

# “THE GOSPEL: The Man or Woman in the Mirror”

A sermon by  
The Rev. Dr. Douglas E. Nagel  
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**TEXTS: Ephesians 2:1-3, Romans 3:21-26 and John 3:31-36**

## **Ephesians 2:1-3**

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

## **Romans 3:21-26**

But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

## **John 3:31-36**

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life but must endure God's wrath.

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I hate it when I return home and am suddenly in trouble for no good reason. LuAnn held the credit card bill. The bottom line told the story. Over five thousand dollars in charges. “What is this?”

“Let me see.”

“Honey look at the charges. A leather goods store at the Atlanta Airport, \$300.00. A jewelry store purchase at the Atlanta Airport, \$250.00. A liquor store purchase in Atlanta for \$100.00. In case you weren't noticing, I haven't been out of Ohio for three months. Someone has stolen my identity and used our credit card number.”

The same thing happened in the Bible, long before there were credit cards.

## **STOLEN IDENTITY---The Problem of Human Sin**

The early chapters of Genesis record that humans were created in the image of God to have dominion over the created order. Genesis 1:26 tells us, [*“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’”*]

Remember that. Created in the image of God. Created to have dominion over creation. Humans were given the role of representing God on earth. To do that properly, they would need to be in relationship with God, understanding and doing God's will in the world God created.

Scripture also tells us that this was not enough for the first humans. The temptation arises to be more than vice-regents. The desire to be like God becomes the impetus for disobedience and a selfish power grab. Man falls. His identity is stolen. Although created in the image of God, the image is damaged, marred, and effaced. He loses dominion.

The warning God originally gave to the first man and woman comes true. *"You may freely eat of every tree in the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."* (Genesis 2:16-17)

They die. However, they do not die physically. What dies? If you look closely at the disruption brought by original sin, you discover that every relationship is altered. The relationship between man and woman, the relation between both and God, the relationship between human beings and the world, and the relationship of man within himself is altered.

Suddenly, there in the Garden is shame, blame, fear, loss of ability, anger, and so many other negatives that result from choosing self over God's prescribed order. Dominion is lost. Identity is lost.

Many will claim the perfectibility of man. Blame falls on circumstances, environment, poverty, lack of education, and so many other factors for human shortcomings. However, you may change the circumstances and discover that the wealthy still steal, the brilliant find more clever ways to kill, and those who are economically secure are no less tempted to use drugs or abuse their children.

The problem is not environment. The problem is not economics. The problem is the human heart. We can recite a litany of names and places that chart the darkness of the human heart. Pulse Night Club. Oklahoma City. Virginia Tech. Columbine. The Las Vegas MGM Grand. No change of environment or circumstance could transform the depravity of the human soul apart from the redeeming grace of God.

Charles Hodge, great Presbyterian theologian wrote, "Original sin is the only rational solution of the undeniable fact of the deep, universal and early manifested sinfulness of men in all ages, of every class, and in every part of the world." G. K. Chesterton has written, "Whatever else is or is not true, this one thing is certain—man is not what he was meant to be."

This is not who we were born to be. It is what we have become. Someone has stolen our identity. Rather, we have surrendered it willingly.

Apart from God's action, the person who looks back at us from the mirror is spiritually dead. Here is what the Shorter Catechism says of man's estate because of sin. "All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever."

Those are hard words to hear. Lost. Wrath. Miseries. Death. Pains. Yet this is who we are unless God intervenes. The Apostle Paul writes to the Church in Ephesus. He writes, contrasting who they are now in Christ, with who they were apart from Christ. Hear those words again, *"You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient."* (Ephesians 2:1)

How did we get this way? In Romans 5:12, God's word tells us, *"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned . . ."*

We come into the world physically alive and spiritually dead because of Adam's sin. Some will argue that people are basically good. Yet, why do we lock the doors on our cars and homes? Why do we not boldly walk down a dark street in a strange town? Why the need for police, defense attorneys, and jails? We know that something is awry in the human makeup.

We have gotten it wrong. Too many people think that some people are evil because they do evil things. Scripture would correct us to understand that all people do evil things because all have a fallen human nature.

Yet, this is a sermon about good news. What good news could there possibly be with such a bleak portrait of human nature?

### **THE GREAT EXCHANGE---Jesus' Righteousness for My Sin**

The good news is that God loves His human creation too much to leave us alone, lost, and abandoned to the consequences of our own misguided choices. From the very foundations of the world, God set out a plan to

redeem the humans he loves. The plan must include two things: 1) God's holiness must be honored and the penalty for sin must be paid, and 2) God's love must be revealed in the plan of salvation.

Holiness alone would mean wrathful punishment of those who sin. Love alone would mean that justice would never be honored, and God would wink at the enormity of human rebellion.

Only one plan could accomplish both objectives. God would do what man could not. The Son of God would live the righteous life God demanded, a perfect righteousness, walking completely in God's will. He, the Son, would bear the penalty of human sin. Justice would prevail. Sin would be punished. The debt would be paid.

Even that was not the end. Had Jesus' merely died for human sin, a righteous man as ultimate sacrifice, it would only have restored us to the *status quo ante* before the Fall. It would not have given humanity the possibility of obtaining the righteousness God demands.

So, in the stillness of that first Easter morning, the stone was rolled away, and God raised Jesus from the dead. Romans 4:25 puts it very well in saying that Jesus was ". . . handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification." Jesus' death erases the penalty of our sins. Jesus' resurrection establishes our righteousness before God in Him. It is not our righteousness. It is Jesus' righteousness that we access by faith in Jesus. It is Jesus' righteousness that is ours when we place our trust in Him. His grace is sufficient, His righteousness is all we need.

This is what Paul is saying in the second Scripture lesson for today from Romans 3:25b-26, "*He [God] did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.*" We are justified, or made right with God, through faith in Jesus Christ.

This is the power of what Paul writes in Romans 5:18, "*Therefore, just as one man's [Adam's] trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's [Jesus'] act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.*" The good news is that God, in Christ, give us the possibility of moving from death to life.

As Paul writes to the church at Ephesus in this morning's epistle lesson, he references this movement. Note what he says,

Here is what Paul writes. In verse 1 of chapter two, he begins, "*You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived. . .*" Then, in verse 4, Paul crowns his argument with this victory cry, Ephesians 2:4 "*But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through trespasses, made us alive together with Christ---by grace you have been saved. . .*" You were dead, but God made us alive together with Christ! This is the new creation, the restoration, and the new birth!

This is the great exchange. As Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthian church, "*For our sake he made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" (2 Corinthians 5:21)

An old Gospel song tells the miracle of this great exchange. The words are these. [SLIDE]

*He paid the debt he did not owe, I owe a debt I could not pay*

*I needed someone to wash my sins away*

*And now I sing a brand-new song, Amazing Grace,*

*My Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay.*

## **A NEW IDENTITY---THAT CHRIST BE FORMED IN ME**

We have seen it in the plot of hundreds of movies and television shows. Someone has witnessed a crime. Someone has observed graft or fraud or racketeering in their business or organization. They turn states evidence. In order to give them security and the confidence to testify freely, they are offered the opportunity to enter a Witness Protection Program or Witness Relocation Program.

They are given a totally new identity. A new job is found for them. They are relocated to a different area of the country. All points of contact with their former life are severed. All records regarding their former life are expunged.

They are a brand-new person.

Naturally, it is difficult to suddenly adapt to being someone entirely different. Mannerisms, appearance, and regional accents can still give a person away, but over time, the witness begins to live into their new identity.

That can be difficult. Every morning I look in the mirror as I shave. I see the man who looks back at me. I know him well. His face bears the scars of past accidents---a broken cheekbone, a suture line from a fall in a sandstone cave, a nose reconstructed after skin cancer surgery. I see in him the signs of age. He bears the marks and signs of the grave . . . graying and thinning hair, wrinkles, skin blemishes, and sagging eyelids. I ask myself, "Is this who I am? Is this my real identity?"

The task of faith is to see myself in Christ. If you are a believer, that is your task, as well. I will freely admit that I am not who I want to be, but I also confess that I am not who I once was. Like a lump of clay on a potter's wheel, God is shaping me through faith, His word, and the experiences of my life to become a vessel suitable for His service.

That means I cannot look back to what I was. I must look forward to who I am now in Christ. It is a matter of seeing myself as God sees me and not as others, or even my own conscience, perceive me to be.

The wonder of the good news is that when my life is hidden in Christ, He is my new identity. When God looks at me, He sees not my unrighteousness, but the righteousness of His Son that covers me. I am, indeed, a new creation in Jesus Christ. All of life beyond the point of receiving and accepting what God has done for me in Jesus Christ is a matter of cooperating with God's Spirit to conform my life to my new identity, the image of Christ in me.

It is a matter of crucifying my old self and learning to live into the new man I am in Jesus. This is what Paul meant when he wrote to the Galatian church in Galatians 2:19b-20, "*I [my ego, myself, my old ways of being and behaving] have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*"

I have a Presbyterian pastor friend who owns a T-shirt. The front of the T-shirt contains the following phrase. "God loves you, but I am his favorite."

Roman Catholic author and speaker Brennan Manning came up with a similar slogan. The slogan is, "I am the one Jesus loves." It sounds a little arrogant doesn't it? But he is quoting Scripture. Jesus' closest friend on earth, the disciple named John, is identified in the Gospels as "the one Jesus loved." Manning said, "If John were to be asked, 'What is your primary identity in life?' he would not reply, 'I am a disciple, an apostle, an evangelist, an author of one of the four Gospels,' but rather, 'I am the one Jesus loves.'"

What would it mean, I ask myself, if I too came to the place where I saw my primary identity in life as "the one Jesus loves"? How differently would I view myself at the end of a day? Sociologists have a theory of the looking-glass self: you become what the most important person in your life (wife, father, boss, etc.) thinks you are. How would my life change if I truly believed the Bible's astounding words about God's love for me, if I looked in the mirror and saw what God sees?

Brennan Manning tells the story of an Irish priest who, on a walking tour of a rural parish, sees an old peasant kneeling by the side of the road, praying. Impressed, the priest says to the man, "You must be very close to God." The peasant looks up from his prayers, thinks a moment, and then smiles, "Yes, he's very fond of me." [Brett Blair, [www.eSermons.com](http://www.eSermons.com) Adapted from Phillip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?* [pp. 68-69]]

Who am I? I am the one that Jesus loves. Who are you? You are the one that Jesus loves.

He is very fond of you. When you understand that, trust that, believe that, and live out of that new identity, it will rock your world!

Soli Deo Gloria! To God alone be the glory. Amen.