

It's an honor for me to be here. Your pastor is a dear friend, and I love him. He has been an inspiration for me in a number of different ways. I love what God is doing here at the Village. It's just exciting to be part of what God seems to be launching all over this nation, this Gospel Revolution that God has launched. The same thing that God is doing here at the Village, He is doing at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Ft. Lauderdale. God is just having fun launching gospel riots in churches, and I am honored and humbled to be part of a group of young pastors and preachers who just want to see the liberating power of God's radical grace revive, renew and reform the church. So just to see what God is doing here, to be on site and have the privilege to preach here is a real joy.

I want to focus your attention on Colossians 1. 2009 was by far the most painful, most difficult year of my life, for a number of different reasons I'll explain shortly. It was during that painful, difficult year that God used these verses to rediscover the now power of the gospel in brand new, bright and liberating ways. I had been preaching the gospel for some time. I was trained formally, theologically and biblically. I believed the gospel with all of my heart, mind, soul and strength. I could preach it with passion and conviction, but it wasn't until God brought me through the crucible of pain, it wasn't until God stripped me down to basically nothing that the gospel became colorful for me in some remarkable ways. And I'm not the same as a result of that. I'll share more with you about what that year looked like, but it was these verses specifically that God used to revive my spiritually depressed soul. Colossians 1, beginning in verse 9, "And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." My hope and prayer tonight is that God will use these verses to explode in your heart and set you free the way these verses exploded in my heart and set me free a year and a half ago.

So let's pray together. "With one voice and one heart, we pray, O God, come thou Fount of every blessing and tune our hearts and minds to see and to savor Your amazing grace. I pray, O God, that You would send Your Spirit now to sow thickly and mediate the presence of Christ. I pray that we would be reminded once again that You are in fact mighty to save. I pray that You would show us again that You are strong, show us that You are big. I pray that we would be liberated by the refreshing reminder of our smallness. Revive us by a greater sense of Your size. Nobody is here by accident. You are sovereign, and that means that every person is here by divine appointment. So we pray, O God, that You would speak clearly, compellingly and convincingly. You know the needs, the fears, the longings and the insecurities of every single person here. You know us better than we know ourselves. So I pray, O God, that Your gospel, the radicalism of Your grace would set us free tonight in ways that we could have never imagined. So do it we pray. And as You do it, we give You all the praise and glory. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen."

If you know anything about me at all, which I don't suspect you do, then you will know that I am absolutely addicted to the gospel. It burns inside of me, and it seems to get hotter every single day. I can't stop thinking about it, talking about it, writing about it, reading about it, wrestling with it, reveling in it, standing on it and thanking God for it. My focus has become myopic, my passion has become singular and I can honestly say lesser things don't distract me as easily as

they used to. I'm not as anxious as I used to be. I don't fret over things as much as I used to. I'm more relaxed about what other people think about me. Whether good or bad, it doesn't matter to me as much as it used to. I'm enjoying life more. The pressure is off, and I'm just beginning to understand the length and breadth of the liberating freedom that Jesus paid so dearly to secure for sinners like me. I used to believe, like many people who grew up in church, that the gospel was simply what non-Christians must believe in order to be saved, but after God saves us, He advances us to deeper theological waters. I've come to love what Tim Keller said a while back. He said that the gospel is not simply the ABC's of Christianity, but it's the A to Z of Christianity. Once God saves us, He does then move us beyond the gospel into something different, but He moves us more deeply into the gospel. The gospel doesn't simply ignite the Christian life, but it's the fuel that keeps Christian people going and growing every day and in every way. In other words, the gospel isn't simply the power of God to save us; it's the power of God to change us once we're saved. That is a major paradigm shift that is taking place inside the church today that I am so remarkably grateful for. The stranglehold of legalism and moralism is beginning to weaken because the now power of the gospel, the power of the gospel for Christian people now, is beginning to be preached from pulpits, and it's gaining traction in the hearts and minds of people. We're beginning to realize that this is God's power, not simply to justify us and get us in, but it's also God's power to sanctify us and keep us in. That's good news.

So if that's what's happening, then we have to be somewhat clear on what the gospel is. First of all, the gospel is not a command to do anything. The word "gospel" means "good news." The word "evangelist" in the New Testament is simply a word that conveys meaning with regard to someone who would come and announce victory on the battlefield. So victory is won on the battlefield, the war is over and an evangelist goes back to the city and announces victory. So the gospel is not a command to do anything at all. It is an announcement that Christ has already done it, that the victory is won. So if you are a Christian, you are now living under a banner which reads, "It is finished. It's done. There's nothing left to do." So the gospel is this grand announcement. It's what J. Gresham Machen, an old Presbyterian pastor, referred to as "The triumphant indicative." It's something that is complete. It's something that is done. Jesus paid it all. It's finished. It's over. The battle has already been won.

So it's really clear for us to understand that, because that will then communicate something that is remarkably freeing. The gospel announces that the determining factor in my relationship with God is Jesus' work for me, not my work for Him. It's His performance for me, not my performance for Him. It's His obedience for me, not my obedience. It's what Paul talks about in Romans 5, where he waxes remarkably eloquent about Christ's substitutionary work. We sang about it today, and the church has sung about it for years. "In my place condemned He stood and sealed my part in with His blood. Hallelujah, what a Savior." Christ not only died a substitutionary death, but He lived a substitutionary life. He fulfilled the law. That's what He said He was coming to do. "I came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it." He came to fulfill the law. We were the law breakers; He was the law keeper. If we don't understand that Christ came, not simply to die in our place, but to live in our place, if we don't understand that He came to fulfill the law in His life, then at His death there is no righteousness to impute. The righteousness that is imputed, that glorious exchange that takes place on the cross, the early church father Athanasius referred to it as a glorious exchange where Christ exchanged our sin for His righteousness. That was a righteousness that He fulfilled, that He deposited into our bankrupt bank account. The gospel is the story where Jesus is the hero. It's all about Him, what He has done. It has nothing to do with us at all, nothing. There is nothing whatsoever about the gospel that encourages us to focus on ourselves, nothing. In fact, there is a tremendous amount of Christian narcissism, Christians who are absolutely fixated and obsessed with how they're doing. It's called spiritualized naval gazing. We become remarkably obsessed with how we're doing. Are we doing okay? Are we doing everything right? It's unbelievable. And we do it under the guise of pursuing holiness and practicing godliness and sanctification. But the fact of the matter is we are remarkably obsessed with ourselves and our performance. And the gospel is the good news that our relationship to God has nothing to do with our performance. It has everything to do with Christ's performance for us. Now this is very, very important stuff. Because we are continually

enslaved to our performance. Jerry Bridges talks about how we so naturally drift into performance mode when it comes to our relationship with God. We think, "So, much good behavior for me generates so much affection from God, and so much bad behavior for me generates so much anger from God. So God's relationship to me, how God thinks of me is ultimately dependent on how I'm doing." It's remarkably narcissistic. It's morbidly introspective. It takes our eyes off of Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, and we begin fixating on ourselves. So the gospel is the good news that God does not relate to us based on our feats for Jesus, but Jesus' feats for us. The gospel tells us that God's acceptance of us is not gained by our successes or forfeited by our failures because it's not about us at all.

Now I'm painfully realizing that the sin that I need removed daily in my life is my narcissistic understanding of spiritual progress. It's amazing. It's one of those things we typically overlook, because we think about spiritual progress as being a really good thing. It is a good thing, but I'm discovering that the more I focus on me and how I'm doing, the less I focus on Christ and what He has done. And therefore, my efforts to get better actually make me worse. Because I become self-absorbed. It's morbidly introspective and terribly narcissistic. I think too much about how I'm doing, if I'm growing, whether I'm doing it right or not. There are so many books, conferences, sermons, churches and preachers who essentially give us a to do list. The moralistic undertone of so many books, sermons and all those things today in the church is simply this, "Do more. Try harder." It encourages self-salvation. "You want to experience freedom and fullness of life? Do you really want to have your best life now? Well here's how you do it." Basically the whole premise is, "You have it within yourself to get happy. So do the right thing, stay within the bounds and check off the to do list." It's amazing. I love watching young Christians, people who are recently converted, come to church. They're just happy and clapping. They're just thrilled to be experiencing this new found freedom that they have in Jesus. And then they come into our churches, and we lay on their shoulders a morass of things they have to do if God is really going to be happy with them. We call it "discipleship." "Here's the list of things you need to do. You need to be at church on Sunday, you need to be at church on Wednesday, you need to volunteer in the nursery, you need to be in women's Bible study, you need to be in men's Bible study, you need to be in a small group. . ." It's on and on and on. And while our intentions may be good, the message we're sending is, "If you're really serious about God, you will get busy." Now that sounds a lot more like the way our American culture has trained us than what the Bible says.

There's a remarkable book called *The Gospel-Driven Life* written by a guy named Michael Horton, who is a friend, a great theologian and professor of theology at Westminster Seminary in California. One of the chapters in his book is simply titled "Don't just do something. Sit there." It's this chapter on Mary and Martha and how we try to justify ourselves and please God by staying busy, doing more and trying harder. What's so ironic about that is then the Christian life becomes all about me, how I'm doing and what I need to do. It's, "I . . . I . . . I . . . me . . . me . . . me . . ." It's very easy to slip into this mode. I spend way too much time pondering my failure, brooding over my spiritual successes and wondering why I'm really not getting that much better. I'd like to think that I am quickly becoming a spiritual giant, but I look down deep in my heart and I'm like, "You know, you're still the rebellious sixteen-year-old you were however many years ago." My wife and I have been married for seventeen years, and our marriage is so much better now than it was when we first got married. We got married at 21. We didn't know what we were doing. We had been Christians for six months. We had our first child at 22 and our second child at 24. I was in school the first seven years we were married in college and grad school. We were poor. I was convinced that if God would make her more like me, we would have a fine, happy marriage. But our marriage is so much better now. We enjoy one another now like we've never enjoyed one another before, and so much of it has to do with the fact that we just realize that we are who we are. We're really not getting that much better, but that's what it means to get better. I spend way too much time thinking about me and what I need to do, and I spend far too little time thinking about Jesus and what He's already done. And what I discovered is that the more I focus on my need to get better, the worse I actually become. I become neurotic. There are a lot of neurotic Christians out there. I know some. They are miserable to be around. I am one, and I'm miserable to be around. I become self-absorbed. Preoccupation with my performance over Christ's performance for me makes me increasingly self-centered and morbidly introspective.

And it's always good to remember that when the disciples were on the boat and Jesus was walking toward them at night, He summoned Peter to come and join Him on the water. Peter, with some fear and trepidation, gets out of the boat and begins to walk on water toward his Savior. And he was actually doing just fine while his eyes were fixed on Christ. When he looked down and started to consider his performance, he began to sink. That's me, and I'm guessing that's you too. We spend so much time under the guise of pursuing holiness, practicing godliness and pleasing God, but at the end of the day, we spend more time thinking about how we're doing than what Christ has done. And that not only leads to slavery, narcissism and all sorts of things like that, but it actually makes us worse.

So I have a friend named Rob Rosenblatt, who is a Lutheran theologian out in California. He sent me a note the other day, and I love a line in it. He just has a remarkable way with words. He said, "Anytime our natural fixture on self is rattled, shaken and turned from itself to that man's blood and that man's cross, then the devil takes the highmost." Every time our focus becomes that man's cross, that man's blood, that man's death, that man's resurrection and not me, the devil runs. The devil wants Christian people, under the guise of sanctification and pursuing holiness, to think much more about themselves than they do about Jesus. And you know as well as I do that that's enslaving you, it's hurting your marriage and it's hurting your children. I know it too. It hurts my marriage and it hurts my children when this is true. It hurts my church. It hurts me. My slavery hurts other people. Because even though we think we're doing something with honorable motives, we think we're doing the right thing, it's still all about me. Do you know what the gospel does? The gospel doesn't take us deeper into ourselves. The gospel causes us to wash our hands of ourselves. There is nothing about the gospel which encourages us to think about us, nothing. So to the degree that we think about me, how I'm doing, how I'm performing, we're obsessed with this stuff. Books are written about it. We spend so much time trying to fix one another. Isn't it exhausting? I don't want you to try to fix me, and I won't try to fix you. Let's just try to relax and rejoice under the banner that says, "It is finished." And let's just simply be okay with not being okay. Your marriage isn't going to get that much better. I've been married for seventeen years. It's not that it gets better; it's just that you stop being so critical. I was listening to an older couple, a pastor and his wife. They had been married for forty-something years, and they were giving testimony on stage and taking questions from the audience. Someone asked, "What is the one thing about your husband that you would change?" This wise older woman said, "After forty years of marriage, if there is still something about my husband I want to change, it's not his problem. It's mine." That's great wisdom. It's remarkable wisdom.

I think most Protestants believe that our righteousness is as filthy rags, that our good works don't earn God's favor and there's nothing we can do to get ourselves into heaven. My struggle isn't believing that my good behavior can earn God's favor. My daily struggle is believing that my good behavior can keep God's favor. So the fact is that the only people who get any better are the people who know that, if they don't get any better, God will still love them. Because it's not about getting better. If you could do it, Jesus becomes unnecessary and irrelevant. Let me read you a quote I found. "Getting better is better than not getting better, but there's a better way to get better than to obsess over your need to get better." Part of what it means to get better is you don't worry or not about whether or not you're getting better. That is what it means to get better. Now I know that may confuse you, but the secret of the gospel is that we become more spiritually mature when we focus less on what we need to do for God and more on all that God, in Christ, has already done for us. So this is my favorite quote in the world. It comes from a guy named Gerhard Forde, who was a theologian. He wrote this toward the end of his life. I love this perspective. It's so liberating. He says: "Am I making progress? If I am really honest, it seems to me that the question is odd, even a little ridiculous. As I get older and death draws nearer, I don't seem to be getting better. I get a little more impatient, a little more anxious about having perhaps missed what this life has to offer, a little slower, harder to move, a little more sedentary and set in my ways. Am I making progress? Well, maybe it seems as though I sin less, but that may only be because I'm getting tired! It's just too hard to keep indulging the lusts of youth. Is that sanctification? I wouldn't think so! One should not, I expect, mistake encroaching senility for sanctification! But can it be, perhaps, that it is precisely the unconditional gift of grace that helps me to see and admit all that? I hope so.

The grace of God should lead us to see the truth about ourselves, and to gain a certain lucidity, a certain humor, a certain down-to-earthness." It explains why the apostle Paul says at the end of his life, "I'm the chief of sinners." He was acutely aware of the fact that, when it's all said and done, he hasn't really gotten that much better, and that made him all that much more grateful for Jesus. It's what Jack Miller used to say. "Cheer up. You're a lot worse off than you think you are, but God's grace is much bigger than you could have ever imagined." So what Gerhard Forde is saying is this. When we stop narcissistically focusing on our need to get better, that is what it means to get better. In other words, when we stop obsessing over our need to improve, that is what it means to improve. That's the definition of improvement.

So this is the question. What are you going to do now that you don't have to do anything? That will set you free. Because what's ironic about this is, once the gospel frees you from the enslaving pressure to do anything for Jesus, you'll want to do everything for Jesus. There is this remarkable fear that if you preach the radicalism of God's unconditional grace, people are going to take advantage of it and they're going to go off the deep end. Parents are afraid of that and preachers are afraid of it. It's not true. Think about this. The more assured I am of my wife's unconditional love for me, whether I'm being nice or not nice, the more assured I am that she will love me just the same whether I'm in a good mood or a bad mood, whether I'm being nice or mean, that makes me want to be nice. This idea of "Yeah, grace but. . ." is not what Paul says in Romans 6. He speaks about the radical substitutionary life and death of Christ in Romans 5, and then he begins Romans 6 by saying, "I know what you're thinking. Shall we sin more so that grace may abound?" His preaching led to someone asking that question. That's how scandalous grace is. The preaching of the gospel should cause people to ask that question. And Paul goes on to say, "By no means." And what you would expect him to do in that moment is to put the breaks on grace and give a little law. "Let me maintain some spiritual equilibrium here. I've given you grace. Now let me give you law and balance things out." That's not what he does. What he does is go deeper into grace. He actually probes the gospel more, not less. So this idea that grace is dangerous and needs to be kept in check is the devil's lie. Yes, it will mess up your hair. Yes, it's undomesticated. Yes, it will wrestle control out of your hands. Yes, it's scary because it's uncontrollable and it's untamable, but it's the only power that can melt a human heart.

You know what licentious people need? They don't need law. The Bible says that we rebel against that. You tell me black, and I say white. That's just the way I am, and that's the way you are too. That's not what changes licentious people. That actually makes them more licentious. Think about the Soviet Union, a country that was under lock and key for seventy years, no freedom allowed. Communism comes down and look at the country now. Sexual promiscuity and prostitution are worse there than they are here. The Russian mafia basically runs everything. There is more crime there now than there is here. It's just an unbelievable country in chaos. That is what legalism produces. I have a story that illustrates this so perfectly. I'm one of seven kids. Four of us work together in South Florida. Others live elsewhere. Some who live elsewhere came down to South Florida for their kids' Spring Break. We all got together one Sunday night at my oldest brother's wife's grandmother's condo on the beach. So we're at this condo on the beach. Kids are swimming in the pool, and we're eating dinner on picnic tables. Also there were these old, rich, stodgy people are just beside themselves. Kids are swimming in their pool. They couldn't stand the fact that we were there. And about every ten minutes, they would come and harass us. "Well you can't be doing this. The rules say this." So it was getting late, so one of my brothers gathers his children, and he goes up to the condo, opens the window and shouts down with great obnoxious tone, "Hey it was great being with you guys. I love you guys. I miss you guys. We've got to do this more often." And of course the people sitting by the pool were freaking out. He just did it to stir the pot. The law had harassed him so probingly that it produced rebellion. And my older brother looks at me and says, "See what legalism produces? It would have never even entered his mind to do that if he hadn't been harassed by the law. Now that's great illustration. It's a huge mistake when we think that it's the law that actually produces heartfelt obedience. It's not. Grace does that. Only grace can do that. So Christian growth does not happen first by behaving better, but by believing better, believing in bigger, deeper, brighter ways what Christ has already secured for sinners.

And that is specifically what's going on in Paul's prayer here. This is what he's saying, beginning in verse 9, "I pray that you would grow in knowledge, that your understanding would increase, that you would be strengthened with all power. I pray that you would grow in endurance, patience and joy and that your experience of all of these things would develop." Everything he prays for in verse 9-11 is what you and I, if we're Christians, should want. That's what we want, that's what we long for and that's what our regenerated heart craves. But then notice where he locates the power to make these things a reality for us. Where does the power come from to make these things that we all want a reality for us? He anchors it in the gospel. Notice what he says in the second part of verse 12 through verse 14. These verses literally rescued me from death to live in 2009. He says, "You will grow in your understanding of God's will, be filled with spiritual wisdom and understanding, increase in your knowledge of God, be strengthened with God's power, which will produce joy-filled patience and endurance as you come to a greater realization that you've already been qualified, delivered, transferred, redeemed and forgiven."

Do you want to know what sanctification is? It's a big theological word for Christian growth. The best definition of sanctification I can find is this. Sanctification is simply getting used to your justification. Sanctification is receiving Christ's words "It is finished" into our rebellious regions of unbelief. I tell people all the time, "Preach the gospel to yourself every day." People come up to me and go, "What do you mean?" So I point them here to Colossians 1:12b-14. I tell them that preaching the gospel to yourself every day means that you go back to these verses and come to a greater, bigger, deeper, brighter realization that you have already been qualified, delivered, transferred, redeemed and forgiven. Martin Luther said it best when he said, "To progress is to always to begin again." Going forward requires a daily going backwards. Backwards to what? Backwards to the reality of what has already been accomplished for you. It's going back to the already secured reality of your justification and hitting the refresh button a thousand times a day. It's living in these verses. The apostle Paul never tells us what to do before he tells us what God, in Christ, has already done, ever. Colossians is four chapters. In the first two chapters, all he talks about is what God, in Christ, has done. It's not until he gets to chapter three that he says, "Therefore, in light of all that God has done for you in Christ, go out and live this way." We tend to skip over chapters one and two in our thinking. We think much more about what we need to do, and then we run out of gas. Because the engine that is powering us forward is not the gospel. It's willpower, it's self-righteousness or it's something smaller than the gospel. So we conk out.

Well, I mentioned that 2009 was the hardest year of my life. For two reasons it was the hardest year of my life. Reason number one was because my father got sick and lived in the Intensive Care Unit for the last six months of his life and passed away of liver failure. He was not a drinker. He just had a number of problems, and it was his liver that finally ended up giving out. We had a great relationship. He was a remarkable husband and a remarkable father. To watch this powerful, sophisticated, brilliant and successful rock of our family get weaker and weaker and weaker, wither away and become helpless was hard for us to watch. So much so that we said, "Lord, either fix him or take him, but do something." Well, God saw fit to take him. And even though we know where he is and we'll see him again, obviously it's painful. Well that happened in 2009. But that happened on top of a merger that took place between the church I planted back home in Ft. Lauderdale in 2003 and Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, which is a well-known, famous church that was founded in 1959 by Dr. D. James Kennedy, who became somewhat of a household name because he was a pioneer when it came to television and radio. So Coral Ridge became a very well-known, very famous church. Dr. Kennedy passed away in September of 2007, and this church down the road from us started looking for a pastor. They had never been in this position before. They had only had one pastor. Over the past ten years or so, the church had been in pretty serious decline. It had gotten much older, and people were leaving. They knew they needed to do something, so they came to me and asked if I would consider becoming the next pastor. I said, "I'm honored, I'm humbled and I'm undeserving of this request, but I'm at my post where I am." God was doing great things in our church, and God was doing great things through our church. It was just five-years-old, but God was doing remarkable things. I felt called there, and I didn't want to leave. I knew Coral Ridge was going to be a rebuilding project that I didn't want to be a part of. I didn't think I had the

capacity to be a part of that. Certainly I didn't have the patience to be a part of that. So I said, "I'm humbled and honored, but I'm not interested." About two months later, they came back, and I said the same thing, "I'm humbled and honored, but I'm not interested." I knew that whoever took this church was going to die. We all know the stories. You follow a founding pastor and you're the sacrificial lamb. And I wasn't volunteering for sacrifice. So I knew it was going to be a terrible experience for whoever took over.

But about six months after they approached me the second time, they came back and that's when we started talking about the possibility of merging the two churches. So I put a group of people together from our church, New City, and Coral Ridge together, and we met every week for about three hours over a course of about four months. We examined everything and all things financial, structural, personnel, philosophical and theological. You name it; we examined it. We looked behind every tree and under every rock. I didn't want this merger to happen. I was very comfortable, I was very happy and I didn't want it to happen. I was open to it happening because God is in charge, but I wasn't happy about the fact that it could happen. But after four months, all of us came to the conclusion that this is in fact undoubtedly what God wanted us to do. So Easter of 2009, we come together as one church. The celebration was explosive. Revival was breaking out at Coral Ridge. It was remarkable, and I thought for one split, terribly naïve second, "Wow, this may not be as bad as I thought it was going to be." And that euphoria lasted for about ten days. Then all of the fireworks we anticipated started to go off. There was a small but very vocal group of older Coral Ridge loyalists who sought to remove me from the moment I got there. They were circulating petitions, telling people things about me that weren't true and stirring the pot. As a result, there was so much tension in our church. And now we're going into the Summer, and I'm wondering, "What in the world has happened here?" I'm miserable. I was depressed. I'm not naturally prone to depression, but I was depressed. I wasn't eating, I was living with nausea and I wasn't sleeping. I was in bad shape.

And just about that time, family vacation time rolled around. The best thing to do when you're in trouble is get the heck out of town. So that's what we did. Now I really guard my vacation time with my family, so we decided to go anyway even though things at the church weren't settled. We get to our place we rented on the south coast of Florida late afternoon and we go to bed. The next morning, I wake up, make a cup of coffee and go out to the balcony. I'm overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. It's a beautiful morning. I open my Bible. My Bible reading plan has me reading Colossians 1. So I open my Bible, read these verses and I lose it. I finally express what had been going on in my heart for quite some time, and that was just pure anger with God. I just said, "What have You done? I've done everything You've asked me to do. I am entitled to better treatment than this from You. I have performed well. I've done more. I've tried harder. I've done everything You've asked me to do, and this is the treatment I get?" First of all, God can handle conversations like that. The greatest saints in the Old Testament argued with God, and God used that argument to cause them to submit even more deeply. I said, "You know what, God? Just give me my old life back." And through these verses, He said, "It's not your old life you want back. It's your old idols you want back, and I love you too much to give them to you." I never understood just how dependent I had become on human approval and acceptance until God stripped it away. What other people thought about me is what gave me my sense of worth and value. It's what made me feel significant. If people liked me, I felt like I mattered. If I was approved and accepted by others, I felt like I was important. So much of my identity, so much of my security, so much of my significance was anchored in what other people think about me. And God was stripping that away. Now I was, for the first time in my life, in a place where there was a group of people who didn't think well of me at all. They were out to get me, they were telling people things about me that weren't true and this reputation that I had worked so hard to achieve was now being ruined by these self-righteous, terrible people who were after nothing but power. And God helped me to see, He revealed my own idolatry. He showed me what my functional savior was. If you're a Christian, you can say intellectually, "My Savior is Jesus. He is my Lord. He is my Savior. He is my Rescuer. He is my Redeemer," but there are a thousand things smaller than Jesus that you and I look to every single day to be our functional savior, to make our lives worth living, to make us feel like we matter. This is what God reminded me through these verses.

God reminded me that, when we are united to Christ, we don't need to spend our lives trying to earn the approval, acceptance or affection of those around us because Jesus has already earned God's approval, acceptance and affection for us. It's done. Everything we need and long for, in Christ we already possess. That's what Colossians 1:12-14 say. I had to go back to these verses to be reminded of the fact that everything I need and long for, in Christ I already possess. If you understand that, your marriage will change, your relationships will be transformed because now you can spend your life going to the back instead of getting to the front. Now you can spend your life giving instead of taking, because you don't need anything. Everything you need, in Christ you have. It was rediscovering the gospel that enabled me to see that, because Jesus was strong for me, I'm free to be weak. Because Jesus was someone, I was free to be no one. Because Jesus was extraordinary, I was free to be ordinary. Because Jesus succeeded for me, I was free to fail. Because Jesus had won for me, I was free to lose. I was so afraid of losing. I was so afraid of failure. And it was these verses that helped me understand that, because Jesus succeeded for you, you're free to fail. Your failure or success doesn't define you, Jesus does. Whether you win or lose doesn't define you, Jesus does. So now you're free to lose, because Jesus won for you. Nothing in this broken world can beat a person who isn't afraid to lose. And when you're not afraid to lose, you can say crazy, scary, counterintuitive stuff like, "To live is Christ, and to die is gain." That is pure, unadulterated freedom. That is freedom at its purest, and it's the only kind of freedom that enables us to live a life of scandalous generosity, unrestrained sacrifice, uncommon valor, unbounded courage and radical mercy. There's no way that we can do all the things Jesus tells us to do apart from the gospel. We can't do it unless we understand He won for me, therefore I'm free to lose. Every thing I need, in Christ I have, so now I can spend my life giving myself away. Most marriages that are in trouble are the result of failed expectations. "I need something from you that you're not giving to me." How transformative the gospel is when you come to the realization that, "Everything I need, in Christ I have. Therefore while I enjoy your reveling in my love for you, I don't need anything from you in return. So I can spend my life sacrificially giving without taking anything."

Let me conclude with this. This was actually recited by my son Nathan when he was in 3rd grade. His class memorized this and altogether in unison recited it for the parents and teachers. It's remarkable. It was so sweet seeing these fifty 3rd graders sing this from memory. It's called The Fellowship of the Unashamed.

I am a part of the Fellowship of the Unashamed. The die has been cast. The decision has been made. I am a disciple of Jesus. Therefore, I won't look back, let up, slow down, back away or be still. My past is redeemed, my present is empowered and my future is secure. I'm done with low living, sight waking, small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tame visions, mundane talking, cheap giving and dwarfed goals. I no longer need preeminence, prosperity, position, promotions, praise or popularity. I don't have to win, be first, be right, recognized, regarded or rewarded. I now live by faith, lean on His presence, love with patience, live by prayer and labor with power. My goal is God's glory, my face is set, my pace is fast, my road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions are few, my guide is reliable and my mission is clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of adversity, negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity or meander in the maze of mediocrity. I won't give up, shut up, let up or slow up until I have stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up and spoken up for the cause of Christ. I must go till He comes, give till I drop, preach till all know and work till He stops me. Christ has qualified me to become a part of the Fellowship of the Unashamed. I am His and He is mine.

Now that kind of life cannot be lived apart from the power of the gospel. It's when you come to the heart realization that it is finished, when you come to the heart realization that Jesus plus nothing equals everything and that everything minus Jesus equals nothing, until that grips your heart, then you will continue to live in a posture of slavery. Paul said in Galatians, "Christ has come. It is for freedom that He has set us free." Jesus said, "I have come to set the captives free." So if you're a Christian, you're free. You're free to succeed, you're free to fail. You're free to win, you're free to lose. You're free because Jesus paid it all. It's finished, and that's good news.

Let's pray together. "Father, You know the people in this room better than they know themselves. I pray that You would set them free. I pray that gospel explosions would be taking place in every heart right now. I pray that You would be liberating people. Liberate me. Show us Your amazing grace. Show us Your outrageous mercy. Forgive us for our 'yes, grace but. . .' postures. Help us to understand that, because we don't have to do anything for You, we're now free to joyously do everything. We love You. We're grateful for Your grace. It's undeserved. It is descending, one-way love, and we're grateful for it. Help us to revel in it and spread it. We pray in Christ's name. Amen."

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