done.” So the Law still requires us not to steal; it still requires us not to take the name of the Lord in vain; it still requires us to be faithful to our spouses, but that is not to say that the Law justifies. It is God’s path of delight for us and goodness for our lives, and our walking in that path occurs freely and cheerfully. We do not walk in the path because God says, “I will not love you if you get off the path.” We are free from the condemning wrath. We are free from guilt. We are free from the power of sin, but we walk in the path because we delight to do so when we understand His grace in our behalf.

So we need to ask again, “What better leads to true holiness—threats of punishment, that is, condemnation, or the promise of grace?” That question of which will be more effective often leads us to understanding the relationship between our conduct and God’s acceptance. Here is the question: are we holy for God’s acceptance or are we holy from God’s acceptance? The instincts of the average person

are to say, “I will be holy so that God will accept me.” People say, “Be holy for God’s acceptance,” but the Gospel is “Be holy, because God has accepted you.”

Now you may wonder whether love for God is the only motivation for obedience or whether there are other legitimate motivations. For example, when God warns His people with threats of punishment for disobedience, should they not obey out of a simple desire for self-preservation? Ultimately we will say that there are many motivations. Self-preservation is one of the biblical motivations, but it cannot be the primary reason for obedience. If the primary reason that you are obeying God is to take care of yourself, then your service is selfish and not holy at all. So God will give us understanding that our primary motivation has to be out of love for Him, and the way that we preach such things as God’s warnings of judgment is with an understanding that if God did not love you, He would not warn you. The warnings themselves are an expression of divine love for a people He desires to preserve. There is not the sense of “You had better obey or the ogre in the sky is going to get you.” It is actually, “Your Father in heaven has warned you of the safe path. Stay in that path.” The rules will not change, but the reasons for obedience are dramatically different if one perceives that the goal is to motivate people by love primarily, rather than simply self-protection.

Let me tell you my own struggles. So much of my life has been unfolding from that period of about four to five years out of seminary when I had the wonderful privilege of going to the oldest and largest church in my presbytery, and I was the youngest minister in the presbytery. Receiving that call was a moment for great personal pride and arrogance, but it did not go very well, and it used to bother me so much. There was so much struggle in this historic church. The church was over 150 years old. It was the first Presbyterian church in the Indiana Territory. It was in the state of Illinois, but the church was established before Illinois was a state. For the first 150 years, the church was pastored by only three people. Three Scottish pastors—Wiley, Smiley, and Stuart. It sounds like a Scottish law firm, does it not? They had long stays, but even though there was this long history of the faith, I will tell you, we had so much adultery and so many addiction problems and so much depression that, week after week, I would just get so mad at those people. I was so angry with them for not honoring the Word of God despite this tradition that they had. Then ultimately, I must tell you, I began to feel that the problem was not so much them as it was me and preachers like me. I was so hurt by the situation—it was only about five years out of seminary—that I thought I would have to leave the ministry. I went into the ministry desiring to help people. I wanted to do that, and yet every week I would stand up and just hammer on people: “Stop doing this. Straighten up. Do not do that.” I said to my wife at some point, “All I do is hurt people. That is all I do. I just stand up here and hurt people every week. I cannot keep doing this. I just cannot keep doing this.”

There were various things that began to come together in my life to help me understand what I was doing and what some of the dynamics were. One of them was Sidney Greidanus’ *Sola Scriptura*. I was just looking for anything that would tell me a different way to preach, and I read that article on how to use the exemplars in the Bible. Should you just tell people “dare to be a Daniel” and “you just be as good as David” and so forth? Greidanus helped me to see that actually, those people were awful people. It is God’s grace that made them able, and God was using them to teach us of His grace, not just to “be a better person.”

Where I really heard this problem that I had was not in my preaching. People always tended to congratulate me for my preaching. Where I really heard it was in counseling situations, and I would say awful things to people. For example, there might be a couple that had been caught in immorality, and I would say to them something like, “Listen. You should not expect God to love you if you are going to keep doing this.” Now do you hear what I just said? God’s love was dependent on their behavior, and it

was in the quietness of that counseling room that I actually began to hear how what I was saying and thinking and behaving that was so contrary to my theology. I did not believe that God's love was based on human action, and yet it is what I would preach, if not explicitly, then by implication, week after week after week. I began to say to myself, "Are people struggling so much with addictive problems because they actually want to get away from the God I am preaching? Is the reason that there is so much depression in this church the fact that I do not give them any hope? I just keep making acceptance with God based on their changing their behavior, and they gave up on trying to be good enough for God a long time ago. So depression and immorality and addiction are just escapes from the gospel that I am preaching here week after week." It was the desire to find something different that began to make me think that I either needed to leave the ministry or I had to preach a different gospel.

Ultimately, to use the terminology of Galatians, I realized that I was already preaching a different gospel than the one in the Scriptures. I was preaching the gospel of "do better." Not to preach that gospel is to understand the relationship between the imperative and the indicative. The classic statement from Ridderbos is this: "The imperative rests on the indicative, and the order is not reversible. Who we are in Christ"—that is the indicative—"is the basis and power for what we do"—that is the imperative—"that pleases God." Here is Ridderbos' technical explanation. In *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, he writes: "No less striking in this respect"—he is talking about how the relationship with God precedes obedience to Him—"is Colossians 3:3ff, in response to the statement, 'For you have died and your life is hid in God.'" Now it is even hard for us in seminary to hear that language. Just think what he said. You are dead. Your life, your identity, is dead, and you are now hid in God. You have another identity, because you are dead. "After saying this"—that your identity is now wrapped in God—"the command at once resounds: 'Put to death, therefore, your members upon the earth: fornication, uncleanness, etc.' Having once died with Christ"—that is, being in Him, having this new identity—"does not render superfluous this putting to death the members that are upon the earth." So the fact that you are in Christ does not render superfluous the need for holiness, but it 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 this order is not reversible." The standard human reflex is to say, "I will obey God, and then I will get His love." The Gospel says, "You have His love. Even when you were His enemy, He died for you. Therefore serve Him." And if that captures you, it will change absolutely everything in your life.

I can remember—and maybe you will think it is silly—when some of these kinds of grace perspectives began to come into my life and my wife's life. It even changed the way we would talk to our children. There was a time when I would say to my son, "Colin, you are a bad boy because you did that." Now do you hear the theology of that simple statement? You are what you did. The indicative rests on the imperative. You did or did not do something, and therefore that determines who you are. You are a bad boy because you did that. What we began to say, and maybe it sounds silly to you, is "Colin, do not do that. You are my son." I want what you do to be based on who you are, and that will not change. You are my son. Be what you are. Live out this relationship. To be able to say that as a preacher from the pulpit is one of life's greatest privileges. What a privilege to say to God's people: "Be what you are. You are children of light. You are the children of God. You are in Christ Jesus. Be what He has already made you to be. Live out the reality of your life. This is what you are. Live it now. Rest on the indicative that He has established by living this out." Once you see it, that becomes part of the pattern of Scripture. God, in giving the Ten Commandments, before He says, "Do not take my name in vain. Do not make graven images," says, "I am the God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. I did this for you. You are free. Now live as a people of the covenant. Because of what you are, live it out." He does not say, "Because of what you are, there are no imperatives anymore." But the imperative rests on the indicative, and the order is not reversible, even though all human reflex would say it is reversible.

In Christ-centered preaching, the rules do not change, but the reasons do, as one preaches with a redemptive approach. Here is that concern for antinomianism being addressed directly. People will say, “If you talk too much grace, you kind of get rid of the rules.” No. Listen. The rules stay in effect, but the reasons for obeying them change entirely. Instead of gaining God’s love by obedience, we are obeying because we have God’s love. The imperative rests on the indicative. It does not disappear. The imperative rests on what God has already done. Just to reiterate the Confession: “neither are the aforementioned 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 requires to be done.” We still do it, but it is with this whole new motivation of cheer, of delight, of love for God.

Our goal in excavating the grace in every passage is not to minimize biblical imperatives but to empower their application with proper motivation and enablement. That is why a little later in the semester you are going to read portions of *Holiness By Grace*. When you have preached a little bit, I think you will keep asking those motivation questions: “How does this work? How do we deal with people’s need to turn from hell-bent activity? How is holiness motivated by grace?” We will explore different components of that, but for now let us at least begin to grasp it by talking about what become the proper motivations. In answering the four questions of application, we have said that what to do and where to do it will not change, but why to do it and how to do it will be the questions we must answer from a Christ-centered perspective. If this is actually what we are working on, how is motivation now working when we say we are excavating grace in order to compel love?

We recognize, first, that there are proper motivations for Christ-centered preaching, and the first one has to be love for God. There is a priority order in what I am about to say. The primary, the premier motivation for obedience, must be love for God, so we are revealing grace in all the Scriptures, and this is more than an interpretive scheme. It is the chief expository means by which the preacher may provide consistent adulation of the mercy of God in Christ in order to prompt our love for God that is the most powerful motivation for Christian obedience. Biblical theology should be more about fostering a relationship than promoting or arguing a science.

Let me just stop there and tell you what I recognize, and maybe some of you do as well, to be some of the historical pitfalls. If you were not in North American Presbyterian circles, but you were more in Dutch Reformed circles, the things that I am telling you about are old news. They have been talked about for a century and a half. Often in kind of Presbyterian, Reformed, evangelical settings at large, these things seem rather new and sometimes very suspect, but these things are not new in Dutch Reformed circles. However, the consequence of saying that the Bible is not rightly exegeted until we have discerned the grace or the Christ-focus of a text has led, in Dutch Reformed circles, not so much to the emphasis on loving God as to huge debates over what are the master metaphors of biblical theology. Is “kingdom” the right grouping mechanism? Is the right grouping mechanism “creation, Fall, redemption, consummation”? Is “covenant” the correct metaphor of all things? Is “family” the correct metaphor? Some have said that “Sabbath” is the master metaphor. I want to back away from all that and say, “Listen, maybe those are wonderful things to explore, but the main thing to focus on for the edification of believers is to say, ‘We are talking about having people understand the relationship they have with God that He has established apart from their works.’” Now there may be different ways to understand that, but sadly, in so many of the Dutch Reformed circles, biblical theology has been nothing but a place of debate and lines of cleavage and division in the church rather than a uniting understanding of God’s people for why we love Him.

It is not a mystery to you that some of this emphasis of Christocentrality makes some people stand off a little and wonder if this is a good or a bad thing and whether it leads people astray. If I could push away from all the debates, I would say, “Listen. I am happy if you understand at least what I am trying to emphasize is that the goal of preaching is to have people love their Savior more, and it seems to me that is kind of beyond debate.” We ought to be able to say that what we are trying to accomplish by the end of the day is to have people love Jesus more, because we believe that out of that will come all the obedience and all the love for others and all the mercy toward the oppressed and all the concern that needs to be expressed toward our families, if we are just saying, “I am here to love Jesus more and to show Him more, and that is why I am looking at the Bible as I am, to try to create greater love for Christ that is relationally oriented.” I do not mean that it is non-rational, but our understanding is driving a relationship more than a debate.

I have referred to people’s concerns over the idea of Christ-centered preaching. You may wonder what some of these concerns are, not just about Christ-centered preaching but also about this kind of grace movement that is in our circles these days. What are these people concerned about? Some people say that it is incipient Lutheranism. They would say that it will ultimately lead to some discounting of the Law, because we will get the idea of a law/Gospel split. Well, you have heard me very much try to say today that the Law is in effect. I am well aware that there is that concern. I am well aware that almost any aspect of this discussion can become a new legalism. That is why I was just talking about the debate. This can turn into people saying, “If you do not talk about grace the way I talk about grace, then you do not really understand the Gospel.” So we get “sonship” controversies and *Desiring God* controversies and *Christ-Centered Preaching* controversies, and I kind of want to say, “All right. I know those are good and legitimate discussions. But if all we are doing is having a kind of academic debate, then we are not doing the Gospel work we ought to be doing, which is ultimately helping God’s people to understand, in whatever language you become comfortable with, that loving Christ more is what preaching is about.”

If possible, I want you to see the logic of what I am talking about here and why we are taking the course we are taking through this lesson. Anything can be warped. Anything can be misunderstood, and that is why I am trying not to argue for a particular language. I am trying not to argue for particular code words. I am obviously trying to make an explanation of how it functions. I am not even trying to create the one master metaphor that has to work for everybody. I am more saying, “If in your heart of hearts, you see God’s people out there wanting to love Him and know Him and obey Him and struggling to do it, and you want to know what will most help them, it is, in whatever way is appropriate for your personality, that church situation, and those people, to instill greater love for Christ.” That is what I want you to see. How does that occur? Ultimately we love God because He first loved us, so when you are talking about creating this compelling love for God, it is not a new command (although He said, “A new command I give you, that you should love one another”). But this is not a new imperative to love one another. That imperative has always been in place, but even that imperative rests on the indicative of His love for us, so we do not say this as, “You must now love Jesus.” Well, of course you must love Jesus, but what we recognize is that we cannot do that if we do not know that He loves us. It becomes absolutely impossible to love God if you think He is the ogre in the sky. You can obey Him if you think He is the ogre in the sky, but you cannot obey the first commandment—that you should love God with all your heart, soul, and mind—if you think He is the ogre in the sky. So creating a right understanding of those indicatives is what ultimately creates even the possibility of obeying God by loving Him.

We were dealing with this love for God as a primary motivation. Various verses make reference to this. Obviously, Romans 12:1 does, which says, “I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices....” Do you see imperative and indicative there? The imperative is to “offer

your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.” I must tell you that most of my early Christian life I read that very differently than it is on the page here. What I read it to say was, “I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, and then you will be holy and pleasing to God.” Have some of you read it that way? “You be a good living sacrifice, and then you will be holy and pleasing to God.” What does it actually say? This is not a statement of what you will be. It is a declaration of what you are. Unlike dead sacrifices of animals in the past, you are already holy and pleasing to God, in view of His mercy, that is, what He has already made you to be. Therefore, live it out. As this living sacrifice, let your life now be a praise to Him. Live out this life that He has already made holy and pleasing to Himself.

Consistent focus on Christ’s mercy rather than building up a dread of God is what most powerfully motivates and enables Christians in their fight against sin and desire to glorify God. Think how Paul says it in Titus 2: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions.” It is an amazing statement. It is the grace of God that teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions. It is that grace that compels us to obedience. The Old Testament message is that the joy of the Lord is our strength. Here, again, it is this primary motivation of love for God.

Now there are other motivations. One of these is “love for others loved by God.” Why do I love the unlovely? Why do I love people who are mad at me? Why do I love people who are criticizing me, hurting me, or hurting my family? If I believe that they are made in the image of God—and some of them actually believe they are doing God’s work by attacking me—then I am going to love those whom God loves, if He is my first love. Because He loves me, I love them. I may not have any earthly reason, any human response, but because of His love for them, I love them.

I think I have said this to some of you on other occasions, but I do not think it was until I discovered this grace-focused preaching that I actually began to think I really loved lost people. I think I felt obligated to witness to them, even though I did not like them. However, I finally began to love them when I began to say, “God has worked in me a grace that is beyond any of my doing, so that when I am looking to people who are filthy in language and habit and thought and practice and say, ‘You know, you are like me apart from the grace of God, and if God loves you enough to put me in your life so that you can hear the Gospel, then I think I can love you, because I love Him, because He loves you.’” For the first time I did not make things like witnessing into a good work that I was trying to accumulate enough of to prove to God that I was being faithful. Instead, I actually began to long to witness to people because I loved them for the first time. I must tell you it is the only time I began to feel that I was at all effective in witnessing to people, when I actually began to love them because God did. “I tell you the truth,” Jesus said, “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” How was He motivating the disciples? He tells them to do it for Him. As long as they do it for the least of these, they are really doing it for Him. He is motivating them to love for others by love for Himself.

The final reason for obedience is “love for self as one loved by God.” It is an interesting thing to be a child of the king. If He loves me, I guess it is okay if I love me. Do you know believers who actually think that self-hatred is a form of showing their faithfulness? They think that the way to show that they are really, really serious about God is by hating themselves and feeling bad about every sin longer than everyone else, and so they make self-loathing the basis of their status before God. The trouble with that is that it makes the blood of Christ of no effect. It is my self-loathing rather than His blood that makes me acceptable to God, and so the way in which I really, really, show that I am a great Christian is that I feel really bad about myself for long periods of time, and I think that makes me holy.

Here are the problems with self-loathing. Here is what we should be doing. First, we should be claiming the rights and privileges of our inheritance in Christ. I am a child of the king. In fact, I am His own inheritance. John Murray writes this: “Grace is bestowed and the relation established by sovereign divine administration.” God establishes our relationship with Him. How then are we to construe the conditions of which we have spoken? This was the earlier question. They are simply the reciprocal response of faith, love, and obedience. Why does God say, “Because you are mine, walk in My ways”? These conditions of experiencing His blessing are the reciprocal responses of faith, love, and obedience apart from which the enjoyment of the covenant blessing and the covenant relation is inconceivable. If I am not faithful to my spouse, it is inconceivable that I could enjoy the faithfulness of God, so God warns me about unfaithfulness because He wants me to have the enjoyment of the faithfulness that He delights in. Does God ever motivate us with good things in our lives? If I am faithful to my spouse, is there blessing to me? Certainly, and God can motivate me by saying, “You will delight in your wife, and there will be wonder and goodness in that,” and so it is because I want to care for myself that I want to be faithful to my spouse. There is a right self-motivation.

Now there can be a wrong self-motivation when it gets out of priority. If I bring home some flowers to my wife and I meet her at the door and say, “Look, I brought you some flowers,” and she says, “That is wonderful! Why did you do that?” and I say, “Because it is so good for me,” what will she do with those flowers? They will come right back at me. Now, there is blessing to me, but the primary intent is to bless her, and so it is not wrong to say, “Yes, my self-good can be a consideration when I hear the warnings in Scripture and when I hear the conditions on blessing, but still the primary reason for preaching and motivating people has to be love for God, even if I am concerned about me as well.” The Bible certainly motivates me with concern for myself at times but with the understanding of what God provides.

Part of that motivation is that God motivates us with avoidance of the consequences of sin revealed by a loving God. God does motivate us with avoidance of the consequences of sin, but the last part is also important—revealed by a loving God. If God did not love us, He would not warn us of sin’s consequences. That is one of the awful portions of Romans 1, where the apostle looks at those who are caught in sin and says that God simply left them to go their way. He said, “Let them have their way,” but for His own people, He warns them of the consequences of sin. It is part of His love in expression, and that is why we see some of these standards in the Scriptures and begin to understand them as part of God’s love.

It is necessary to make a distinction between saving discipline, which is expressed toward us regularly, and retributive punishment, which was inflicted on Christ once for all. God disciplines His people, but God does not punish His people. Now that may sound strange to you, but let us go to the origins of these words. To punish someone is to inflict penalty on him. To discipline someone is to seek to restore a relationship, to do what is best for that person. So the penalty for my sin has been put on Christ. Now the writer of Hebrews tells us that no discipline seems pleasant for the moment. God will warn us with discipline, but we are reminded that He only disciplines those He loves, which means that when I am in the throes of the worst discipline God can bring into my life, I am loved no less. That must affect the way we preach. If all we are doing is warning people of the disciplines of God to turn them from wrong behavior, that does not accomplish God’s purposes if we do not say, as the writer of Hebrews would, that the discipline is out of love. His intention is only to help you.

You may have heard the old preacher’s story about the woman who took her son to the doctor because he was sick, and the doctor determined he would have to give the child a shot. The mother said, to comfort her child, “Do not worry, Johnny, it will not hurt. It will not hurt.” The doctor knew that it was going to hurt, and so he said to the boy, “Son, I may hurt you, but I will not harm you.” Do you hear the

difference between discipline and punishment? God may hurt you, but His goal is the fruit of righteousness—the blessing to come that He means to bring into your life. No discipline for the moment seems pleasant, but when it has matured, it will bring about the fruit of righteousness, which is God’s true intent. 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, and discipline preached without fatherly love as motivation will not accomplish God’s purposes.

Thus there are many motivations for obedience—fear of consequences, desire for blessing, a certain love for self, concern for others, and love for God—but since love of God must be the primary motivation in holiness, stimulating such love must be the primary and most consistent concern of our preaching in order for our people to have holy power for their obedience. The message of grace is meant to stimulate love for God and its compelling power. It is this biblical theology that sees redemptive truth throughout all of the Scriptures. Biblical theology enables us to see and expound this grace in all Scripture and thus rightly apply the whole counsel of God to our lives.

As we begin to see that and sense that what we are trying to do is to create this compelling love for God, then we at least have to ask what would be wrong motivations. I remember a class some years ago when I was saying to people, “Try not to motivate people by guilt. Try not to make guilt your primary motivation.” A student held up his hand and said, “What else is there?” I think a lot of preachers think that. What else is there to motivate, other than guilt? What is the other motivation? It is love. It may sound kind of trite and sentimental to say this, but there is no more powerful motivation than love. What drives the mother back into the burning building? It is love. There is no more powerful motivation in humanity than love, and love for God is the most powerful motivation for holiness.

That means there can be improper motivations that are contrary to the whole counsel of God. One is making self-promotion or self-protection the primary aim of obedience. Honesty would say that if you were to go through the pews of most of our churches and ask what many people’s primary motivations are, they fall into one of two categories. There are people who are obeying God so they can get more good things, and there are people who are obeying God so the ogre in the sky will not get them. If you are serving God so the ogre in the sky will not get you, you are really serving yourself. If you are obeying God so that you will get more good things—a bigger house, a prettier wife, more money—you are just serving yourself again. They are both just sanctified selfishness, and neither is worthy of those whose chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. For those reasons, there have to be other ends that motivate us.

J. I. Packer writes this:

The secular world never understands Christian motivation. Faced with the question of what makes Christians tick, unbelievers maintain that Christianity is practiced only out of self-serving purposes. They see Christians as fearing the consequences of not being Christians—that is, religion as fire insurance—or feeling the need of help and support to achieve their goals—that is, religion as a crutch—or wishing to sustain a social responsibility—religion as a badge of respectability. No doubt all of these motivations can be found among the membership of our churches. It would be futile to dispute that. But just as a horse brought into a house is not thereby made a human, so a self-seeking motivation brought into the church is not thereby made Christian, nor will holiness ever be the right name for religious routines thus motivated. From the plan of salvation, I learn that the true driving force for authentic Christian living is and ever must be not the hope of gain but the heart of gratitude.

If you will substitute for “gratitude” the word “thanksgiving” or even “love of God,” I will be happy, because the word “gratitude” is a little debatable these days for reasons I am about to discuss. However, what is he saying? The world thinks that Christians are selfishly motivated. Sadly, many Christians are, but what should be motivating them is a response to the grace of God. I want to read to you from the Heidelberg Catechism, number 86. I usually think of this as one of the most honest of all questions that you will find in a catechism anywhere. The question is this: “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?” Is that not a great question? If it is all grace, why be good? The catechism gives this answer: “So that with our whole life we may show ourselves grateful to God for His goodness and that He may be glorified through us.” If it is all grace, why be good? Because I want to show my love for God.

Now tell me why the word “gratitude” is debatable in our circles right now. In John Piper’s book, *Future Grace*, on page 42, how Piper defines gratitude is “a debtor response to God.” Now let us just say some things. Of course he is responding to a lot of his own upbringing and background, where somebody would say, “You should go to the mission field. Jesus did so much for you. Should you not repay Him by going to the mission field?” and so Christian obedience and motivation was driven by the sense of paying God back. Let us all agree, if that is the kind of gratitude we are talking about, it is definitely wrong. The difficulty is that not only among the Reformers, but in the Bible, that is not how the word “gratitude” is used. The word “gratitude” is used as a substitute for “thankfulness,” so you will get Colossians 3:16 telling us that we should sing to God with gratitude in our hearts. The word is the just the word *charis*, by the way. It is just the grace terminology. So we should respond to God with a grace-response, filled with grace, filled with an understanding that all that we have is not of us at all. Now if what we are doing is saying, “No, no, no. I have to pay God back with what I have,” then believe me, that you will never pay it back.

Because of the controversial nature of the word “gratitude” right now, I have tried to substitute other words and just talk about love for God instead. It can confuse people when you use the word “gratitude” today. However, it is the language of the Reformers consistently that we should be responding in thanksgiving, and almost nobody debates that we should be showing thanksgiving to God. However, it is not paying God back; it is just the response of a loving heart. Does that help at all? I imagine that you are aware of that controversy, and I feel that it is beginning to dispel as *Future Grace* gets to be older and as people really begin to get into the book and see how Piper defines the term in a different way from the way that the Reformers used the term. If you are troubled by the word “gratitude,” please just substitute “love for God.”

You might ask how the idea of Christ-centered preaching relates to Piper’s message that “God is most glorified when our greatest delight is in Him.” We would have to say it is really the same message from a different angle. That is not a different message, because what you are saying is “Why would I delight in Him? Because of what He has provided me.” I love him because He first loved me, and therefore He is most glorified when I take my greatest delight in pleasing Him, so it is my self-delight to please one that I love, but the reason I love Him is that He first loved me. Gratitude does not have to be something that is a self-serving debtor response—“I get the monkey off my back by paying God back”—rather, it is in the biblical terminology being filled with grace, being very thankful in my heart for all that came to me by no doing of mine and with no payback from me.

In addition to making self-promotion or self-protection a primary motivation, another wrong motivation is using selfish fear—or “slavish fear,” to use the Reformers’ language, the confessional language—rather than godly fear, as motivation. Wrong motivation would be making personal protection from the ogre in the sky the motivation of our preaching, but we must say that there is a proper fear of God. The

Bible certainly talks about the fear of God. Our trouble is that we do not have an easy English word that fits the concept of the fear of God, and I wish I did, but if God were somehow to appear in our midst, we would all fall to the ground. There would be a right fear of God, but that fear of God is regard for Him in all of His nature, not just a disciplining side. It is a proper regard for His love. It is a proper regard for His fathering. It is a proper regard for His sovereignty. It is a proper regard for the awesomeness of who He is. In understanding what proper fear motivation is, I am helped by Isaiah 11:2, which tells us that when Christ comes, He will walk in the fear of the Lord. So proper biblical fear of God is whatever way in which Christ properly regards His Father. It is not that sense of “Oh, no, the ogre is going to get me.” That is not how Jesus would perceive His father. It is that proper regard for all that God is, and that is what ultimately makes biblical fear even an aspect of responding to love for God and the love that He has for us.

Another wrong motivation is failing to distinguish between objective guilt and subjective guilt as motivation. We have already talked about subjective guilt. It is what we feel in grieving the Holy Spirit, what we rightly call conviction for sin, but that is very different from objective guilt—that is, the penalty for past, present, and future sin placed on Christ and fully reconciled on the cross. Yes, we can convict people of sin, but we do not condemn them if they are God’s people. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, and so making people aware that they have grieved the Spirit should lead them to seeking repentance and knowing God’s grace rather than having a sense that God is now condemning them.

I want to say a few words about proper enablement. We have talked a great deal about motivation, and we need to say that we did not get to the fourth question of application. We have talked about what to do and where to do it. The answer to the question of “why” is primarily out of love for God, but how do people do what they are supposed to do? In order to provide proper enablement, we have to answer all four questions of application. We must answer not only “what” and “where,” but also “why” and “how.”

Now the reason we have spent so much time on the “why” is because of this statement: the why is the how. When people truly grasp the love of God, they have His strength. The reason that sin has power over us is that we love it. If sin has no attraction to us, then it has no power over us. Do you believe that? If sin did not attract you at all, it would have no power over you. We undermine the power of sin by filling the heart with love for Christ, revealing the grace that is why we love Him. John Owen wrote that the way you remove the power of anything is by taking away its life source. The life source of sin is our love for it. Take that away, and sin has no power. How do you take away love for sin? You fill up with love for Christ. The why becomes the how. As people are filled up with love and they see why they should be serving God and they understand that it is His love that has been exegeted from the text, then ultimately it is that love for Him that grants them power. That means that when we are motivating people, we want to make sure that people know how to plug into Christ’s grace. They offer confession.

By the way, that is so that they will experience His grace, not so they will gain it. How many people think that if they do not repent of their sin, they do not have grace? What is the trouble with that kind of thinking? How many of you have repented enough for your sin? None of you have. If you think that your repentance is what gains God’s grace, then you will live guilty all your life. You must know that you already exist in the state of grace. You already exist before the smile of God, and while you may not experience that grace, as rebellion takes you from it, it is not your confession that gains His grace. Your confession is what allows you to experience it afresh. Grace also helps people to claim their sonship, to know what it means to be in Christ, and to know God’s provision for them.

From where does the power come? They should be told to pray for the Holy Spirit. That is part of it, but it is also beginning to understand what it means to walk in faith. When the Puritans talked about what would give people power for the Christian life, they talked about the walk of faith. Many of us think the walk of faith is working really hard, but they meant exactly the opposite. They said the walk of faith was coming to the Scriptures as a little child and simply believing what it said. What would actually give people power is to look at the Word and simply believe like a child that it is true. What it says is “Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world.” Many Christians think, “I cannot overcome sin. It is just the way I am made. God made me this way. It is probably His fault,” instead of simply believing what the Bible says: “You are overcomers. Greater is He that is in you than He that is in the world.” If you do not believe that you have power over sin, you have already been defeated. It is necessary to be like a child. A child says, “He says it, so I will believe it. It does not feel that way. I do not think I have power. I have struggled with this so long, but He says I have power, so I am simply going to believe it,” and that means we believe that we are a new creation in Christ Jesus, that there was a time that we were not able not to sin—*non posse non peccare*—but now I am able, because the resurrection power of Jesus Christ is in me. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is in me, and because of that I have power, not like the world. I am just going to believe that. As an act of faith, I am simply going to believe that what the Bible says is true. In believing it, there is power.

That power is exerted when we then begin to nurture the new affections. Thomas Chalmers wrote long ago about “the expulsive power of a new affection.” He was following in the path of John Owen, saying that as we are filled up with love for Christ, it expels love for the world. We are like a tank for God’s love, and as we are filled up with the love of God, it drives sin and the desire for sin out of us. We begin to recognize whole new ways of approaching the Christian life—for instance, the love-building as opposed to the points-earning use of Christian disciplines. We know that so many times we will say to people, “You need to read your Bible more. You need to pray. You need to associate with other believers.” But why do most people even in the church think they are doing that? Because they think they must earn points with God.