

“It’s Not About You”

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

If you have been at our church for a while, you know that I am an expository preacher. As such I preach “expositional sermons.” What’s that? Here’s how one writer defined it:

“A sermon is expositional if its content and intent are *controlled* by the content and intent of a particular passage of Scripture. The preacher says what the passage says, and he intends for his sermon to accomplish in his listeners exactly what God is seeking to accomplish through the chosen passage of his Word.”¹

One of my heroes on this front was a man named Charles Simeon, a man used by God to restore biblical teaching to the center of church life in England in the 1800s. Simeon was an expository preacher and here is how he defined his convictions about preaching:

“My endeavor is to bring out of Scripture what is there, and not to thrust in what I think might be there. I have a great jealousy on this head; never to speak more or less than I believe to be the mind of the Spirit in the passage I am expounding.”²

Elsewhere, Simeon described what he believed to be the threefold result of faithful expositional preaching—it humbles the sinner, exalts the Savior, and promotes holiness.³ These strike me as noble aims. We need to know how far we have fallen, how high Christ has ascended, and what the Lord desires of our lives.⁴ Preaching should inform these matters because the Word of God, the source of our preaching, does.

For this reason, I’ve never been much of a “topical preacher,” meaning my starting point in constructing a sermon is not typically “what does the Bible say about topic X?” and then to start searching out biblical material to contribute to our understanding of that topic. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with that. But there are dangers if it becomes an exercise whereby the preacher is setting the agenda and some of the counsel of God is neglected and overlooked because it’s difficult and not exactly what preachers would gravitate towards preaching naturally. Another danger is that it can string together a lot of Scriptures that in context may have very little to do with one another. When context is ignored, bad interpretation and false teaching can ensue.⁵ But topical preaching can be done well (just like systematic theology can be done well), if the dangers are acknowledge and due diligence is applied so as to not violate the intention and argument of the original author’s of Scripture who were inspired to teach us truth by the Holy Spirit.

In my opinion, it’s easier to get at that meaning by preaching through books of the Bible. Why? You can’t skip the hard stuff. You preach on topics you probably would not choose to preach on naturally, but the people of God need to hear. In time you are more likely to preach the full counsel of God. The context is easier to discern because you’re seeing how the thoughts in the text connect to one another as a part of a grand narrative or logical argument. And there are many other reasons of this sort. So of the hundreds of sermons the Lord has given me opportunity of preach over the years, almost all of them have been part of series working through a book or centered on one particular passage in Scripture, bringing in other Scripture only to the extent that it helps us understand that one passage.

Now, you're probably wondering, "why is he telling us all of this?" Well, because today our approach is going to be more topical in nature. I believe we need to ask "why are we here?" and "why do we exist, individually and corporately as a church?" and to see how the Bible as a whole answers those questions. So we are going to cover a lot of ground in the Scriptures, which we will put on the screen for your convenience. And, let me just say, we are not even going to scratch the surface of what the Bible says about these matters. The lessons we will learn today could be taught from far more biblical texts than we will have time to explore this morning. But the Bible speaks in overwhelming unison on these things.

So then let me begin by stating what should be obvious but is certainly not in our cultural environment. Are you ready?

It's not about you.

Does that sting the pride a little bit? But it is absolutely true, even if it goes against every fiber of our being. We have been conditioned to think of everything in reference to self. Ever since the Fall of Man, we have struggled to think of anything without self occupying the center of our perception. That includes how we view religion, in general, and Christianity, in particular. But at the end of the day, and even at the start, it's not about you. Period. Full stop.

What then is it about?

It's about the glory of God.

What comes to your mind when you think about the glory of God, I wonder?⁶ Maybe it's His mighty acts in history. Maybe it's His perfection. Maybe it's the vastness of His creation that attests to His wisdom and power. Maybe it's the full revelation of Himself in the person of Jesus. All of these certainly display God's glory in various ways and to varying degrees.

In the Old Testament the main word of "glory" comes from a Hebrew word for weight. It was used for things that possessed a certain heaviness, whether literally (in terms of their substance) or metaphorically (in terms of their importance). In the New Testament they use a Greek word, but they use it in much the same way to refer to one's worth, greatness, and honor. Very often when the words are applied to God, they have in view His majesty or supremacy.

When Paul was writing to the Romans, he states,

"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"³⁴ 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?'³⁵ 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?'³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." (Romans 11:33-36)

Do you see what Paul is saying? Really a couple things. First of all, God doesn't need us for anything. He doesn't owe us anything. Don't think for a moment that God created humanity because He needed something from us. God is the only being who is actually self-sufficient. In eternity's past God existed and His existence was not contingent on anyone or anything. This is why the Bible begins the way it does—"In the beginning God..." Before there was any created thing, there was already God. Paul didn't just teach this truth to the Romans, he also said as much to the people of Athens...

"The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything." (Acts 17:24-25)

God asked Job, in the Old Testament,

“Who has first given to me, that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine.” (Job 41:11)

A similar point is made in Psalm 50,

“For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.” (Psalm 50:10-12)

Do you see what is being taught in passages like this? What could we possibly give to God that is not already His possession? All of His creation belongs to Him. He created it. God doesn't need us, therefore. He doesn't need any of His creation. Why then did He create us? It wasn't because He was lonely and needed a friend. No! God is Trinity. “The fact that God is three persons yet one God means that there was no loneliness or lack of fellowship on God's part before creation.”⁷ He doesn't need us.

So, again, why then did He create us if He didn't have to or didn't need us in any sense? He created us for His glory. That's what Paul was trying to get across in the Romans passage we read. *“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen”* (Romans 11:36). And, by the way, that is the turning point in the book of Romans. For eleven long chapters Paul has been unpacking the glories of God as seen in the Gospel and showing how the aim of the truths of the Gospel makes sense out of all Scripture and all history. Then in chapter 12 he pivots from theology to application (as he so often does in His letters).

So all that rich theology and talk about history and the Scriptures and the Gospel for eleven chapters is summed up in 11:36 with that statement that all of it is for the glory of God. Then, and only then, once we get that, He begins to talk the personal life applications of such things starting in chapter 12 and for the rest of the letter. Do you see that? It's all for God's glory, chapters 1 through 11. *“Therefore,”* chapter 12, *“present your bodies as a living sacrifice...”* Why? Because if everything exist for God's glory, then that includes you. So offer your life up for His glory. That's what your life is meant for. God's glory.

Indeed, all of creation, Paul was teaching, exists for the purpose of God's glory. As John Calvin put it, creation is the theater of God's glory.⁸ The lower creatures or the inanimate creations glorify God simply by being what they were created to be. Psalm 19 opens by communicating this truth...

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” (Psalm 19:1)

We look at the heavens and we see something of God's glory. We look through a microscope at how our cells repair themselves and we see something of the glory of God's wisdom. We look through the Hubble Telescope and we see the vastness of God's creation as though it were without end and we see something of the glory of God's creativity and might. As science develops and our knowledge of God's creation expands, we are meant to be pointed to God's glory. And if we would sit on our porch and watch the sun rise or set and cast a unique portrait across the sky that no other day will ever display, we are meant to marvel at God's glory. *“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.”*

As humans we can look at ourselves and be amazed at the intricacy and intelligence of our design. Just like the rest of creation these observations point to God's glory. But we, as humans, were meant to point to God's glory in a unique way. We have been created in the image of God. We are image bearers. The

creation account in Genesis really highlights this distinction. All of God's creating activity is described in a very structured and repetitive way and then, when it gets to describing the creation of humanity, the narrator slows down and breaks form.

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Genesis 1:26-28)

As image-bearers we are meant to point to another. We represent another. We've had another's imprint stamped upon us. We image another. So, yes, we bring glory to God just like the rest of creation by virtue of our existence and what it says about Him. But we were meant to glorify God in a unique way too. We don't have time to explore all that might be wrapped up in the image of God. But the point I am making is that there is a uniqueness about human creations and, therefore, there is a unique way that we glorify God. We are meant to glorify God actively and intentionally. That's why God's Word teaches us to live for His glory. And in the garden, Adam and Eve did this in a beautiful and pure way.

But when they chose to sin against God in Genesis 3, then the purity and clarity of that image is tarnished. The Fall of Man into sin doesn't remove the image of God (cf. Genesis 9:6; James 3:9), but it does distort it. It does influence our capacity to glorify God actively and intentionally in the unique ways for which we are created. How encouraging it is, then, for us to discover that the redemption that Jesus came to bring progressively reverses this distortion. Paul taught that through faith in Christ, trusting in His death for our sins and resurrection for our future hope, we are granted salvation. In this salvation, we are given a new nature, *“which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator”* (Colossians 3:10). Wayne Grudem explains this verse like this:

“As we gain in true understanding of God, his Word, and his world, we begin to think more and more of the thoughts that God himself thinks. In this way we are ‘renewed in knowledge’ and we become more like God in our thinking. This is a description of the ordinary course of the Christian life.”⁹

Of course, this is a process. It's part of Christ's redeeming work. It's what we sometimes refer to as sanctification. And this sanctification involves restoring in us what was lost in the Garden of Eden. Elsewhere Paul says of Christians,

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18)

As we grow in Christian maturity we are growing in our likeness to God. His image is being restored in us. Our character is increasingly shaped by His character and, in this way, we image Him the way we were intended. In fact, Paul even describes the goal of our salvation in similar terms.

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...” (Romans 8:29-30)

Do you see God's agenda for your life and redemption?

There is a great book by Tim Chester called, *You Can Change*, that I would highly recommend for those of you that are seeking to change certain things in your life (cf. New Year's Resolutions). In the book, Chester writes,

“What does it mean for us to be a new creation? It means we're re-created in the image of God. It means we're given new life so we can grow like Christ. And being like Christ means being like God, reflecting God's glory as God's image.”

So there is a chunk of the book that works through how we were created in God's image, how there is a sense in which that image is broken because of sin, how God has an agenda for our change, how that agenda involves being re-created through faith in Christ, and how that re-creation involves the Gospel's work in our lives. He writes,

“Jesus came to remake us in God's image. Jesus took our brokenness, our hatred, and our curse on himself on the cross. He took the penalty of our sin and in its place gave us a new life and a new love.”¹⁰

For the first time since the Fall, we are able to actively and intentionally live our lives for the glory of God. In Christ, we have had that capacity restored. By the power of God's Spirit who indwells God's people, we can live for God's glory.

How? How do we live for God's glory? What kinds of things can we do to glorify God? Ask that question in many Christian settings and you'll likely get answers like worship, or sharing your faith, or doing good works, or forgiving people, etc... Those are all good answers. But notice they're all “spiritual” sounding answers. Thus they're too narrow. The reality is that God calls us to glorify Him in all that we do.

After a discussion on how to glorify God in a particular set of circumstances, Paul says to the Corinthians,

“*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God*” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Clearly, then, it's not just the “spiritual” activities in our lives that God means for us to do for His glory. It's every activity in our lives. Eat to the glory of God. Drink to the glory of God. Whatever you find yourself doing, do it to the glory of God. Your doing was meant to glorify Him. All of our doing should have that conscious aim.

The Bible applies this principle to many areas of our life....As it relates to our inner lives and the use of our bodies, we are told,

“*Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

As it relates to your praise, God's people are told,

“*The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me...*” (Psalm 50:23)

“*You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him, and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!*” (Psalm 22:23)

“Ascribe to the LORD, o heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.” (Psalm 29:1-2)

As it relates to the good works you have opportunity to do in your daily life, Jesus instructs,

“...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16)

As it relates to the suffering we experience in this world because we are followers of Christ, Peter says,

“...if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.” (1 Peter 4:16).

Even as it relates to our dying, Jesus sets us an example,

“This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God. And after saying this he said to [Peter], ‘Follow me.’” (John 21:19).

We could keep going, but you get the idea. Christians exist to glorify God in everything that we do.¹¹ We are to glorify God. But let’s be clear about something. When we say that we can live in a way to glorify God that does not mean that we make Him glorious. He already is perfectly glorious. He couldn’t be more glorious than He already is in Himself. We are to glorify God in the sense that we acknowledge His glory. We point to it. We make much of Him. “To give glory to something means to deem it impressive and to attribute worth to it as something that possesses significance and importance.”¹² We magnify His glory so that other people will notice it (cf. Psalm 34:3; 69:30; Luke 1:47).

One writer gives a helpful illustration to this effect, when he distinguishes between the magnification of a microscope and the magnification of a telescope.

“God’s goal at every stage in creation and salvation is to magnify His glory. You can magnify with a microscope or a telescope. A microscope magnifies by making tiny things look bigger than they are. A telescope magnifies by making gigantic things (like stars), which look tiny, appear more as they really are. God created the universe to magnify His glory the way a telescope magnifies stars. Everything He does in our salvation is designed to magnify the glory of His grace like this.”¹³

This is why every aspect of your salvation, it seems, is said to be for God’s glory in Scripture. Let me give you some examples.

God’s free choice to save us: *“In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.” (Ephesians 1:4-6)*

God’s creating initiative: *“...bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” (Isaiah 43:6-7)*

The Incarnation of Christ: *“For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy...” (Romans 15:8-9)*

Propitiation (God's wrath toward us being removed): "[Christ Jesus] *whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*" (Romans 3:25-26)

Our Sanctification: "*And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*" (Philippians 1:9-11)

The Consummation: "[Those who do not obey the Gospel, cf. previous verse,] *They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.*" (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12)¹⁴

This last verse reminds us of the choice that is before us in this life. Some of our Bible readings as a church this week were from the book of Ezra, so I was reading a commentary on Ezra by James M. Hamilton, Jr., in which he says,

"[This world] is still the stage God has built. He still wants it filled with His glory. Rebels will give Him occasion to display the glory of His justice. Those who trust in Jesus will experience the glory of His mercy. So the question is not *whether* you will glorify God but *how*."¹⁵

That's the point being made in 2 Thessalonians, which I read moments ago. But the larger point I'm making is that these verses illustrate that God saved you *not* to make much of you, but to make much of Him. You are redeemed for His glory alone. And we, as a people, were redeemed for His glory alone! That's why we exist.

And I do agree with John Piper, who is famous for saying, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him" (but that is a whole other sermon, or book!).¹⁶ Suffice it to say that enjoying God and glorifying Him are essentially two sides of the same coin, the same activity. God is most glorified in us when the world sees that Jesus is worth more to us than ease, and comfort, and wealth, and health, and everything else that the world may offer us. Jesus is better. God satisfies us. When the world sees this, God is glorified.

So let me close our time, by noting three things. First, we have not even scratched the surface of this theme in Scripture—that we exist for the glory of God. If you are a seasoned reader of Scripture, you know this. But hopefully we have seen enough to reinforce in our minds that God's glory is the purpose of your existence and salvation.

Second, by way of personal application, you need to ask, "Do I live like this is true?" Let me give you an example of where to probe in your own heart. Think about how you respond to frustrations and frustrating people. How do you react to them? What would happen if we lived our lives like we really believed that whatever we do should be done for the glory of God? What if in our frustrations we paused and asked, "what reaction would bring the most glory to God?" But that's not what we tend to ask, is it? No typically. Not most people. Not even many Christians. In our flesh we instead often react based on what will bring the most glory to self. What will make me look best? What matches my preferences and serves my conveniences? But what if the next time we were faced with a choice, we stopped trying to keep God at arms length and we asked instead, "God, in this choice that I'm facing, what decision would bring You the most glory?" and then acted accordingly. It would change things. Those are questions that get your life on

track with God's will. Does your life communicate to people in the world that it's not about you? Or do you still believe that it is?

Tim Challies writes,

“The simple fact is, you are not the point of your life. You are not the star of your show. If you live life for yourself, your own comfort, your own glory, your own fame, you will miss out on your very purpose.”¹⁷

Finally, by way of corporate application, we as a church need to ask, “do we operate like these things are true?” The reason I'm bringing all of this up at this point is because your ministerial staff believes that we need to seek to ensure that we don't lose focus as a church. We need to be about what God is about. We need to have a biblically informed vision and priorities. For months we wrestled with and prayed through and examined passages like the ones we have considered today in order to articulate a statement that we believe will help us stay focus and evaluate the ministry we do as a church. The purpose statement we came up with begins with these words:

“We exist to glorify God through Gospel-transformed lives.”

We are going to spend the next weeks exploring this further, but hopefully you're beginning to see, as we have, that this is consistent with the Bible's teaching. And, if indeed that is our purpose as a local church, then how do we fulfill it? What's our plan to carry it out? Well that's the next line:

“We do this by actively embracing Gospel-Centrality, the Great Commission, and the Great Commandments....”

We are calling these the three “GCs” to make it easier to remember. That's also the title of this short series of sermons. This is how your leaders at Southern Oaks are thinking about Christian ministry at this church. This is how we will evaluate ministry at this church. Is it shaped by and flow out of the message of the Gospel? Does it accord with the command of Jesus for us to make disciples of all nations? Does it help us to love God and neighbor better according to the counsel of God's Word? If the answer to all of these is “no,” then we don't want anything to do with it at this church. It may be a good thing, but it's not what we want, as a church, to actively pursue if it will not glorify God by serving these directives.

So in the coming weeks, Lord willing, I will show you why from God's Word these things are important to us and why what comes from God's Word is far more important and authoritative and desirable than any tradition. And, of course, to do these things for the glory of God we have to rely on the Spirit of God, submit to the Word of God, and follow the Son of God. We will unpack this more, starting next Sunday. To be continued...

But...Let me say this...if we don't get what we talked about today right—that we exist to glorify God—we're not going to get church and ministry right. It's not going to happen. The desire to see God glorified in all things needs to be our chief aim. If that's not settled in our minds, we won't get the rest of these things right. We want Southern Oaks Baptist Church to be a church that is about glorifying God above all else. We want that to be our DNA, which will only happen to the extent that it is part of your own personal DNA.

If you choose to live a life that is self-exalting, you are choosing to live a life that is God-belittling. So I say again: It's not about you. It's about God and His glory.

Let's pray...

¹ Mike Bullmore, “A Biblical Case for Expository Preaching,” 9Marks Journal (May-June 2007), 16.

² Handley Carr Glyn Moule, *Charles Simeon* (London: Methuen & Co., 1892), 97.

³ Charles Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1847), xxi.

⁴ This thought and the above sources related to Charles Simeon I gathered from a book by David Helm, titled *Expositional Preaching* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 12-13.

⁵ For more on these dangers see J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 125ff.

⁶ This section is heavily influenced by the work of Tom Ascol, both in content and the progression of thought. Ascol wrote an article for *Founders*, called “All to the Glory of God”. The article struck me as very logical in its unfolding and I could think of no better way to structure my own thought.

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 161.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, translated and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 1:6:2 (72).

⁹ Grudem, 444-445.

¹⁰ As of January 9, 2016, both quotes could be found at <https://www.crossway.org/blog/2016/01/you-can-change/>

¹¹ Ascol, “All for the Glory of God.”

¹² Charles L. “JR” Vassar Jr., *Glory Hunger: God, the Gospel, and Our Quest for Something More* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 15.

¹³ John Piper, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2001), 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

¹⁵ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Ezra and Nehemiah* (Christ-Centered Exposition Old Testament Commentary; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 15.

¹⁶ See John Piper’s *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Revised Edition; Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2011).

¹⁷ Tim Challies, *Do More Better: A Practical Guide to Productivity* (Minneapolis: Cruciform Press, 2015), 11.