

“Grace, Gratification and Glory”

Sermon for 14 August 2016

Texts: Exodus 20:17-21; Jeremiah 30:18-31:6; Luke 12:15-21

I am such a blessed man. My life is not monotonous, or boring; the results are not transient or fading in value. Opening God’s Word is an adventure every week. He leads me to some very unexpected, but stimulating places! Let’s begin this week’s adventure with the setting, as found in verse 18:

Exodus 20:17-21 New King James Version (NKJV)

17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.”

18 Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. 19 Then they said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.”

20 And Moses said to the people, “Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin.” 21 So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was.

There is a very serious misstep, or fundamental misunderstanding here. The signs were sent to bring people to a fear of the Lord (**that they would not sin**). They were not sent to “distance” the people from God (**the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near**). The popular panic reaction was a superstitious one. On more sober reflection what the people should have done is to press forward with Moses, press into the presence of God. Why? Because they had “heard God speak directly to them . . . and lived.” It was as if they had access to Eden again! Then God held immediate conversation with Adam and Eve *and now with the whole people of God—and they were still standing!* The commonly voiced desire of man to hear from God, to talk with God, to know His reality and to live in His presence were all there at Sinai. Yes, His majesty, His power: **Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking.** Why would anyone who had God in real time like that want anything different? Why would they want to **stand afar off**? Why would they want a mediator (such as Moses even), or altars, or rites and rituals to stand between them and the God who speaks to His people?! *That’s the misstep! That’s the huge error in judgment!* What an awesome way to spend a fresh dawn, a morning—talking with God *in person, hearing His voice seeing His signs.*

Moses couldn’t have been clearer: **“Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin.”** However, the people ignored him. They did fear and that fear led them into obscurity and error and folly. WHY WOULD THEY? One helpful suggestion is this: they *knew* that they were sinners, and they knew that *the just punishment for sin was death and they knew enough to be ashamed of themselves as sinners.* Therefore this withdrawing is shame-based behavior. Christians, however, knowing that their sins have been forgiven, should do better with sinning. They

are no longer superstitious! They should take their shame rather as an indication that *they have some business to transact with God*: they need to confess their sin, repent of their sin, turn from their sin and ask forgiveness for their sins *so that a right relationship to God might be fully restored*. Christians are to walk by grace and in forgiveness—not fear, not shame, especially not avoidance. But, like God’s people on that fateful day before Sinai, sometimes they misstep. They step back when they should step forward—they should engage with God and not retreat, or disengage. Hopefully, you are not one of them! There is strong encouragement from the Word not to do so:

Jeremiah 30:18-31:6 English Standard Version (ESV)

18 “Thus says the Lord:

**Behold, I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob
and have compassion on his dwellings;**

**the city shall be rebuilt on its mound,
and the palace shall stand where it used to be.**

**19 Out of them shall come songs of thanksgiving,
and the voices of those who celebrate.**

**I will multiply them, and they shall not be few;
I will make them honored, and they shall not be small.**

**20 Their children shall be as they were of old,
and their congregation shall be established before me,
and I will punish all who oppress them.**

**21 Their prince shall be one of themselves;
their ruler shall come out from their midst;
I will make him draw near, and he shall approach me,
for who would dare of himself to approach me?
declares the Lord.**

**22 And you shall be my people,
and I will be your God.”**

**23 Behold the storm of the Lord!
Wrath has gone forth,
a whirling tempest;
it will burst upon the head of the wicked.**

**24 The fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back
until he has executed and accomplished
the intentions of his mind.**

In the latter days you will understand this.

**31:1 “At that time, declares the Lord, I will be the God of all the clans of
Israel, and they shall be my people.”**

2 Thus says the Lord:

**“The people who survived the sword
found grace in the wilderness;
when Israel sought for rest,**

**3 the Lord appeared to him[me-Septuagint] from far away.
I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.**

**4 Again I will build you, and you shall be built,
O virgin Israel!**

Again you shall adorn yourself with tambourines

and shall go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.
**5 Again you shall plant vineyards
 on the mountains of Samaria;
 the planters shall plant
 and shall enjoy the fruit.**
**6 For there shall be a day when watchmen will call
 in the hill country of Ephraim:
 ‘Arise, and let us go up to Zion,
 to the Lord our God.’”**

Do you follow me? We should head towards God *because of His goodwill* towards us. No only do we know that we can hear live from Him and live, we also have His declared intent (again). **I will restore . . . I will multiply . . . I will honor them . . . I will punish all who oppress them . . .** So what is the fly in the ointment? Gratification is, our selfish desire is.

I went to work the Stevens Farm, winter of my junior year and served with my grandmother—she was housekeeping on that farm. And I was apprenticed there to a man named Hayward. They were both astonishingly knowledgeable Yankees; they knew how to run a self-sustaining farm in Maine. In the spring of that year, we had our mean, prize bull get loose from his pen. Unfortunately for me, I was in his pasture of choice. And I saw him coming just in time to leap into a handy apple tree. It was easy. (You’d be amazed what you can do, how quickly you can climb, how suddenly agile you become when a bull is bearing down on you. Fear does motivate.) I observed the bull as he tore up the turf. He was not “friendly.” I called for help. Hayward sized up the situation quickly. He picked up his double-bitted axe and sauntered out into the pasture as casual as a light breeze. He headed for me and that bull. When the bull saw him, he charged Hayward. Hayward stepped adroitly aside, at the last moment, and swung that axe, dropping the bull in his tracks. “Come on down, son,” he said, “we have a critter to dress.” What was that?! It was skill, courage, expertise . . . it was a rescue, and a display of dominion such as I had never witnessed before. Hayward was like the prince described in Jeremiah 31:21: **who dares to approach . . . without fear of annihilation, extinction or death!** Later, Hayward shared, “Despite this being a major loss (the bull was pricey), there’s no place for a dangerous animal on this farm. People’s safety comes first.” And despite it not being slaughtering season, we were able to move the beef through a local butcher.

That bull symbolizes for me what Alexander MacLaren describes as gratification, “a wild boar” temper. That is, gratification/greed in the very heart of man. MacLaren expounds, “But deed and word will not be right unless the heart is right; and the heart will be wrong unless it is purged of the bitter black drop of covetousness.” The bull has to be chained, dropped, or slain. “The desire **to make my neighbor’s goods** mine is the parent of all breaches of neighborly duty even as its converse “love” is the fulfilling of it all; for such a desire implies that I am ruled by selfishness and that I would willingly deprive another of goods *for my own gratification*. Such a temper, like a wild boar among vineyards, will trample down all the rich clusters in order to slake its own thirst.” **Thou shall not covet** teaches men that we serve a God who sees the heart—to Whom “all things are naked and open.” God is greatly concerned for the motivation of our hearts, for the boar within. *We are not mere slaves of our natural desires, passions, urges, or impulses—we know the wisdom of keeping the bull in his pen!* God has put a controlling power (an inner Hayward! the Holy

Spirit! the indwelling Christ) within us by means of which we can keep down passion, check desire, resist impulse and not sin. We can either pen the bull, avoid the pasture, or kill the bull—the same goes for the wild swine.

“The man is lord of himself”—for so God created us—and we are held morally accountable for either getting up the tree, avoiding the pasture, or swinging the axe—depending. However, prior to the situation (prior to the bull escaping, or the impulse ruling), we have this work to do: we must exercise our freewill to mould our feelings, to discipline our passions and impulses, to maintain the fences against sinning—in a word to shape our character solidly and soundly ahead of time! Before temptation, prior to testing! We may observe that careless persons fall into two categories: slackers and slaker’s. The first don’t attend to spiritual development and character development so they are easily picked off by the Tempter. The later bring their sin on; weak impulse control, or frail self-control. ***Well, guess who’s responsible for that state of unpreparedness??!*** The person who covets is like a hornet in a spider’s web because he let covetousness get the upper hand! When covetousness gets the upper hand, all wrong doing is possible (to wit King David, Uriah and Bathsheba!). Covetousness is at first an inward motion of the heart “from which the fountain of original corruption do spring up in the heart, and tickle it with some secret delight though they do not obtain the deliberate consent of the will.” (Matthew Poole, Commentary) “No human eye can see the coveting heart; it is witnessed only by him who possesses it and by Him to whom all things are naked and open.” (as in Luke 12:15-21) And (the tenth commandment) “forbids all wrong desire of having what will gratify ourselves.” (Benson, Commentary) These things instruct us that “thought is not ‘free’” and it is “of importance that Divine Law should distinctly assert a control over men’s thoughts and feelings, since they are the source of all that is evil is word and act (James 4:1-4a) and true godliness consists in bringing **every thought into captivity to Christ** (2 Cor. 10:5).”

I wish to add another farm analogy. Where land is to be cleared, that is, trees and cut an stumped, a most useful tool is the “root extractor.” It has great steel hooks. These are fastened to the roots and by either hydraulic pressure, or the turning of powerful gears, tremendous force is applied to those roots and the tough, tangled, crooked and gnarled roots are ripped out of the earth. A mass of torn earth is left behind, but the roots are gone—there will be no suckers springing up from shorn stumps to revegetate that field! Our unworked hearts are like fields full of trees! The sins here do represent our sinful dispositions—the wicked feelings and tempers that belong to us, *that are ingrown, tangled—they belong to us.* When we are converted, the trees are lopped off; but the stumps and roots remain. Soon the old sins try to reassert themselves, they spring up with new vigor, new growth. Covetousness is among the worst of these root systems! They are largely hidden; immense beneath the ground. In the properly kept heart, the stumps are entirely and completely removed. If they are not, the wildness of the forest will return; with a vengeance even. (This figure was developed by R. Newton, The Bible Illustrator.)

“Murder, adultery, theft and slander, all these spring from a covetous heart. The wrong thought admitted nourishes the wrong desire, which in time, gives birth to the wrong action. Out of the heart are the issues of life, therefore keep thy heart with all diligence!” (G. A. Goodhart, Bible Illustrator). Goodhart continues: “There are two ideals by which men mould their lives. One makes God the center of all things, the other makes self the center. One says ‘Thy will be done,’ the other says ‘My will be done.’ It is in the heart that accepts this latter ideal that covetousness has its home. Everything is regarded in its relation to self,

the neighbor's life and home, property and character, are only so many possible instruments which may thwart or assist the gratification of selfishness." The only remedy, extract the selfishness, or self-centeredness, or idolatry of worldliness which has occupied the heart. Establish and affirm that God is the proper center of the universes—not my desires, wants, or psychological needs!

Displace those powerful affections with a greater one: the love of God. Replace self-will with divine will; seek in everything to do God's will. Divine affection is sufficient to expel all competitors. It has immeasurable expulsive and purifying power!

Love purifies the heart, guards the thoughts and disciplines the desires. This truth is what freed Luther to exclaim, "Love God and do what you please." *No one who loves God misbehaves.* And, again, those who love God keep His commandments because He has shown us that if we do love Him, we will! Let us learn to behave ourselves well.

Because I have been thinking about these things, I want to close with some thoughts on "being a gentleman today." A gentleman is not a suit of clothes, a fashion, a style. No, being a gentleman is not an exterior thing at all but something solid, something known from the inside out. A gentleman is a gentleman from the core of his being. It is his identity, not an accessory, or an add-on. Consideration is not an option with him. Kindness is not an added feature. No, who he is, is manifest in all he says and does.

A true gentleman is a good thing, a valuable and all too rare thing! He doesn't open the door for a lady because it is a convention, or a flimsy gesture, or a come on . . . he doesn't even do it for what she represents. He does it because of who he is. Chivalry is not a put-on; it is a manly disposition. He looks out for others, protects the vulnerable, assist the helpless. He is kind. He can be counted on because integrity and reliability are his middle names. No one doubts that he is there for others—selfless and unflinching in the face of danger, he rises to the occasion. He demonstrates the care, courtesy and consideration we owe one another out of duty to God and as children of our Heavenly Father and siblings of the Son. No questions asked. The elderly and infirm welcome his company.

A true gentleman never covets. What is good and true and pure inform his choices, characterize all his decisions. Call me old fashioned if you wish, but such a man might be mistaken for a saint. The ladies might agree . . . and I guess that would be okay.

Amen