

The Wednesday Word, Dec. 31, 2008: The Gospel and our Relationship with God, Part 1

It was a beautiful sunny morning in Las Vegas, NV. The surrounding desert mountains glowed with their distinctive splash of southwestern colors. I was driving in my car, at peace with God and man, listening to Christian radio where the subjects under discussion were missions and evangelism. The man being interviewed, it seems, ran a program where they took summer missionaries to Europe and other parts of the planet. As I listened, he said, "If there are any high school kids out there who want to go as Summer Missionaries to Europe and tell the folks over there about your relationship with God then contact us at this address."

I was shocked. I don't wear false teeth, but if I had done they would have dropped out of my mouth! The scripture instantly came to mind, "Go ye into all the world and tell them about your relationship with God"! (I think it's found somewhere in the Book of Hezekiah!) But before my blood pressure could calm itself, they then interviewed some kid who had made the trip the previous year. Let's call him Bret! Why Bret? Why not, that was his name! Bret it seems was filled with the 'Joie de vie' and assured us that the high point of his life (to date) was to have been able to have traveled overseas last summer to tell the folks in distant lands about how they could be saved by having a relationship with God.

Let's fast forward a few months. I'm now sitting on an airplane in Nashville TN. We are waiting to take off, but somehow there is a delay. A teenage girl of about 17 or 18 has taken the seat beside me. Having exchanged civilities she asked, "What kind of an accent do you have? Is it Scottish?" I explained it was Irish. "Oh cool" she said, "I've been in Scotland, but I never made it to Ireland." "What were you doing in Scotland?" "I was there with my Church. My dad's a pastor and we were there on a missions trip." "So are you a Christian?" "Oh yes, very much so!" she replied "That's really interesting. May I ask you a question?" "Sure." "In your religion, how do people get to Heaven?" "You get to Heaven by having a relationship with God." She smiled. "Does it say that in the Bible?" "Oh yes that's what the Bible says." "That's great! Where does it say that?"

There was a pause after which she produced a Bible from her bag and began flicking through the pages. She looked puzzled, then said,

"I'm not sure where it says it, but it's in here all the same."

At that moment, quick as a flash, she re-opened her purse, took out her cell phone and called her Mum.

"Mum. I'm on the plane, it's been delayed and a gentleman beside me is interested in finding out where in the Bible it talks about going to Heaven because we have a relationship with God."

She began furiously taking notes, then hung up.

“That was my mum, she told me to show you John 3:16.”

“What does that say?”

“It says,” and she pointed to the text, “That God loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes on Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

“That’s a great scripture! May I read it?”

“Sure” she said as she handed me her Bible

I examined the text then said, “ This is a beautiful verse, but I don’t see anything in there about having a relationship with God giving you eternal life.”

“Mmmmh! I suppose it doesn’t actually say that.”

She looked at her notes.

“Well then, there is Acts 16:31, “Believe on the lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.”

“That’s another wonderful scripture,” I said, "but where, in the verse, does it say that having a relationship with God takes you to Heaven?”

She then offered several more salvation scriptures and each time I agreed with the truth offered, but pointed out that these verses, like the others, said nothing about being saved by our relationship with God.

By this stage she was puzzled. I could have gone on with the game, but didn’t. I then produced my Bible and for the next hour or so taught her some ‘Gospel Truth.’

But isn’t it right to have a relationship with God? Yes indeed! We His people, have the Spirit of adoption causing us to relate so closely with the Father that we can call Him ‘Dad’ (Romans 8:15). In reality, as we are bathed in the gospel our relationship with God will flourish. Under the truth of the gracious, finished, redemptive acts of Christ we will be released to pursue loving God with all that we have. But our relationship with God, vibrant as it may be, can never be seen as the ground and foundation of our acceptance with Him. In fact the opposite is true. Our relationship comes as a result of having been put right with God through Jesus Christ alone, so this relationship can, therefore, in no way put us into right standing with our Creator.

Let’s face it; our daily relationship with God is no foundation for acceptance with Him. If we are honest, we will have to admit that no matter how pulsating our relationship with God is, at times it is often experimentally fractured because of our failures. Our relationship with God should, therefore, neither be compared to nor confused with the perfect work of God in Christ. Our relationship with God is not the gospel! Jesus Christ is our gospel! Since our relationship with God is not the gospel it is not, therefore, the power of God unto salvation. So why go and preach about

our flawed and inferior relationship with God when we could tell people about Christ and His perfect relationship with the Father on our behalf?

I cringe when I think of all the resources being wasted sending kids overseas to tell people about their relationship with God. By all means send out summer missionaries ----it's a wonderful idea--but in the name of all that's good, teach them the gospel before you unleash them on an unsuspecting public. The sad thing is that many of the listeners in the foreign lands will not have heard the gospel before the arrival of the summer missionaries and will still not have heard it by the time the summer missionaries leave.

One of the great benefits of the gospel is reconciliation between God and sinners and it's out of this reconciliation that relationship flows. However, it's a false gospel that substitutes our relationship with God for the gospel truths of Christ crucified and justification by grace through faith. When our kids go on summer missions, the people in Scotland, Ireland and everywhere else need to hear the Good News---that is--- that in spite of all the bad news, in spite of all the sin and rebellion and ill-will of man towards God, God in His mercy, grace and righteousness broke into time and space in the person of His Son, became one of us and bore the penalty for our sin in His own body on the cross. The folks overseas need to hear that Christ Jesus has reconciled His people unto God by shedding His own blood. They need to know that the Lord Jesus Christ became a perfect sacrifice for sin and settled everything that was wrong between the sinner and God.

Furthermore, they need to know that salvation is finished and accomplished, not because of our believing it or by having nice feelings towards God, but because our salvation was purchased by the blood of Christ and it is this blood itself which God so highly esteems. The summer missionaries need to declare that without adding anything to the blood of Jesus, God righteously forgives sin and accepts the sinner as perfectly righteous in Christ.

The summer missionaries need to be clear that all charges against us have been dropped and we now, by faith alone, embrace this finished redemption. Now, because of that which has been done for us in the gospel, we can have a wonderful fellowship and relationship with our Heavenly Father. However, we cannot overstress that our relationship with God does not open the door to heaven. Rather, it is only because Jesus has opened Heaven's door that we now may now have a relationship with God.

And that's the Gospel Truth