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God's Power in Our Weakness
June 18, 2023

A New 'Gospel' Which Cannot
Save

Sermon Text: 2 Cor 12:7-10

Scripture Reading: Zechariah 4

The theme Scripture for this series of messages on the subject of God's power being perfected in weakness is this:

2Co 12:7-10 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. (8) Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. (9)

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for **my power is made perfect in weakness.**" Therefore **I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.** (10) For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. **For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

The Lord always works through man's weakness – through our weakness. When we are "strong," that is, when we boast about our own abilities in doing the Lord's work, even in contributing to our own salvation, then the Lord withdraws from us. He removes His Spirit and His power and we become like Laodicea:

Rev 3:17 For you say, I am rich, I

have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

Clearly these are lessons we desperately need to learn. *God's power is perfected in weakness.*

1Co 1:26-31 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. (27) But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; (28) God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, (29) so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (30) And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, (31) so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

God's Weak Remnant

A repeated illustration of this fact – that God's power always works through our weakness – is that of His church. Specifically, His church as a *remnant*. As small and weak in comparison to the world's might. Consider:

Joh 6:66-68 After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. (67) So Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" (68) Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,

Mic 4:6-7 In that day, declares the LORD, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away and those whom I have afflicted; (7) **and the lame I will make the remnant**, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion from this time forth and forevermore.

Rom 9:27-29 And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as

the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, (28) for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.” (29) And as Isaiah predicted, “If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.”

Rom 11:2-6 God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? (3) “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.” (4) But what is God's reply to him? **“I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”** (5) **So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.** (6) But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

2Ti 4:10-11 For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to

Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. (11) Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.

2Ti 4:16-17 At my first defense **no one came to stand by me**, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! (17) But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.

And of course we could go on:

Deu 7:7 It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples,

Mat 7:14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

Luk 12:32 “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

God's power is perfected in

weakness. The Lord chooses the weak things through whom to work His power. When we are weak, which we are, then we are strong. But when we sin and boast and praise ourselves and brag about our own power, Jesus leaves.

The New “Gospel” that Permits Man to Boast

The gospel of Jesus Christ is foolishness to the world. It is the wisdom of God, but the world despises the message of the Cross.

1Co 1:21-23 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. (22) For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, (23) but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,

As I mentioned last Sunday, the history of this church evidences the sin of pride. Some of you were present when a man who enjoyed power here for many years before

any of us came, raged right here on this pulpit. I can still here his incredibly hostile and arrogant words, “*he doesn’t even give us credit for building this building!*” Remember? It’s been nearly 30 years ago. That man has since departed this life. Another man of the same arrogant spirit boasted to me. He said “Our church has a reputation in town! Everyone knows we are a fine family church!”

But I tell this story because it is so characteristic of the sin which is in so many churches and which is *always a temptation to us*. The Lord has done and is doing some powerful things through this little church, *but it is the Lord who is doing it, not us*. There must never be any boasting. At some point in the history of this church, man’s sinful pride crept in until it dominated everything.

What happens then when Jesus leaves? Well, you end up with this sort of thing:

Isa 1:11-15 “What to me is the

multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. (12) “When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? (13) Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations— I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. (14) Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. (15) When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

A local church can be for all appearances a “happening place.” Lots of people. Activities abounding. An apparently vibrant preaching ministry. The whole package. And yet, despite these externals, it so often is a corpse. An entity with no Spirit, because Jesus

has left. And why did He leave? Because of this:

Isa 42:8 I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.

We must always, always, always be on guard against the craving of our sinful flesh to take the glory for ourselves, and most often the way we go about this is to fashion false gods. Many local churches are idol temples filled with graven images. In practice, they end up denying this:

Isa 45:22-24 “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. (23) By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.’ (24) “Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; to him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him.

The boastful pride of man embraces what J.I. Packer called, *the new gospel*. He did so in an introductory essay which he wrote for the Banner of Truth publication of John Owen's powerful work, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, originally published in 1684. Owen's purpose was to demonstrate that the Arminian doctrine of *Universal Atonement* was a false, damaging, doctrine. He maintained, as we do, and as Jesus Himself taught (see John 17) that His atoning word of redemption on the Cross was specifically for His elect, that He actually effected redemption for His people, not for universal humanity. This is what the "L" maintains in the mnemonic, TULIP.

The "new gospel" is man's creation. Its purpose is to permit man to boast, to claim that he contributes to his salvation. And wherever the contagion of sinful pride creeps in, you can be sure that the gospel itself is going to be twisted so that it is no gospel at all. Oh yes, it has results! Man's sinful flesh embraces it, glories in it, boasts in it, and points to the

crowds of people that it is "winning for Christ." But it is a straw house that such a gospel creates.

Listen to Packer explain. These are excerpts from his essay and you can read the entirety by just plugging his name and the title of Owen's book in on the internet:

The Death of Death in the Death of Christ is a polemical work, designed to show, among other things, that the doctrine of universal redemption is unscriptural and destructive of the gospel. There are many, therefore, to whom it is not likely to be of interest. Those who see no need for doctrinal exactness and have no time for theological debates which show up divisions between so-called evangelicals may well regret its reappearance. Some may find the very sound of Owen's thesis so shocking that they will refuse to read his book at all; so passionate a thing is prejudice, and so proud are we of our theological shibboleths. But it is hoped that this reprint will find itself readers of a different spirit.

Without realising it, we have during the past century bartered that gospel for a substitute product which, though it looks similar enough in points of detail, is as a whole a decidedly different thing. Hence our troubles; for the substitute product does not answer the ends for which the authentic gospel has in past days proved itself so mighty.

The new gospel conspicuously fails to produce deep reverence, deep repentance, deep humility, a spirit of worship, a concern for the church. Why? We would suggest that the reason lies in its own character and content. It fails to make men God-centered in their thoughts and God-fearing in their hearts because this isn't primarily what it is trying to do. One way of stating the difference between it and the old gospel is to say that it is too exclusively concerned to be "helpful" to man—to bring peace, comfort, happiness, satisfaction—and too little concerned to glorify God. The old gospel was "helpful," too—more so, indeed, than is the new—but (so to speak) incidentally, for its first concern was always to give glory to God. It

was always and essentially a proclamation of Divine sovereignty in mercy and judgment, a summons to bow down and worship the mighty Lord on whom man depends for all good, both in nature and in grace. Its center of reference was unambiguously God. But in the new gospel, the center of reference is man. This is just to say that the old gospel was religious in a way that the new gospel is not. Whereas the chief aim of the old was to teach men to worship God, the concern of the new seems limited to making them feel better. The subject of the old gospel was God and his ways with men; the subject of the new is man and the help God gives him. There is a world of difference. The whole perspective and emphasis of gospel preaching has changed.

From this change of interest has sprung a change of content, for the new gospel has in effect reformulated the biblical message in the supposed interests of "helpfulness." Accordingly, the themes of man's natural inability to believe, of God's free election being the ultimate cause of salvation, and of Christ dying

specifically for his sheep, are not preached. These doctrines, it would be said, are not “helpful”; they would drive sinners to despair, by suggesting to them that it is not in their own power to be saved through Christ. (The possibility that such despair might be salutary is not considered; it is taken for granted that it cannot be, because it is so shattering to our self-esteem.) However this may be (and we shall say more about it later), the result of these omissions is that part of the biblical gospel is now preached as if it were the whole of that gospel; and a half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth. Thus, we appeal to men as if they all had the ability to receive Christ at any time; we speak of his redeeming work as if he had done no more by dying than make it possible for us to save ourselves by believing; we speak of God’s love as if it were no more than a general willingness to receive any who will turn and trust; and we depict the Father and the Son, not as sovereignly active in drawing sinners to themselves, but as waiting in quiet impotence “at the door of our

hearts” for us to let them in. It is undeniable that this is how we preach; perhaps this is what we really believe.

But it needs to be said with emphasis that this set of twisted half-truths is something other than the biblical gospel. The Bible is against us when we preach in this way; and the fact that such preaching has become almost standard practice among us only shows how urgent it is that we should review this matter. To recover the old, authentic, biblical gospel, and to bring our preaching and practice back into line with it, is perhaps our most pressing present need. And it is at this point that Owen’s treatise on redemption can give us help.

the “five points of Calvinism,” so-called, are simply the Calvinistic answer to a five-point manifesto (the Remonstrance) put out by certain “Belgic semi-Pelagians” in the early 17th century. The theology which it contained (known to history as Arminianism) stemmed from two philosophical principles: first, that divine sovereignty is not compatible with

human freedom, nor therefore with human responsibility; second, that ability limits obligation. (The charge of semi-Pelagianism was thus fully justified.) From these principles, the Arminians drew two deductions: first that since the Bible regards faith as a free and responsible human act, it cannot be caused by God, but is exercised independently of him; second, that since the Bible regards faith as obligatory on the part of all who hear the gospel, ability to believe must be universal. Hence, they maintained, Scripture must be interpreted as teaching the following positions:

1. Man is never so completely corrupted by sin that he cannot savingly believe the gospel when it is put before him.
2. Nor is he ever so completely controlled by God that he cannot reject it.
3. God's election of those who shall be saved is prompted by his foreseeing that they will of their own accord believe.
4. Christ's death did not ensure the salvation of anyone, for it

did not secure the gift of faith to anyone (there is no such gift); what it did was rather to create a possibility of salvation for everyone if they believe.

5. It rests with believers to keep themselves in a state of grace by keeping up their faith; those who fail here fall away and are lost.

Thus, Arminianism made man's salvation depend ultimately on man himself, saving faith being viewed throughout as man's own work and, because his own, not God's in him.

The Synod of Dort was convened in 1618 to pronounce on this theology, and the "five points of Calvinism" represent its counter-affirmations. They stem from a very different principle—the biblical principle that "salvation is of the Lord"; and they may be summarized thus:

1. Fallen man in his natural state lacks all power to believe the gospel, just as he

lacks all power to believe the law, despite all external inducements that may be extended to him.

2. God's election is a free, sovereign, unconditional choice of sinners, as sinners, to be redeemed by Christ, given faith and brought to glory.
3. The redeeming work of Christ had as its end and goal the salvation of the elect.
4. The work of the Holy Spirit in bringing men to faith never fails to achieve its object.
5. Believers are kept in faith and grace by the unconquerable power of God till they come to glory.

These five points are conveniently denoted by the mnemonic TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Preservation of the saints.

Now, here are two coherent interpretations of the biblical gospel, which stand in evident opposition to each other. The difference between them is not

primarily one of emphasis, but of content. One proclaims a God who saves; the other speaks of a God who enables man to save himself. One view presents the three great acts of the Holy Trinity for the recovering of lost mankind—election by the Father, redemption by the Son, calling by the Spirit—as directed towards the same persons, and as securing their salvation infallibly. The other view gives each act a different reference (the objects of redemption being all mankind, of calling, those who hear the gospel, and of election, those hearers who respond), and denies that any man's salvation is secured by any of them. The two theologies thus conceive the plan of salvation in quite different terms. One makes salvation depend on the work of God, the other on a work of man; one regards faith as part of God's gift of salvation, the other as man's own contribution to salvation; one gives all the glory of saving believers to God, the other divides the praise between God, who, so to speak, built the machinery of salvation, and man, who by believing operated it. Plainly, these differences are important, and the

permanent value of the “five points,” as a summary of Calvinism, is that they make clear the points at which, and the extent to which, these two conceptions are at variance.

Where the Arminian, therefore, will be content to say: “I decided for Christ,” “I made up my mind to be a Christian,” the Calvinist will wish to speak of his conversion in more theological fashion, to make plain whose work it really was:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature’s
night:

Thine eye diffused a quickening
ray;

I woke; the dungeon flamed with
light;

My chains fell off: my heart was
free:

I rose, went forth, and followed
thee.

Clearly, these two notions of
internal grace are sharply
opposed to each other.

Now, the Calvinist contends that
the Arminian idea of election,
redemption, and calling as acts of

God which do not save cuts at the
very heart of their biblical
meaning; that to say in the
Arminian sense that God elects
believers, and Christ died for all
men, and the Spirit quickens those
who receive the word, is really to
say that in the biblical sense God
elects nobody, and Christ died for
nobody, and the Spirit quickens
nobody. The matter at issue in this
controversy, therefore, is the
meaning to be given to these
biblical terms, and to some others
which are also soteriologically
significant, such as the love of God,
the covenant of grace, and the verb
“save” itself, with its synonyms.
Arminians gloss them all in terms
of the principle that salvation does
not directly depend on any decree
or act of God, but on man’s
independent activity in believing.
Calvinists maintain that this
principle is itself unscriptural and
irreligious and that such glossing
demonstrably perverts the sense
of Scripture and undermines the
gospel at every point where it is
practiced. This, and nothing less
than this, is what the Arminian
controversy is about.

Arminianism is “natural” in one sense, in that it represents a characteristic perversion of biblical teaching by the fallen mind of man, who even in salvation cannot bear to renounce the delusion of being master of his fate and captain of his soul. This perversion appeared before in the Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism of the Patristic period and the later Scholasticism, and has recurred since the seventeenth century both in Roman theology and, among Protestants, in various types of rationalistic liberalism and modern Evangelical teaching; and no doubt it will always be with us. As long as the fallen human mind is what it is, the Arminian way of thinking will continue to be a natural type of mistake.

The pitiable Savior and the pathetic God of modern pulpits are unknown to the old gospel. The old gospel tells men that they need God, but not that God needs them (a modern falsehood); it does not exhort them to pity Christ, but announces that Christ has pitied them, though pity was the last thing they deserved. It never loses sight of the Divine majesty and

sovereign power of the Christ whom it proclaims but rejects flatly all representations of him which would obscure his free omnipotence.

Do you see it? I have no doubt at all that this was at the root of the prideful sin that crept into this church and which dominates so much of the doctrine which perhaps even the majority of evangelicals cling to.

But how is this weakness? How does this new “gospel” have any power to save if in fact God’s power is perfected in weakness, and if in fact it is only when WE are weak that we are strong? Our enemy is subtle and deceitful. He is the origin of this new gospel by which he leads most onto Broadway which leads to destruction.

May the Lord give us protection and wisdom by His powerful Spirit working in us, and may we always give all glory to Him, never touching it for ourselves, and may

He give us all great encouragement as we see our own weakness and the weakness of this church, to see that He is God who chooses the weak, foolish things to display His power.