

LOVED WITH AN EVERLASTING LOVE

Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, we have seen two truths in action over and over again.

- God is holy and judges all men and women by His holiness.
- Men and women are sinners and cannot change their own nature.

Every time Jesus gives a positive moral teaching, our hearts should sink a little in the knowledge that we are not able to meet God's standard of holiness.

Every time Jesus denounces unbelievers, our hearts should sink a little in the knowledge that we really aren't all that different.

In Matthew 23, Jesus pronounced a series of judgments on the scribes and Pharisees. No one listening to Him that day should have said, "What a relief! I'm not a scribe or a Pharisee!" All these judgments are warnings to every man and woman.

As I've pointed out each week, Jesus doesn't give positive alternatives in Matthew 23. Nevertheless, the Scripture has spoken to us, and we have been able to see what godly people would do. For instance, He began in Matthew 23:13 by saying that the scribes and the Pharisees hinder people from coming to Christ. We talked about how we could encourage people to trust Jesus.

But we come to a judgment this morning where there is no positive alternative to follow.

Jesus says,

**27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
For you are like whitewashed tombs**

which on the **outside** appear beautiful,
 but **inside** they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.
28 In this way, you also **outwardly appear** righteous to men,
 but **inwardly** you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”
 (Matthew 23:27–28, 2022 LSB)

Their problems were rooted in spiritual death. There is no positive alternative that we can put into practice. No one can simply stop being dead.

Here's our plan this morning.

First, we will take a few minutes to understand the figure of speech that Jesus uses.

Second, I will attempt to define what it means for a person to be spiritually dead.

And lastly, we will consider how God has answered our spiritual death by His everlasting love.

WHITEWASHED TOMBS

Numbers 19:16 says,

16 Also, anyone who in the open field touches
 one who has been slain with a sword
 or who has died naturally,
 or a human bone
 or a grave,
 shall be unclean for seven days.
 (Numbers 19:16, 2022 LSB)

Those who touched corpses or graves were ritually unclean for a week and could not enter the Temple to worship, bring a sacrifice, or pray.

Here's the situation. Hundreds of thousands would stream into Jerusalem for the major feasts. The majority would camp in the surrounding countryside. And surrounding Jerusalem, there were more than 800 tombs in a three-mile radius.

How do you protect people from accidentally defiling themselves on a grave? The answer was to whitewash the tombs so that they stood out clearly. This was done after the early rains each spring, beginning a month before Passover. Those brilliant white tombs and graves stood out clearly, especially on the green hillsides during Passover, giving people plenty of opportunity to avoid ritual defilement.

THE SCRIBES AND THE PHARISEES

This is the picture that Jesus uses of the scribes and Pharisees. On the outside, they appeared impressive and beautiful, but on the inside, they were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness, just as tombs are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.

The scribes and Pharisees stood out wherever they went. They dressed and behaved in ways designed to attract attention and impress onlookers. And for the most part, it worked. People were impressed and showed them tremendous respect.

Jesus alone knew what was really on the inside: the spiritual equivalent of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Jesus alone had the ability, if I may put it this way, to "roll away the stone" as it were, and reveal what was actually inside of them.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE SPIRITUALLY DEAD

What does it mean to be spiritually dead?

Foundationally, it means to be permanently severed from the life of God. Yahweh told Adam in the garden that sin would result in death. Adam sinned, and Adam died, and all who are in Adam died with him.

We are so oriented to the physical world in which we live that physical death is the big deal. But biblically, physical death is just a picture of the real death that Adam died: spiritual death. Adam was severed from the life of God that he had known. And so all of Adam's descendants – including Eve, though she was already living, were severed from the life of God as well.

Adam's physical death took more than 900 years. Adam's spiritual death happened in the blink of an eye, in the time it takes to cut a thread. He had only known the life of God. Then that life was gone. Only an impassable chasm remained, a massive void between himself and God, filled with guilt and rebellion; with hypocrisy and lawlessness, as Jesus says.

As I pondered this truth this week, I thought of magnets. Magnets have two poles, North and South. The opposite poles actively attract one another. The same poles actively repel one another.

In Adam's case, as long as he was rightly oriented to God, he was actively attracted to Him. Yahweh was the Creator; Adam was the creature. Yahweh was the potter; Adam was the vessel. Yahweh was the giver of life; Adam was the recipient of life. Yahweh was the Lawgiver; Adam was the Lawkeeper. As long as Adam remained properly oriented to God, properly related to God, there was a wonderful attractive force that drew Adam to God.

But the moment Adam sinned, he flipped his own orientation to God. Adam decided to become his own Lawgiver. Adam decided that he could do without the life of God. And suddenly, God repelled him. We actually see this in the garden:

8 Then they heard the sound of Yahweh God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of Yahweh God in the midst of the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:8, 2022 LSB)

Adam and Eve were repelled by the presence of God. They feared Him. They actively avoided Him.

So, what does it mean to be spiritually dead? It means to be permanently severed from the life of God. That separation creates some inevitable results. For instance,

- People are born already hostile to God and His Word (Romans 8:7-8).
- They cannot understand spiritual things (First Corinthians 2:14) because their thinking is futile, their minds are ignorant, and their hearts are hard (Ephesians 4:17-18).
- They cannot help but suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18).
- They are so convinced of their own invincible wisdom that they worship virtually anything except the One True God (Romans 1:22-23).
- And tragically, they are blind to the hope of the Gospel and the glory of Jesus Christ (Second Corinthians 4:4).
- In fact, the sweet, precious message of the Gospel smells like death to them, repulsive and vile (Second Corinthians 2:15).
- They hate the central truth – the cross of Jesus Christ – that leads to salvation (Second Thessalonians 2:10).

This is what it means to be spiritually dead. This is why, apart from the intervening work of the Spirit of God, we cannot understand the state of our own hearts. It is why, apart from the Spirit of God, we cannot comprehend the need for the Gospel. It is why, apart from the Spirit of God, evangelism fails every single time.

THE INABILITY OF THE SPIRITUALLY DEAD

You see, those who are spiritually dead are not just unwilling to please God; they are unable to please God. It's not that they don't respond at all to Him or the Gospel; it's that they can only respond with hostility to the Creator and His love.

One of the most tragic funerals I've ever conducted was for a young man in his early 20s. He had been married just a few months. One morning his young wife woke up early to go run. She leaned over to kiss him goodbye, and he was cold. It turns out that he had a congenital heart defect, and shortly after going to bed the night before, his heart failed. At the graveside service, she suddenly threw herself on his casket, shrieking and wailing and begging him to come back. It was utterly shattering to witness. It's one of the things that I wish I could unsee, but I can't. And in spite of her uncontrollable grief and pleading, he did not respond. He couldn't.

Well, those who are spiritually dead are just as unable to respond positively to the Gospel as that young man was to respond to his grieving wife. Unbelievers can hear us speak. They hear the words that we use. But the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ actively repels sinners.

Paul wrote,

**23 but we preach Christ crucified,
to Jews a stumbling block
and to Gentiles foolishness,
(1 Corinthians 1:23, 2022 LSB)**

Do you see the problem? Those who are spiritually dead can only respond negatively to the Gospel. They can only be offended by it if they are trying to establish their own righteousness or be amused by it if they are convinced of their own wisdom and sophistication.

The irony, of course, is that the cross of Jesus Christ is the greatest possible demonstration of God's love for His creation.

**8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us,
in that while we were yet sinners,
Christ died for us.
(Romans 5:8, 2022 LSB)**

The cross of Jesus Christ is the love of God written boldly across the pages of history for all to see. Those who are offended by Christ's cross are offended by the love of God. Those who ridicule the cross of Christ ridicule God's love.

So we know why so many don't believe, don't we? They are dead in their sin, and they can only see the evidence of God's love as something either offensive or idiotic.

WHY BOTHER PREACHING THE GOSPEL?

One obvious question, then, is why bother preaching the Gospel? If men and women are spiritually dead, utterly hostile to God and His Word, and so offended by or dismissive of the cross of Christ that the very mention of it is a deal breaker – why preach the Gospel? Why preach Christ crucified?

Let me give you three reasons we preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

The first one is obvious: we evangelize – that is, we preach Christ crucified – because we have been commanded to evangelize.

Jesus' final earthly instructions to His disciples were to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8)

Peter says in Acts 10:42, "And He commanded us to preach to the people."

We preach because we have been commanded to preach.

Second, we preach Christ crucified because it proves that God's justice is right.

The message of the Gospel is NOT “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” The message of the Gospel is “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Through the preaching of the Gospel, God gives the world fair warning and full disclosure about the judgment to come.

The preaching of the apostles in the book of Acts was much closer to Jonah's preaching in Nineveh than to anything Billy Graham or Bill Bright ever said. Paul spoke with Felix and Drusilla about, and I quote, “righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come.” Paul warned the Athenians that God is going to judge the world and has proven it by raising Christ from the dead. Peter said in Acts 10:42-43,

42 “And He commanded us to preach to the people, and solemnly to bear witness that this is the One who has been designated by God as Judge of the living and the dead. 43 Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.” (Acts 10:42–43, 2022 LSB)

And the response of sinners to the Gospel shows that God is right to judge the world. What do I mean by this?

Here's the Gospel in a nutshell. A day of judgment is coming. His wrath will be poured out on sinners and their sins. Jesus Christ died for sinners, and all who call upon Him in faith will be saved.

And what do the majority of people do when they hear that message? They are either offended or amused, and they reject it. And therefore, God's judgment against

them is vindicated. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross is the greatest picture of love the universe has ever known. Those who reject the love of God in Jesus Christ fully deserve His wrath.

I have to admit, I cringe when I declare God's judgment against the wicked. I don't cringe because I don't believe it; I believe it with all my heart. I cringe like I would if I were a police officer telling someone a loved one has been killed in an accident. I cringe like I would if I were a doctor telling a patient that they have terminal cancer. I cringe because, until He saved me by His grace, I was under that same sentence of hell.

So, we preach the Gospel first because we are commanded to and second because it reveals the justice of God.

LOVED WITH AN EVERLASTING LOVE

Finally, of course, we preach the Gospel to reveal the lovingkindness of God in Jesus Christ.

**3 Yahweh appeared to him from afar, saying,
 "I have loved you with an everlasting love;
 therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness."
 (Jeremiah 31:3, 2022 LSB)**

The word "drawn" is an active, powerful, deliberate word. It is used to describe when Joseph's brothers pulled him up from the pit. It was used to describe Jeremiah being pulled up from the cistern in which he had been imprisoned. It was used to describe an archer pulling a bowstring.

"Drawn" does not mean passively attracted but actively moved. Spiritual death leaves us spiritually paralyzed, unable to do anything good for ourselves. The

spiritually dead can only be saved if God will exercise His sovereign power on their behalf and cause them to be born again.

So the hard, painful news of the judgment of God is more than balanced by the wonderful, precious, blessed news of the equally powerful, equally deliberate, and equally active lovingkindness of God. What a relief it is to come to the love, mercy, kindness, and grace of God in the Gospel.

We are dead in our sins, guilty before God. We richly deserve His judgment and condemnation. There is nothing we can do to bring ourselves to Him. But God the Father, who is full of lovingkindness, sent God the Son to take on human flesh, live a sinless life, die in the place of His people on the cross, and rise in victory over sin and death. And now God the Spirit causes the Gospel to be effectively preached and heard. He softens the heart of sinners. He gives them faith. He takes away their sins. He imputes Christ's righteousness to them. He joins them with Jesus on His cross, mortifying their sinful nature. He joins them with Jesus in His resurrection, enlivening their new nature. He grants them repentance and new obedience. He sanctifies them from that moment until they exhale for the last time. And then He brings them in glory to the Father and the Son.

That is the Gospel. The miracle of the Gospel is not that you figure out the right words or that a sinner manages to change their heart. The miracle of the Gospel is that in a moment of time, the Holy Spirit transforms a sinner so that the Gospel is not the stink of death but the aroma of life. The Gospel ceases to be an offense or a joke and becomes the precious news of God's lovingkindness.

Take a moment and ponder and savor the love of God for you.

God doesn't love His people because they earned His love. He doesn't love His people because they made some attempt to love Him or please Him. He doesn't love His people because they are better than others. He doesn't love His people because they try to do the right thing. He doesn't love His people because they are nice.

He loves His people because – get ready for a shock – He is love. There is nothing in us that makes us lovable. Nothing that makes us worthy of His love. Nothing that makes us deserving of His love. If we could live another 1,000 years in perfect obedience, we would not earn or deserve a nanosecond of the love of God. God loves us because God is love. He proved His love by giving His only begotten Son as a proven holy sacrifice, and did that not when we were friendly toward Him but when we were bitterly, angrily, and violently hostile toward Him, His Word, and everything He loves.

Whatever you do, don't minimize God's love for you by minimizing your hatred for Him before He saved you. Don't say, "Well, at least I never did THAT!" Say with the apostle Paul, "Yes, I am the CHIEF of sinners!" Don't say, "Well, I wasn't *that* bad!" Say with Paul, again, "Wretched one that I am! Who will save me from this body of death?"

It's tempting to think that there is SOMETHING within us that is worthy of love. But, beloved ones, our security in Christ, our confidence, our assurance, is that God has freely chosen to love us because He is love. Our peace with Him is not because we give Him no reasons to cast us away but because He has promised never to cast us away.

Pray with me.

