

The King's Commission in Light of Truth
 2 Corinthians 5:11-14
 Grand Avenue Baptist Church
 Michael Felkins
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As we get started this morning, I want to say a BIG thank you to Terry & Debbie Martens and the GROW 252 team. GROW is our Wednesday evening children's discipleship ministry, and this year, they covered a lot of ground. The children read John Bunyan's *Holy War*, aka: *The War for Mansoul*. They studied spiritual warfare and memorized Ephesians 6:10-20. They also worked on a lot of Bible literacy topics. They concluded Wednesday evening with a celebration time and a game called "*Stump the Pastors*," where they brought Pastor Dean and me forward and asked us questions from their lessons. I was quite impressed, and I was stumped by a couple of questions. So, congratulations to our boys and girls in GROW, and a big thank you to all of our Children's workers. The key role of our children's ministry and youth ministry introduces us to the second message in the King's Commission series.

In 2005, Christian Smith and fellow researcher Melinda Denton published a landmark study called "*Soul Searching*." The study examined the religious beliefs held by American teenagers. What they found was shocking. They discovered that the religious faith described by most adolescents was not faith at all but something they defined as "*Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD)*."

Smith and Denton said *MTD* consists of the following five beliefs:

1. "A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth."
2. "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and most world religions."
3. "The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself."
4. "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem."
5. "Good people go to heaven when they die."

They found that American teenagers are extraordinarily inarticulate about their religious beliefs. Most are virtually unable to offer any serious theological understanding. They report,

"To the extent that the teens we interviewed did manage to articulate what they understood and believed religiously, it became clear that most religious teenagers either do not really comprehend what their own religious traditions say they are supposed to believe, or they do understand it and simply do not care to believe it. Either way, it is apparent that most religiously affiliated U.S. teens are not particularly interested in espousing and upholding the beliefs of their faith traditions, or that their communities of faith are failing in attempts to educate their youth, or both."

Smith and Denton went on to say that it's not that teenagers are inarticulate in general. He said,

"Many teenagers know abundant details about the lives of favorite musicians and television stars or about what it takes to get into a good college, but most are not very clear on who Moses and Jesus were. This suggests that a strong, visible, salient, or intentional faith is not operating in the foreground of most teenagers' lives."

Ultimately, this study indicates that American teenagers are significantly influenced by the ideology of *individualism*, which has profoundly shaped the broader culture. However, now understand this, MTD is displayed by an *instinctive non-judgmentalism* and a *reluctance to suggest that anyone might actually be wrong in matters of faith and belief*.

Smith and Denton conclude that *MTD* is broader than adolescence. It is predominant in our culture. This generalized belief system is what appears to describe the beliefs of millions of Americans, both young and old.¹

Although this study is somewhat dated, its findings are very relevant. Twenty years later, we are now seeing the impact of MTD in our culture. Think about it, it's not that many adolescents or adults cannot articulate their faith, but many cannot or will not define what a woman is, and will not call abortion or LGBTQ+ issues sin, and they believe it is okay to be "*trans*." Here's the deal: Absolute truths cannot be found in MTD, except for one, and that is that there are no absolute truths.

Friends, on a practical level, discussing the *absolute truths* of the Bible can sometimes be an awkward conversation. When you begin to discuss what sin is, the gospel, that Jesus is the only way to heaven, that there is life after death, and eternity in Heaven and Hell is real, then you might be met with blank stares or even resistance. You might even hear a statement that sounds something like,

Well, that is your truth, and you must be true to your truth.

The challenge for Christians is not allowing awkwardness to sidetrack the conversation. If we do, then we will not communicate the whole gospel. We may even fear sharing the whole gospel. Are you tracking with me so far?

Remember, we are working through 2 Corinthians 4-5 and examining *ten motivations* that the Apostle Paul gave us for carrying out the King's Commission. Last Sunday, we examined *three motivations* for evangelism as they relate to eternity. This morning, we will examine *three more motivations* related to the truth of the gospel. Are you ready? Here we go.

I. We understand God's wrath (2 Cor. 5:11)

"Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience."

Why is it that we *persuade others*? It is because we know *the fear of the Lord*. *The fear of the Lord* is a motivator for sharing Christ with others.

I want you to underline the phrase "*the fear of the Lord*" in your *Service Guide* or Bible. The ESV translates it correctly, but it is easy for us to miss the impact of the phrase in English. In other words, you might read it and think,

"I am a Christian, and I understand that I am to fear the Lord, which is why I witness."

Now, that is not incorrect, but it misses the full impact of the verse. Let me read it in the New King James, because I think it gets to the heart of the message of the text:

"Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men."

Maybe you didn't get the meaning of this text the first time. The word "*fear*" means "*terror*," and that is what Paul is trying to convey. He wants us not only to properly fear God because of who He is, but also, according to the fullest meaning of this text, he wants us to fear the wrath of God that is in store for those who die separated from God by their sin.

¹ <http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/04/11/moralistic-therapeutic-deism-the-new-american-religion-2/>. Also see: <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/10/19/souls-draft/>; <http://www.ptsem.edu/iymllectures/2005/Smith-Moralistic.pdf>.

Friends, we need the meaning of this text to sink in so that we will be concerned for those who are in danger of facing the *unrestrained and absolute* wrath of God for eternity. We need this truth to strike terror in our hearts so we will be motivated to share the truth of the gospel.

The Prince of Preachers, Charles Spurgeon, once said that "*Hell is a motivator*" when it comes to evangelism. The bottom line is that we must not only fear God, but we must also fear what God has planned for those who die in the condition of being separated from Christ. We must *plead* with them and *persuade* them to trust Christ, while at the same time knowing that only God can awaken faith in their hearts.

Brothers and sisters, we must be convinced that Hell is real. I was once asked if I thought the fires of hell were real. Here is my answer: Hell is real. However, we must keep in mind that the Bible uses the finite, limited human language of "*fire*" to describe the horrible, eternal reality of Hell. Keep in mind that the Bible also speaks of Hell as *darkness, eternal separation, a place of fire and brimstone, and a lake of fire*. God is trying to communicate to us that Hell is a horrible place, so He uses the most graphic, frightening, painful language to wake us up to the reality of Hell. Bottom line: I think Hell will be worse than a lake of fire. Whatever it is, it will be worse than our limited finite language.

The thing is, we need to be convinced of the reality of Hell. We must be as convinced of its reality as the American Puritan pastor, Jonathan Edwards. Listen to what he wrote in his famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*,

*"Just like one holding a dirty spider by the web over a fire, God holds you over the pit of hell. He abhors you; His anger is provoked; and His wrath burns against you like fire. He looks at you as worthy of nothing but to be cast into the lake of fire. His eyes are too pure to have you in His sight. You are ten thousand times more detestable to Him than the most hated venomous snake is to us. You have offended Him infinitely more than any criminal has offended a judge, and yet it is nothing but His hand that keeps you from falling [into the fire]. There is no other reason that you were allowed to wake up this morning and did not go to hell last night after you closed your eyes to sleep. There is also no other reason that you have not dropped into hell today, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason why you have not gone to hell since you have walked into church today when His eyes saw the wicked way you have attended His worship . . . O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in . . . You hang by a slender thread with the flames of divine wrath licking around it, ready to singe it."*²

Here's my point in reading this section of his sermon. Friends, we cringe at that kind of language and this kind of preaching. Over the last 100 to 125 years, our culture has shifted toward a kinder, gentler view of Hell. Hell has all but evaporated from modern preaching, and when we hear it, we call it "*Old timey preaching*," or "*Throwback preaching*," or "*He is a fire and brimstone preacher*." We assign these labels to avoid confronting the harsh reality of the Bible's message that we would rather not hear. We live in a "*politically correct*" society where the reality of God's wrath and hell are unpopular, and that has come into the church and modern preaching. The fact is, no one wants to talk about hell.³

² Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, 47-48.

³ For more information on the discussion of Hell and Evangelism see: Al Mohler, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2009/01/16/the-american-experience-and-the-death-of-evangelism/>; For a more thorough discussion see: <http://www.9marks.org/ejournal/hell-remembering-awful-reality>.

I've told you this story before, but it is worth repeating. I was at a church conference at a very large church in Atlanta, Georgia, in 2008. We were having lunch with the staff members of the church, and at our table was the Executive Pastor. He was also one of the founding pastors of the church. During the weekend, the speakers had talked repeatedly about softening the message in the Sunday morning sermons. Someone asked if they ever preached on Hell. He said no because some people had bad experiences hearing about Hell. Then, many of us at the table spoke up and said, "*But Jesus taught on Hell more than anyone in the New Testament.*" At this point, the questions began flying, and he just got up and walked off. Friends, beware of MTD because it is in many churches and has been for a long time.

Friends, *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism* didn't begin twenty years ago. It began in the Garden of Eden when the serpent began to question God's word, and the enemy continues to water down God's word today.

Theologian Homer Simpson put his finger on the pulse of modern Western culture when he said,

"I'm not a bad guy? I work hard, and love my kids. Why spend half my Sunday hearing about how I'm going to Hell?"

Our culture doesn't want to hear about Hell, and as a result, churches and many Christians do not present the reality of hell in their evangelism. When this happens, we don't present the whole message of the Gospel, and it short-circuits our evangelism.

One of the reasons the modern church struggles with evangelism is that many church members do not believe God will send people to hell. Friends, He will do it. His word says He will, and He will fulfill His word.

Some of us struggle with a firm view of Hell because we came to faith in Christ at such a young age. As a result, we did not understand God's wrath and hell—we just loved Jesus. That is good, that we love Jesus.

However, brothers and sisters, as we get older and study the Bible, we must understand the biblical truth that says before our conversion, we were under God's wrath and in danger of Hell. We were God's enemy and children of disobedience, with no hope and without God in this world. This is who we were before we were born again.

Listen, if you came to faith in Jesus at a young age because you just loved Jesus, most likely you didn't understand the fear of God's wrath and hell. As a result, you MAY tend not to emphasize the fear of God and Hell when you share the gospel. Your challenge is to allow the truth of the doctrine of God's wrath and Hell to correct your understanding so that, when you share the gospel, you share the whole gospel.

Finally, brothers and sisters, it is the reality of God's wrath and hell that makes Christ's cross so glorious. If we water down the reality of Hell in our evangelism, it diminishes the power and reality of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Jesus endured Hell for sinners on the cross so they wouldn't have to.

It is when we understand that He took the wrath of God on the cross that the fullness of the glorious gospel shines through. So, let's hold to a thorough understanding of God's wrath and Hell, so that our hearts may overflow with gratitude and glory of the substitutionary death of our Savior. May a thorough understanding of the *terror of the Lord* motivate us to share the gospel with those who do not know Jesus.

II. We love the lost (2 Corinthians 5:13)

"For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; or if we are of sound mind, it is for you."

Verse 13 is strange. Why does Paul say something like this? It is because of his love for others. This motivation goes hand-in-hand with an understanding of God's wrath and the concept of Hell. We are concerned for the lost because we fear they will face God's wrath, AND because we love them. We care about their eternal destiny.

Here is what Paul is saying: Essentially, he is in awe of God. His awe of God helped him see the situation clearly. He sees their situation, and he loves them and wants them to know Jesus.

The phrase *“of sound mind”* means to *exhort, admonish, or to argue and persuade*. Paul loved the people of Corinth. He strove to convince them of the whole gospel. He wanted to make sure they were saved. The Apostle Paul displayed God’s compassion toward people. We hear it not only in this letter but in the other letters as well.

Listen to the Apostle Paul’s heart of compassion for his fellow Jews in Romans 9:1-3,

“I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.”

Then, only one chapter later, in Romans 10:1, he says,

“Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.”

Finally, in Romans 11:13-14, he says,

“Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry¹⁴ in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.”

Many of you here this morning believe, as I do, in the doctrine of election that Paul laid out in Romans 9-11. We often refer to the Bible’s teachings on this doctrine as *“The Doctrines of Grace.”* They are beautiful truths that display God’s sovereignty in salvation.

However, just because God is sovereign in salvation, you shouldn’t conclude that the Bible teaches we do not have to engage in evangelism. Just look at what Paul says in Romans 9-11. We are to preach, witness, and have a love for the lost so that they come to faith in Christ, and because God elects and sovereignly saves the lost, we can have confidence as we do evangelism. We believe that Jesus Christ can save anyone.

Therefore, as God ordains the ends (the salvation of the lost), we must remember that He also ordains the means (evangelism, sharing the gospel with the lost) to achieve those ends. What this means is that if God ordains the salvation of lost people, then it also means He ordains the means to see them saved, and that is prayer, missions, evangelism, and preaching. That’s why we have the King’s Commission in Matthew 28. We, the church, are called to go and share the gospel with all peoples for their joy. The question is: Do we love the lost? Do we have compassion for those who are not saved?

Puritan Pastor Robert McCheyne saw thousands of people converted under his short ministry. He began preaching at the age of twenty-two and died at the age of twenty-nine. The story is told that a few years after his death, a man visited McCheyne’s church and met the custodian there and asked him,

“What was the key to McCheyne’s ministry?” The custodian took him to McCheyne’s office and said, “Sit down behind that desk over there. This is where McCheyne used to sit. Now put your face in your hands and begin to weep over the lost people in this community.”⁴

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news. Can you imagine not being excited about telling good news? Understanding the gospel is an excellent motivator for helping us *love the lost*. Sharing the gospel is about sharing the best news in the world. This is why, at Grand, we strive to keep the gospel at the center. The more you

⁴ Timothy Beougher, Seminary class: *Personal Evangelism*, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006.

understand the gospel and its importance, the more you will want to share it. Let's become a church that loves the lost and be brokenhearted over their condition. Our final motivation to carry out the King's Commission is because of . . .

III. The love of Christ. (2 Cor. 5:14-15)

"For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died;¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."

What we see in v. 14 is a continuation of what the gospel births in our hearts. It is the result of being born again. New birth creates a love for Christ and, as a result, a love for those who do not know Jesus. We share the gospel with others because of our love for Jesus.

So, why should we do evangelism? It is because of the love of Christ! Bottom line: It is because we love Jesus!

The Greek word *"control"*, in v. 14, is an interesting word. It is used in various ways throughout the New Testament. It does not mean external control or control from an outside force.

This word means *internal control or influence*. This word can be translated as *"fever"* or *"infection."* The word picture of this word gives us the idea that the love of Christ has invaded our hearts, and it works in our spiritual hearts like a *"fever"* or the way an *"infection"* works in our bodies. It invades our spiritual hearts and begins to exert influence at the core of our desires and what we love.

A good question to ask yourself is: *Does the love of Jesus control you? Has the love of Christ infected your life?* When the love of Christ infects your life, it changes you from the inside out. Instead of being self-centered at the very core of who you are, you begin to focus on God and others from the heart.

We sing about this kind of love of Christ in our hymns. One of the oldest and most beloved hymns is *"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"* by Isaac Watts. Listen to how Watts describes his love of Christ:

*When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood.*

*See from His head, His hands, His feet, Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, Or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a [offering] far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

When the love of Jesus invades your heart, you will understand that it demands my soul, my life, and my all. You won't feel externally compelled, but in your heart, you will desire to see others saved. You will want to share the whole gospel because you love Jesus.

John Piper tells the story of how a theology professor's love of Christ stunned him when he was a seminary student. Piper writes:

"One of the most memorable moments of my seminary days was during the school year 1968–69 at Fuller Seminary on the third level of the classroom building just after a class on systematic theology. A group of us were huddled around James Morgan, the young theology teacher who was saying something about the engagement of Christians in social justice. I don't

remember what I said, but he looked me right in the eye and said, "John, I love Jesus Christ."

It was like a thunderclap in my heart. A strong, intelligent, mature, socially engaged man had just said out loud in front of a half dozen men, "I love Jesus Christ." He was not preaching. He was not pronouncing on any issue. He was not singing in church. He was not trying to get a job. He was not being recorded. He was telling me that he loved Jesus.

The echo of that thunderclap is still sounding in my heart. That was 40 years ago! There are a thousand things I don't remember about those days in seminary. But that afternoon remains unforgettable. And all he said was, "John, I love Jesus Christ."

James Morgan died a year later of stomach cancer, leaving a wife and four small children. His chief legacy in my life was one statement on an afternoon in Pasadena, [California]. "I love Jesus Christ."⁵

Brothers and sisters, let us be a church filled with people who love Jesus. Let's hold fast to the truth of the gospel and be fearless as we share the whole gospel message. Let's be a church that is infected with the love of Christ and the love of others. Let's be careful not to beat people up with the whole gospel, but tenderly and compassionately share the whole gospel message by warning and pleading with them to believe. Finally, may the Lord grant us the grace not to lose heart in sharing our faith with those who are perishing.

⁵ John Piper, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/resources/i-love-jesus-christ>.