

WCC CHRISTMAS - 03/12/2023 - "Grace and Righteousness"

READINGS

John 1:16-18, Matthew 1:18-25

INTRODUCTION

- Hi its a great joy to be here in front of you lovely people!
- My lovely godly father-in-law Vernon, was a Black Country man with an appropriate accent.
- He was an engineer and when he said grease it sounded like grace, and with a slight emphasis, wheels sounded like worlds so one of his favourite sayings was a profound pun "grace makes the worlds go round"
- The title for my sermon is "Grace and Righteousness"
- and it is intended to summarise that all righteousness comes from God through His grace - whether that is attributed, acknowledged, or appreciated or not.
- The sermon will be in two parts: Grace based on John 1/16-18 and Righteousness based on the account of Joseph in Matt 1/18-25.

PRAY

PART ONE - GRACE

- Grace first - through our reading in John 1/16-18 read by Pat...
 - Didn't she do well! Am i not a privileged man!
 - Grace - meaning the unmerited compassion, saving favour and love of God
 - God is totally gracious in His character, which is expressed by The Holy Spirit and so clearly evident in the Lord Jesus Christ and supremely in His sacrificial death on our behalf, bearing God's wrath against our sins upon Himself (1 John 2/2 TLB).
 - When I was a lad there were two phrases I want to allude to explain grace a bit:
1. God's primary grace summed up in John 3/16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. And also 1 John 3/1a How great is the love The Father has lavished on us that we should be called the children of God and that is what we are!
 - This primary grace can only be received and lived under by humble faith.
 - Faith itself a gracious gift of God!

2. There was also what was called secondary grace - described succinctly by Christ when talking about our father God as The Most High - "He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked."
 - This kindness is expressed in 2 main ways:
 - a) All life is created, provided for and sustained by God - illustrated by the statement that "He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." (Matt 5/45)
 - b) Father puts in all humans something of His character - sadly distorted and abused by our sinful nature and generally unacknowledged - illustrated by these 3 biblical statements: "In His own image He created them" (Gen 1/27), "all have fallen short of His glory" (Rom 3/23), "You foolish people who have no understanding, who have eyes but do not discern, who have ears but do not perceive" (Jer 5/21 ESV)
 - Secondary grace does not make the changes or give the outcomes of primary grace because it depends on relationship not simple existence.
 - We can start to see something of the characteristics of primary grace from John's statements about Jesus in our reading ...
 - The phrase - talking about those who are in relationship with God "For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." just blows me away!
 - There are a number of explanations as to what grace upon grace means, but this is the main one I'm presenting to you...
 - It literally means that grace replaces grace or as the NIV puts it "grace in place of grace". The notion is thus of an inexhaustible supply of grace and with it an increase or newness with each supply.
 - James tells us that there is no variation or shadow due to change in the nature of God.
 - That, in a world of continuous search for newness, more, or improvement perhaps seems a bit drab.
 - That is because nothing on earth is perfection, or eternal completion, and we cannot actually conceive of it.
 - We are finite.
 - The thing about God is that He is infinitely complete and perfect! He cannot improve on Himself!
 - Grace upon grace encapsulates this truth - there will always be for us - MORE!
 - There is another view, which despite what I said earlier, I will put forward...
 - it lies in the other parts of the reading:
 - "first came the Law through Moses" which is according to Paul: holy, spiritual and good - it is of grace therefore.
 - second then "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" - as John puts it in v14 "full of grace AND truth"
 - additional grace, or grace upon grace and truth

- third Jesus coming - this phrase will later lead into our second part on God-righteousness coming through relationship with Jesus
- It is through this the incarnation, Immanuel, God with us, Christmas - grace upon grace squared, we can see the unseeable - Almighty God!
- As John puts it in verse 18... "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known."
- Then more grace upon grace - through Jesus' life, death and resurrection we have the means of an everlasting personal relationship with this triune God...
- AND the working of His Holy Spirit to make us into His image by adoption into His Family.
- AND Him giving and attributing His perfect God-righteousness to us- grace upon grace upon grace upon grace!
- So onto one account of the Christmas story...

PART TWO - RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

- Who heard Keith's talk on Know, Grow and Show? Brilliant wasn't it? For me the key point was... pleasing Father with our lives - illustrating the fruit of the Holy Spirit - or demonstrating God's character.
- Well God's righteousness does that!
- We will be looking at righteousness now through our reading in Matt 1/18-25...
- How many of you would say you were righteous?
- The accounts of Joseph are simple - he is fully intent on obeying God, He listens and immediately and fully obeys when God speaks to him!
- Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man!
- Righteous has two meanings in the Bible...

DEFINITION ONE

- Through the First or Old testament until Christ's resurrection "righteous" means earnestly seeking to align with the purposes and commands of God with all the heart. It does NOT mean without fault, or perfect or fully demonstrating the righteousness of God.
- Joseph was a righteous man, because he is described as such, and he fits the pre-Christ's resurrection definition of righteous.

DEFINITION TWO

- The holy morally perfect character of God - the righteousness of God.
- Before we look a bit at Joseph and his righteous character I want to look at the problem for many Christians concerning righteousness.

- After Christ's resurrection and the completion of His sacrificial work of salvation - an amazing thing has happened! Through the grace upon grace process John spoke of.
- We can now by faith in Christ, and His work of salvation, be partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1/4), and in Christ be the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5/21)!
- God-righteousness - a phrase I think I've invented for this sermon, that is, possessing the characteristic of the righteousness of God Himself by gracious attribution!
- Possibly many Christians ask a question like this...

HOW COME WE STILL SIN IF WE HAVE GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS?

- The quality of God-righteousness sadly does not prevent the possibility of sinning.
- Our sin as Christians is down to us, not a lack of Father's grace or weakness in the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice or the work of the Spirit.
- There are three opponents to God-righteousness which if our humble faith is not continually exercised, will mean that we will be deceived/tempted into sin by:
 - o "The World", that is the Satanically controlled dark earth systems/influences,
 - o our "bodies of sin" that is the decaying and corrupt bodies we live in,
 - o or Satan's temptation/deceit.
- In brief we sin because we do not continuously, humbly, exercise faith and rely wholly upon God's perfect gracious provision and righteousness.
- Grace gives us access to this biblical truth "Sin shall not have dominion over you".
- When we do sin however, grace upon grace provides all the grace necessary in Jesus to repent of and "confess our sins" and grace through Christ will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1/9) - for the whole of our lives on earth!
- Following on the grace upon grace theme... "and not only our sins, but the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2/2) - for those who put their faith in God's grace and righteousness!
- Now a further look at Joseph...

JOSEPH - A RIGHTEOUS MAN

- We are going to look at a unique human
- He was someone who taught Jesus!
- We know this not because the Bible specifically states that but because
- firstly we have seen that Joseph was a righteous man, who was a Hebrew in the nation of Israel. Matthew's earlier genealogy makes that clear.
- Secondly every parent in Israel had three times been given by God (Deut 4/10, 6/7, 11/19) the command to "teach their children".
- What were they to teach them?..
- Primarily to fear God, and also to obey all the statutes and commandments of God.

- Joseph was a righteous Hebrew and we know he was in Jesus' life until Jesus was at least twelve years old.
- We are told - God in Christ who emptied himself or made himself nothing when he took on the human frame (Phil 2/7). Because Jesus emptied Himself...
- Joseph would have taught Jesus about The Law.
- Joseph probably helped to teach Jesus to speak, to walk and maybe even to be a carpenter...

JOSEPH'S RIGHTEOUS LIFE-CHANGING DECISIONS

- By reading through chapter one to two, you would see that Joseph made FOUR life changing decisions in first few months and early years from Jesus' conception - TOTALLY on the basis of dreams of an angel!

WHAT A RIGHTEOUS MAN JOSEPH WAS!

- There were actually 5 life changing decisions he made!
- Joseph's first decision in Matthew's account was simply as a lovely righteous person wanting to obey the Law, but not shame Mary - without apparent input from God at that point,
- The decision was made after thinking or consideration.
- He did not want to shame Mary or worse have her put to death as the Law required, as she was clearly having a child by someone else.
- He was going to divorce her quietly. That would be a life changing event.
- He clearly loved her and there would be - no more Mary in his life!
- Here is a curious fact concerning Joseph...
- Although I searched diligently - like the "wise men" looking for the child Jesus, - even when they have lost the 12 year old messiah for at least 4 days, I could find no account of Joseph praying!

AN INTERESTING POSSIBLE CONCLUSION?

- We could conclude from a biblical perspective and specifically from the account of Joseph - when righteous people think, God considers it as prayer and He responds as such.
- Also, we could conclude that if we are thinking in a God-righteous way, our decisions will be fine with God, unless He specifically says something different.
- If anybody would like to discuss this last point with me afterwards, I will explain further my biblical reasons for proposing this possible conclusion.
- We can in the account, see that straight after Joseph had come to this decision on his own to divorce Mary, he had his first dream from God - because it was an angel of the Lord
- It is implicit in His actions, that Joseph knew it was God speaking to him.
- Note further, that there is no sense of rebuke in the angel's message about Joseph's decision - it was a righteous decision, made in love of Mary and God, and in light of the law.

JOSEPH'S FOUR DREAM BASED LIFE-CHANGING DECISIONS

Decision 1

- Let us now consider Joseph's response when God first spoke to Joseph through the dream angel message to him.
- God, who had made Mary pregnant, was telling Joseph was to marry Mary - rather than divorce her, - and when the child was born, to call the child - Jesus - "Saviour" or literally "to deliver" or "rescue".
- Notice earlier, Joseph spent time thinking before deciding to divorce Mary quietly - without her being stoned to death.
- Joseph if complying with God's command would be choosing take on all the behind-the-back gossip.
- and possible face to face criticism for what would be assumed to be his pre-marriage sex, with his betrothed Mary.
- Matthew quite clearly states that Joseph did not have sex with Mary until after Jesus was born.
- In the context of this first dream sponsored, life changing decision, Joseph was doing three things: thinking righteously, listening to God and completely, and immediately HE GOT UP - obeying God!
- He was for sure a righteous man!
- Particularly as this is how he responds each time God speaks to him - through a dream!
- Not sure I would make such momentous decisions on the basis of a dream!

Decision 2

Now when they (the wise men) had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed Matt2/13-14

- Do you think Joseph thought about this decision?
- I do because of his first considered decision.
- We are told that "All Jerusalem was disturbed" - about the implications of the wise men's arrival looking for a new king.
- They knew what a murderous man Herod was.
- They knew how the Romans might react.
- Bethlehem was not far from Jerusalem - oh yes - and Joseph had been visited by the wise men!
- He knew of Herod, he knew of the Romans.
- He now knew that Herod was after them!

- His going in that night may not simply have been obedience, but real concern for his family and himself, the dream was massively urgent
- He was going to leave: his home, his business as a carpenter, and any family or friends he had - it clearly states he simply took the mother and child.
- in the middle of the night!
- on an at least a 12 hour journey!
- I am sure Joseph was thinking/considering - very quickly!
- We know too that he listened and immediately GOT UP and obeyed.

Decision 3 & 4

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene (Matt 2/20-23).

- We can tell Joseph was thinking in the fourth scenario because it says he was "afraid"
- Note the consequent word from God about it in the final dream.
- Joseph's listening & hearing is by implication in the immediate obedient responses.
- My final point about Joseph is that in Joseph's righteous obedience, he is literally bringing on the Kingdom of God and fulfilling prophecies!
- Why would a similar process not also be true for all God-righteous believers?
- What we also know is that Joseph's "adopted" son Jesus, exactly, and fully righteously thought, listened, and obeyed totally and promptly - because as he said, "I only do what the Father is doing" (John 5/19)
- He did it all through His life on earth, and as there is no shadow of turning in God (James 1/17) He will do so through eternity!
- Jesus did so - that all people on the earth might be able make God-righteous decisions by thinking righteously, listening and promptly obeying.
- And consequently have life changing experiences too, which contribute to the coming Kingdom!