

Evangelistic emphasis and illustrations

By Jay Wegter

Why is it more difficult for a wealthy man to go to heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (Matt 19:24)? The answer in part is: because the support of our existence by earthly resources (wealth) is easily confused with the support of our eternal souls.

Sinners are jarred; shocked by the biblical truth that they are in bondage to darkness and depravity and therefore do not have the ability comply with the requirements of salvation from sin. Every unbeliever, in his natural state of self-righteousness imagines that by personal exertion in religion and personal moral reformation he or she has the ability to commend self to God and finally be saved thereby. This satanic self-righteousness must receive a death blow if the person is to be saved by the Lord Jesus Christ. The command, “make your selves a new heart” is impossible in the sinner’s own strength. What is needed is to be “born from above”—something only God is able to grant in His sovereign mercy.

The great stumbling block of the cross is the news that sinners deserve to be cut off from God forever and eternally miserable. Unbelievers refuse the remedy because the diagnosis is so devastating—so mortifying and humbling to human pride. They cannot reckon with the concept that they deserve what Christ received: death and separation from God under divine wrath. They have an unsettled quarrel with God over what their sin deserves. As a consequence, they resist the Spirit’s verdict—even when He relentlessly ‘sets up court’ in the conscience—they ‘throw out the case’.

Man’s proud heart wants to employ human standards of righteousness; therefore man rejects God’s holy justice and moral perfection. In so doing, men behave as if God ‘grades on a curve.’ They are scandalized over the truth that God’s standard is Him self; His own perfect righteousness manifest in Christ. They stumble over the fact that the cross of Christ is a monument to the human race that man deserves to die under God’s moral government. Those within the sound of God’s Word will not perish for want of an atonement—they perish by reason of the fact that the divine diagnosis and remedy are refused (Jn 3:19-21).

Instead of welcoming the Spirit’s conviction as an essential part of God’s grace, the unbeliever ‘bribes’ his conscience (i.e. he looks for reasons in himself as a self-justifier to reject the Spirit’s guilty verdict). This can be illustrated with an example from the Old West. The fugitive who is on the wrong side of the law hopes he will ride into a territory in which the local judge is corrupt and takes bribes. Because the fugitive is on the wrong side of the law; he is radically biased against justice; he runs with other fugitives and finds his false hope in bent justice.

By contrast, the upstanding citizen desires a just judge who is not given to compromise; and who always rejects bribes. Only when a person has bowed before God’s verdict of guilty and seen self as condemned will he flee to Christ for full pardon. Once a person has received forgiveness in Christ, then he is on the right side of God’s law, and he will display a commensurate zeal for divine justice being upheld (knowing that zeal for God’s holy justice is inseparable from the honor and character of God). God and His immutable law look completely different once a person has been forgiven.

Unbelievers flatter themselves by imagining that hell is for big sinners. What escapes their notice is that unmortified lusts are proof we do not love God; but love the world instead (1 Jn 2:15-17).

Unbelievers may admit that those who live for sensuality and material possessions are controlled by lusts and will pass away with the world when it is judged by God. But what they are slow to comprehend is that the third lust in the group, “the pride of life” is just as deadly as the first two lusts. The third lust is the desire to live independently of God and His Word—it’s the desire to live a self-directed, self-sufficient life (this third lust is also proof that a man loves the world instead of God).

Every man will have his appointment with Christ—for the Lord Jesus Christ is the God-appointed Judge of every man (Jn 5:21-29). Christ is King of the human race and He is Lord of the cosmos (Ps 2; Col 1:15-21). Those who have not bowed the knee to Him in this life—recognizing His rightful rule over all—will bow the knee to Him in final acknowledgement that He is Lord (Phil 2:9-11; Heb 9:27). But to bow the knee then (having rejected His kingship in this life) is to lose one’s eternal soul. Those who do not flee to Him as Savior now will face Him as Judge then. The great question is: have you seen your sin as ruinous? Have you discovered that your sins will sink you beneath God’s eternal wrath if you do not have Christ as your Merciful Redeemer?

How are we to make spiritually dead, darkened, enslaved sinners sensible of their severe dilemma? It must begin with a declaration and unfolding of the character of God. The Almighty God of the universe is not like us. He is not a greater more benevolent version of self. He is altogether other—that is what the word “holy” means when associated with God’s Name. Sinners err when they make God in their own image and imagine He does things the way they would do them.

Next we must take away what the sinner thinks he has. More than 95% of Americans think that they have a very good chance at heaven. How filled with self-deception this is. For Christ described the road to eternal life as very narrow with few individuals on it. The 95% who think heaven is in store for them are sorely deceived. Christ has told us what the gate to the narrow way of life looks like. It is a gate of repentance and faith—it is a gate of enslavement to Christ.

Third, we must explain the gospel very clearly. Unbelievers need to hear how God makes sinners right with Him self—the gospel declares precisely how God gives the lost right-standing with Him self. The gospel tells us why exactly Jesus came to earth and took on mortal flesh (Heb 2:9-18).

Fourth, we must explain to sinners that no one comes to the Father but through Christ. We must answer the question as many times as needed until the unbeliever understands—sinners come to God by coming to Christ. And how do sinners come to Christ? They must come with empty hands; with admittedly dirty hands—throwing themselves upon His mercy and merits and His willingness to save even the worst sinner.

They must come in faith and repentance. Faith renounces all possible ways of God accepting and receiving the sinner except one—the gospel way—through a crucified and risen Substitute. When the sinner comes to Christ, he comes as a condemned man; he comes bowing before Christ as Lord. He comes to Christ not in some sort of transaction conscious of fulfilling conditions. No, he comes to Christ for mercy, admitting that even the ability to fulfill the conditions of salvation (faith and repentance) is beyond his natural power. He comes to Christ as a guilty beggar in bondage to sin.

Unbelievers must be brought very low by the Spirit before the above ‘posture’ of soul is even a possibility. Sinners not fully convicted by the Spirit are always optimistic that given a little time and effort, they will be able to comply with the requirements of salvation. But no one is saved when self-righteousness remains (for that man is still ‘alive’ to the law as his hope of heaven).

When the Spirit prepares a man for salvation; the bestowal of divine grace begins by the Spirit cutting off all that man's hopes. How slow are modern evangelical pulpits to accept that this is the Spirit's way of working. So many of today's pastors preach as if they want to insulate their hearers from the devastation and trauma of experiencing moral bankruptcy. Thus, their evangelistic sermons are filled with transaction inferences—the implied message is you may transact with God, “if you will do this, God will do this.”

Pastors tend to be squeamish about the sinner's necessary vision of the heart's moral deformity and inability. But the sight of our depravity and helplessness is necessary if we are to truly flee to Christ. As long as self-righteousness remains, the heart is locked tightly shut against the offices of Christ.

The Puritans knew this better than we do. They understood that since Christ holds all the benefits of His atoning work in His own hands (as “Mediator” of the new covenant), He alone reserves the sovereign right to dispense the benefits of His atoning work to whomever He will (Matt 11:27).

Priests, ministers, churches, lost sinners are not the ones who dispense and appropriate the infinite benefits of Christ's redemptive work. Therefore salvation is wholly in Christ. The ruined sinner who is to be saved falls at the feet of the Savior—from Him alone proceeds life—the life to be saved and believe and the life that brings a man into covenant with God is Christ's sovereign prerogative to bestow. Once the sinner receives from Christ what he has no hope of doing himself—from then on that penitent soul is utterly obligated to Christ.

The redeemed sinner knows he is but a vessel of mercy utterly beholden to Christ. Would that sentiment be possible if the sinner held even the smallest key to his own salvation? No, the biblical accounts of salvation describe men and women suffocating under a mountain of debt to God's law; not as individuals who have come to their right minds who wish to transact with God.

Now, according to Puritan authors, this is precisely why self-righteous sinners are so stubborn in hanging on to the illusion that they may contribute to their righteousness before God. It is because it is so repugnant a thought to them that they are actually walking moral deformity before God—that they are a decaying infected wound in God's sight and that hope alone is in Christ—and, that to receive that hope in Christ is abandon autonomy and be utterly obligated to Christ forever.

This is why salvation in Christ makes us Christ's slaves—redemption utterly obligates us to the Lord forever—we become His possession and no longer live as if we are our own (1 Cor 6:19-20). Sinners who retain self-righteousness want to negotiate with God from a position of imagined strength—even if that imagined strength is but paying one penny of a trillion dollar debt. That ‘penny’ stands for the sinner's contribution to his own salvation.

You see, the one penny contribution is an attempt to escape from being utterly beholden to Christ for all time and eternity. That my friends is how vicious the pride of life is—our addiction to independence from God blocks the offer of salvation by sovereign grace alone; for only divine pity can reverse the trajectory of our ruin. How seldom is this biblical definition of grace really taught.

SALVATION ILLUSTRATIONS:

If a child took a hardened attitude toward his parents that said in effect, “I only want the stuff you give me, and I don't want a relationship with you!” We would quickly determine that this

was a delinquent individual. But how is it that in the divine economy, we justify our idolatry and disinterest in God as ‘normal’ when actually it is open rebellion.

If you slapped your buddy amidst an altercation, the consequences would probably not alter your life. But if you broke through the special agents protecting the President of the United States and ran up to the podium and slapped him across the face; the consequences would be dire. To a great degree, the gravity of our sin is measured by the authority of the person against whom it is committed. The God of the universe will not let us continue endlessly giving the honor due Him to idols.

Another way of illustrating this is as follows: on our own moon, a man can bounce and glide effortlessly in 15 foot leaps. But if that same 175 pound man were to be on the surface of a planet the size of Jupiter, he would be pinned to the ground with a body that weighed over 800 pounds. If the same man were on a planet the size of 5 Jupiter’s, he would be pulled flat into a multi-ton puddle. Even if the planet had an atmosphere like ours, that man would die in seconds because his own weight would crush his heart and lungs. The weight of our bodies is relative to the gravitational pull of the heavenly body (or planet/moon) upon which we walk. The weight of our sin is relative to the One against whom it has been committed (Ps 51:4; Is 6:5).

Your aging mother and an anonymous pedestrian are at a crosswalk. Just as the walk light comes on, your mother sees a speeding auto about to run the red light and strike the pedestrian next to her dead. She rushes into the crosswalk to push him out of the way. But she is killed by the speeding car. The ungrateful pedestrian picks himself up and looks at your mangled slain mother and curses at the corpse and says, “Stupid blank woman.” What would you recommend be done to this spiteful pedestrian? Christ gave His life to avert the Father’s wrath from us; how have we related to Him?

A group of terrorists took a room full of hostages. The lead terrorist threatened to begin the killing if his demands were not met. Just as he puts a gun to the head of a woman, a man and his son come forward from among the hostages. The father tearfully says, “My son has agreed to be slain if you will free all the hostages.” The terrorists agree and shoot the man’s son dead. As each grateful hostage leaves, he or she steps over the bloody body of the young man and tearfully thanks the father for such an amazing sacrifice. One lone hostage asks the terrorist if he can pay money to be released, and if he may leave through another door. What kind of relationship with the father who gave his son do you think this last hostage would have?

Those who fear the Lord take action; they heed the Lord’s warnings. Early in the 20th century, a man who was working on the St. Lawrence River took a nap after lunch in his row boat. The boat slipped off of the sand bar and began slowly drifting with the current. Those on shore tried to warn him by yelling and banging pots and pans; but the sleeping man’s boat continued to drift toward Niagara Falls. Those on shore were horrified as he drew ever closer. They yelled and screamed; but he did not wake. Finally the roar of the falls woke him with a start. He rowed with all his might for a few seconds; but the current took him over the falls to his death. So also those who are spiritually apathetic are likened to a sleeping man who slumbers amidst every warning until it is too late.

