

John 15:9-19
Matthew 10:39; 16:25
Mark 8:35
Luke 9:24; 17:33

YOU ARE SPECIAL

Sometimes we get careless, and we start mixing the real events of Jesus' own life with what's going on in our own lives. When that happens, we find ourselves drawn into the story – walking His New WAY – at least to some degree. It is never as easy as some people try to make it sound. It is never as easy as we ourselves thought it would be, when we first began. In some ways it still ruins us for life here on earth. I suppose that's why they call it "conversion." We don't really care anymore about conforming to the ways of this world.

At the same time, we are also aware of the reduction. I don't know and have never met any spiritually awakened person who feels equal to Jesus. Perhaps I just associate with the wrong people. If we grow up in the church – grow up semi-familiar with the biblical stories and teachings – sometimes Jesus seems a rather tame and unremarkable hero. But that's because we have not yet delved into it. Once we get interested in what was going on and who Jesus really is, it is quickly obvious that we cannot match Him. Nobody can.

So there is always the reduction. We have our trials and our suffering, to be sure. We have our temptations and our battles. We try to become faithful and obedient to God. We want to be part of the Kingdom and help to build it up. And it never happens in this world like we want it to, or like it ought to. Some of that is always a result of our own errors, our own mistakes, and something deeper we don't like to talk about. Nevertheless, while our lives and our efforts are serious business to us (for good reason), they are always a far cry from the drama going on in and around the life of Jesus. He carries a stature, a clarity, a purity, an all-out love for God that we simply cannot match. Wonder of wonders, His love for God ricochets back onto us. That might not be the right way to describe it, but it is very meaningful to me. Jesus' love for us always comes directed by God's love for us. Jesus loves God ... and faithfulness to God sends Him to love us. Otherwise, I think Jesus would have ended up just another people-pleaser. Whatever else you see in Jesus' life, *that* you do not see. We do not crucify people-pleasers.

In this love, we are invited to come with Jesus despite all our flaws. Again, we have to qualify that: We are *not* invited to keep all our flaws and go on in our own way, now promised Jesus' forgiveness and approval while we keep our rebellious, disobedient, willful ways. *That* is the Gospel filtered through the people-pleasers. It is promulgated everywhere in our society, but only by the pretenders, the play-actors. It only confuses the careless, and persuades other play-actors.

We are invited to come with Jesus *despite* all our flaws. But it still has to be His WAY. You don't have to track Jesus' story for very long to realize this is true. We are promised that we do not have to match up – we just have to *want* to. If we follow Him and love Him back, He will draw us into the fullness of His Kingdom despite whatever flaws and errors and incompleteness we carry with us. But no pretending. That's still, by the way, a bit hard for us to fathom. That does not make "sense" to our way of thinking. We believe, on very deep levels, that if we do not match up and cannot change and grow fast enough to deserve the Kingdom, then we will be rejected, abandoned, thrown out. We will end up on the garbage dump outside the city walls. [For more on one such dump, see the note at the end of this sermon.]

You don't have to scratch any of us very deeply to uncover this primordial theology that undergirds all the theories we want to believe and try to believe in. And our kind returns to this deeper, natural theology with sickening regularity. That is, however much we praise the Gospel, we go back to the Law like metal drawn to a magnet. Our Christian structures and institutions are heavier into guilt and fear and shame than they are into love and light and release. Clearly the coming of Jesus, and the Life and New WAY He reveals, requires a reprogramming of all our old ways of thinking. To make it worse, they are backed by all our experiences here in this broken realm. No surprise, perhaps, that we don't have to connect very many careless moments together before we revert back to the old, familiar ways of thinking and behaving. Finally we come to see that if we do not pray every day and study some portion of the Scriptures each day, we do not have much chance of following Him or living in His New WAY.

Before this Lent is over, I hope we will be deep into the joy of Lent, and contemplating the gifts of the Spirit. After all, we know that Easter is coming. It is no longer a surprise to us that Good Friday is followed by Easter and Pentecost. The reality is that our Christian WAY is filled with light and joy that are deeper than anything this world sees or

knows. Sometimes we focus so much on our disciplines, and try to stay honest about our struggles and trials and temptations – until we forget to share and declare that underneath it all is a joy and a delight that we would not give up for anything this world can offer. *“Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”* (Hebrews 12:2)

But I didn’t want to just jump to the joy without reviewing the principles and foundations of our WALK, lest we sound like Pollyanna, or go back to play-acting. The world is good at pretending optimism just because that feels better and works better than pessimism – at least on the surface, at least for a little while. The Christian Way has no use for pretend optimism, any more than it has use for pretend love, pretend joy, or pretend faith. Sin is big, and real, and deadly serious. Play-acting only plays into Satan’s hands.

So last week we started at the beginning. *“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”* We touched on the imperative to repent – to be in recovery from our alienation and animosity toward God. Our alienation and animosity toward God, by the way, are what the Cross proves – and proving it is the real reason and necessity for the Cross, whatever you have been hearing and thinking of late. And we must be in a recovering community – a faith family – or we have small chance of real or lasting recovery. We usually call it redemption, or salvation. Only, that kind of thing doesn’t happen for anybody in one experience. When the light goes on, that doesn’t end the journey – it begins it.

To enter the Christian Life, we have to repent – go into recovery. And we have to be part of a recovering community – a church – or the repentance will not last, or go deep enough to reprogram our former ways of thinking and feeling and behaving. We will go right back to our drinking patterns – or in this case, back to our alienation-and-animosity-toward-God patterns – that is, back to trusting ourselves, instead of the Holy Spirit, for the direction and purpose of our lives.

That was last week, the first necessity. This week we come to the second necessity, the second foundational imperative of our WAY. This one is much harder for us to accept. It is also much harder to preach about. It is easier to preach repentance (though we do not like the insult) because when we start talking about it honestly, the veil falls away.

We are *not* perfect ... we *need* to change ... we even *want* to change, if we can find a WAY – and a Leader – we can trust.

But the second imperative – which we actually *want* to believe – we do *not* believe. Talking about it doesn't often help people to believe it. While we often pretend that we do not need to repent, when we get honest and real – or get caught in crisis or chaos – it brings us to repentance. But the second imperative we pretend to believe all the time. How can we be persuaded to *truly* believe what we have been *pretending* to believe all along? That is hard. It can be genuinely confusing.

How can I illustrate? I am remembering a woman I once counseled:

Daddy always called me his little princess. And of course he meant it, in a way. But as I grew up, I encountered and got tangled up in the realities of the world outside the home. I discovered that even Daddy had flaws, and didn't always remember to treat me as his little princess. So I realized that the princess thing was mostly a myth. Still, we always maintained the myth. It was a good myth, and comforting. Even when I became a woman and was married and had children of my own, still Daddy would call me his little princess whenever we saw each other. And I would nod, and smile. It was a good thing – a warm thing – and I took comfort and refuge in the myth, even though I hadn't believed it was *really* true for almost as far back as I could remember.

Then one day I encountered the Christ of God. Not instantly, but over time He tried to tell me that I was a daughter of the High King of the Universe – a *True Princess* of magnitude beyond anything I had ever contemplated or imagined. I nodded, and smiled, and pretended to believe it. I had been there before. I knew this game. It was just to make me feel good. It was just to comfort me. But do you think I am fool enough to really believe it? It's obviously far too high and glorious for me to take seriously.

The problem is: If I don't believe it, then way down in the secret center of my life, I am calling the Christ of God a liar. And that means I don't really trust Him – and therefore cannot follow Him. I want to, but I cannot. It requires trust – faith – the Christian Faith.

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Of course, Jesus may not be calling you a Princess. He may be calling you a Warrior, or a Prince, or a Teacher, or a Musician. But whatever He is calling you, the way *He* means it is far higher than anything you have ever imagined or believed was really true of you. To trust and believe Him is the second imperative of our WAY. While some people think that believing in Jesus is about trusting Jesus to be wonderful – or concluding that Jesus is the true Messiah – that is not the hard part at all. That is just a smoke screen we throw up to keep from having to face what trusting Him really means. Jesus confronts us with who *we* really are – **and He always makes that too high!** Watch Him in any encounter the New Testament tells us about. It is also the essence of our primary sacrament of baptism. “*You are my beloved son/daughter. In you I take delight.*” (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22) Oh, I know; that only happened to Jesus. Hey, I thought the whole idea was that we are supposed to *follow Him!*

YOU ARE SPECIAL! There is no way you can live the Christian Life if you do not believe that. You live in a world teeming with millions of humans. The law of “supply and demand” makes us the most worthless commodity on the face of the earth. With population out of control and growing exponentially, perhaps the most “loving” thing I can do is take myself out of here, and leave more room and resources for others. More and more people think so all the time. While you may look around and see a few people who really do seem pretty special, the vast majority of people do not. They do not think themselves very special, so how could they possibly seem very special to anybody else? (Unless, of course, someone is looking through the eyes of Christ. (II Corinthians 5:16))

The sheer fact of the matter is: If you are a Christian, sooner or later it has to dawn on you that you are really special. First and most obvious, the Son of God has died for you. Either you are incredibly special, or He is a total imbecile. Figure it out! Of course, what most people believe is that He died for others but not for them. But then, by definition, they are not really Christians yet, are they? They may like the story, may even honor it, but they have not bought it yet, have they?

You see, it doesn't matter what kind of “low-life” some person might be. If somebody cares about their repentance, about forgiving them – about changing their life, redeeming them, showing mercy and love for them – you end up stuck with an incredible conclusion, and there is no escaping it: They must be enormously valuable – incredibly special. In fact, if you trace and track it with any logic at all, they must have

eternal worth. Nobody is going to die on a cross just to save you for a couple more years. That is not enough return on the investment! And what we know now is that there are, and will continue to be, a lot more people needing this redemption than the first-century Christians ever dreamed. They thought it would all be over in their own generation. Teeming upon teeming millions have come to this planet since then. But if we stay faithful, His LIGHT and LIFE are waiting for all who will receive it. Only, we should stop diluting it, don't you think?

If you are a Christian, it doesn't matter what it looks like on the surface, how many problems are raised by the supposition, or what the world believes or does not believe about it. YOU ARE SPECIAL! Special beyond words to describe it. So is everybody else, but a high percentage of them do not believe it because they do not believe in Jesus yet. If you are special but do not believe it, then you will not and cannot act like it. In other words, the power within you is not yet activated, because it is not connected with where it came from. It will manifest at moments and in some circumstances, for a while. It will also get weaker as time passes, like any battery that doesn't get recharged. You can only stay cut off from the source for a limited time before you start to run down. Creatures are dependent on the Creator. (John 15:5-6)

Since it is so difficult to believe, let me reiterate: You are special – not because it's good psychology; not because you want to be; not because you are looking successful at the moment; not even because other humans say so, though that is certainly good for a small and temporary charge. You are special because God in Christ Jesus loves you. "In Christ Jesus" means that this is the final or ultimate evidence. It pushes us over the line. Why do humans bother to remember and bear witness to Him? Why are there congregations all over the world still studying, praying, and talking about Him? So help me, some of them don't seem to realize it – they don't act or preach like it – but the real truth is: Jesus makes us important. Jesus reveals us in a LIGHT we have never seen before. Jesus does things for us that nobody ever did before. Jesus promises us a future that, apart from Him, we would conclude was sheer wishful thinking.

Jesus is important to us because He makes us special. If we believe in Him, He reveals to us that we really are eternal children of the Omnipotent God. Precisely *because* this is the primary prerequisite to living the Christian Life ourselves, this is the very belief that we doubt the hardest, believe the least, duck the most often. Jesus is great, but

we are crap? That's not what being "sinners" means! Among other things, what "sin" really means is that Jesus keeps telling us we are special ... and we *will not* believe Him. At least not down deep, not where it begins to change the way we think and feel about ourselves, and therefore about everything.

The CREATOR – the One whose power, wisdom, purpose, and glory are beyond all our words – this ONE loves you! That is what Jesus came to reveal. Nothing you could ever achieve, dream, or accomplish could even begin to make you more important or more special than that. In other words, the Gospel of Jesus Christ flies in the face of all human wisdom. We think we are selfish, self-centered, and fixated on our own importance. We think that is what's causing all the mayhem in the world. The truth is just the reverse. We think we have no real importance, and deep within is the suspicion that we are worthless. Though we try to hide this as much as possible, we think it's bound to come to light sooner or later. And when it does, we think we will get thrown away – killed or abandoned. So we desperately pretend and strive, clawing to find some meaning or significance to hang on to. That is where the real mayhem is coming from. That is where the horrid way we sometimes treat each other is coming from. If we are worthless, our only comfort is that others must be worthless too. And since the contest in this world seems to be about who can pretend to be important first and best, then they are the enemy. They must not be allowed to outshine us or the jig is up – and we will be thrown away. You see the problem? It is impossible to love your neighbor *unless you already know that you are loved* – and that it will never run out. (*"Perfect love casts out fear."* (I John 4:18))

We say we believe that God loves us, but it is harder to believe than we say. None of us believe it fully, or nothing in this world could ever frighten us again. The Gospel of Jesus Christ flies in the face of all human wisdom. It doesn't matter whether you were taught to always think of others first, or whether you were taught to take care of number one. What matters is deeper than that. If you encounter the Christ and give your life to Him, your worth becomes infinite because it is connected to His love for you – and *He* is infinite. Then you will take care of number one in order to have more to offer Him and His Kingdom. Or you will think of others first in order to bring them into His Kingdom. And in either case, you will not be so frantic about your own survival or your own personal desires – because you know His presence and feel His caring.

The truth is, people who do not value *themselves* do not value others. Please, I'm not advocating drunk driving, or promiscuity; I'm not advocating murder, stealing, living off of others, or lying as a good and lovely way of life. By the way, nobody who truly cares about themselves does these things. But our world has it backwards and inside out, and always has. Knowing you are special is the only hope you have of rising above the beast. But the world tells us to have high self-esteem in one breath, and tries to shame us for being too selfish and self-centered in the next. And whatever we pretend, the truth is that we do not believe we are truly valuable – until we run into the Christ of God. When His LIGHT connects with our own inner light – the light given us by God when he created us – *then* we begin to believe it.

That still puts us into the impossibly difficult position of having to acknowledge – having to admit – that we are special to Him, not just that He is special to us. And we have to honor and hold on to that no matter what the world tells us, because the world will steal this awareness from us, if it can find any way to do so. Sadly, sometimes it's hard to tell who is trying to steal it more – the world or the church. “Your only value is what you give to others ... Stay in a bad marriage ... Always forgive everybody, whether they repent or not ... Settle for a meaningless job ... Suffering is good for the soul ... God only loves the poor and downtrodden ...” and on, and on. Have we ever connected the life that Jesus lived with His belief in His own mission, His own identity, His own importance? Oh yes, it came from God, and it was connected to His trust in God. But how long do you think Jesus would have lasted in any of His purposes, stances, convictions, or controversies if He had been convinced that His own life was unimportant, or that His own truth was not worth causing consternation and trouble over?

Special people make life special for others. Special people think other people are special. Special people are not sadistic, uncaring, boring, negative, mediocre – and they do not want life to be bad or meaningless for others. Jesus did not kill *us*. We killed *Him!* By all our theories of power and authority and superiority, Jesus should have been the most dangerous person who ever lived. But we see Him healing, teaching, caring, compassionate, humble. Figure it out! Well, He *is* the most dangerous person who has ever lived, but only to our darkness.

My eyes are the only eyes I will ever see out of. My ears are the only ears I will ever hear with. My mind is the only mind I will ever think with. My “heart” is the only one I will ever feel with. I have no other

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possibilities; I have only the possibility to be me. It doesn't matter how unselfish I try to be; the only possibility I have is the possibility to be me. Do you have options or possibilities other than the possibility of being you?

Jesus comes to bring this to its apex. "Trust me – trust God!" You are special beyond anything and everything you ever imagined. Break through! Claim it. You will never see anything the same way ever again ... including those strange, weird humans you see and encounter all around you. And you will end up longing for them to see it and know it too: how special they really are, how much they are loved. You will want them to meet and come to know Jesus. There is no other source of awareness that comes close to touching His presence and His love.

Some of you realize it, but I wish I could tell the rest of you what a short time you have here. And that if you are not "faithful," no one else can ever take your place. Nobody else will ever be the person you were supposed to be. It is you, or nobody. And you are very, very special. If you do not fulfill it, the pattern of the faithful person you were designed to be will be lost here forever. The impact you could have made here will never happen. The world around you will miss out on the gifts and contributions you were designed to provide. The rest of us will never see or know what you could have meant to us, if you had truly followed Jesus.

True evangelism ... true vocatio ... true mission – these are about claiming our true identity in the light of Christ's unearthly love. If we really do awaken to LIFE in Christ Jesus, then God's love, forgiveness, and guidance shift into place, and play beyond anything the books can ever tell. The Spirit's mercy and guidance are everything – apart from which none of us have any chance to find our way through the maze of fear and pride, of personal desires and misused gifts ... to our true destiny.

The reason for Lenten disciplines is not to self-efface. It is to realize how valuable you really are – and to know how easy it is to miss it all, to never wake up ... to end up never having followed the Christ in any real or meaningful way. *That* is what is wrong with being special: if you do not claim and accept it, the loss is inestimable. Many of our kind would rather hide from such light than take the risk of claiming the love of Jesus the Christ, and going with Him into LIGHT and LIFE.

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NOTE:

When Jesus talks about what we call “Hell,” He is referring to Gehenna (*geenna, yeeva, Ge-Hinnom*), the valley of Hinnom, the Wadi er-Rababi – the garbage dump outside the Jerusalem wall. It had an especially bad reputation because of sacrifices made to Moloch there in earlier times, including child sacrifices. Jesus uses Gehenna – a physical place in a physical world, a place everybody listening to Him knew and had seen – as imagery to make a point. *We* turned it into Dante’s Inferno! *We* turned it into a vast theological concept – an early version of a Hollywood horror movie. And by the way, in doing so, we also missed the very thing Jesus was trying to tell us: You cannot burn a soul with physical fire. Hell is not about “hot” – it is about ALONE: lost, alienated, frightened, lonely. It is not about a place – it is about a condition. Life is not about your address – it is about your identity: who you really are, what you have become, what you really care about, value, live for ... and how you live for it. “Go to Hell” means nobody loves you. Or more accurately, it means you do not *know* that anybody loves you.