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HOW TO GET INTO THE HALL OF FAME Genesis 15:6

In Romans 1:16 Paul said that he is not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ because it is the power of God. What a profound statement. This message of finding life and hope through the grace of God brought to us by Jesus Christ is the very power of God.

I thought some about power recently. We just flew thousands of miles on jet aircraft. You look at those things sitting on the ground and think, “It is not possible for that thing to actually fly. How can something made out of metal, then filled with human beings, their luggage and a bunch of jet fuel actually go up into the air and fly at higher than 30,000 feet?” We know it involves the principle of lift produced by the airfoils of the wings. But to produce enough lift to actually raise that thing off the ground requires an enormous amount of power. When you are sitting in an airplane you can hear it and feel it. You hear the ear blasting roar of those engines that hurl such a huge machine down a runway and into the air and you feel its push as the plane accelerates.

We also flew on another plane, a single engine Cessna 172. I have to tell you that it created some doubts in me. The plane itself looked a bit sketchy. And in comparison to a jet engine it sounded like a lawnmower. It was a bit unnerving to trust myself to a lawnmower engine to provide enough power to get that thing in the air. When I saw the plane it reminded me of the line in Star Wars when Princess Leia said to Han Solo, “you came here in that thing? You’re braver than I thought.” Nevertheless, it worked, to my amazement. My question is, which do you think the gospel more resembles, that Cessna or the jet engine? Is it a little putt-putt power that maybe gives you just enough power to get your little craft off the ground, or is it a thundering, overwhelming force that can hurl you at tremendous speeds high into the heavens?

The Bible claims the gospel is the most radical, life changing message ever heard. Unfortunately, though it is powerful beyond our imagination, it is truly radical. It is a divine message that we will not completely understand in this life, but it is so different from what humans typically think that many, maybe most, fail to really grasp it. I feel that often even what we hear in the church is a filtered gospel that fits better with our usual thought patterns. Unfortunately when we filter it, we water it down, and in so doing we drain it of its true power. My prayer is that we

all here take it straight. We drink down the unadulterated gospel, for it is only in this form that we will experience its phenomenal, transforming power. Anything else will only produce religion, and I mean religion in its worst sense.

We saw a few weeks ago that the heart of the message of the gospel is found in Genesis 15:6. Abram believed God and God counted that as righteousness. The message of the gospel is that being righteous comes from just believing God. We saw that every human longs for righteousness, because that means being given approval, being accepted. I'm not going to preach that message again, but let me repeat that we are so desperate for that sense of approval we can never be at peace without it. In other words, righteousness is of central importance to our spiritual, emotional and psychological well being. And the message of Genesis 15:6 is that we get that righteousness only one way, by believing God's promise.

IS RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH REALLY NECESSARY

Many people do not think they need faith, especially faith in Jesus. We encountered several on our vacation beginning with the man who drove us to the airport at zero dark thirty that first morning. So why should we think such faith is actually necessary?

Romans 3:10-12 says, "there is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, together they become worthless; there is no one who does good; not even one." Listen to those words. There is not even one person who is righteous. There is no one who does good, not even one. As a result, Paul says we have all become worthless. To be worthless means to have no worth, obviously. In other words, it means to have no value, to be judged not approved, but rejected.

I took some tennis shoes when Laurie and I went on vacation. I've had these shoes for quite some time so they are thoroughly worn. One day we went on a hike with our kids. We hiked through a rain forest to a waterfall. That day the rains started when we had gone just a little way into the hike. It didn't just rain for a little bit. It poured down rain for the rest of the hike. By the time we got back to our car we were as wet as we would have been had we just jumped into the ocean. My old tennis shoes, which I wore on the hike, were now muddy in addition to being pretty well worn out. When our trip came to an end and it was time to pack up our stuff to head home, I was faced with the problem of having more stuff to take home than I really cared to pack. I looked at those old worn out tennis shoes and judged them to be worthless. I didn't even bother packing them. I left them behind. Maybe the hotel maid who cleaned our room found them and wondered why someone would

leave a perfectly good pair of tennis shoes behind. It was because in my mind they were far from perfectly good. I judged them to be worthless and worthy of being thrown away.

The Bible says we are all of us, every single one of us, much like those old tennis shoes. We are worthless and worthy of being thrown away. Not even one of us is truly good according to those words in Romans chapter three. That is not the only place you'll find that message in the Bible. In John 3:19 Jesus said, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." Jesus said that men love darkness. He said that their deeds are evil. How are evil people who love darkness, who are not good ever, going to be approved by a holy and righteous God?

Some will object that this is an awfully gloomy and negative view of humanity. Aren't people basically good? Isn't it true that while yes, there is some bad in all of us, there is also some good in all of us? How can the Bible say that none of us are good, not even one? And aren't there some amazingly good people?

A few weeks ago we received a call one morning that we let our answering machine handle. I was a little bit shaken when I heard the message. The call was from the internal revenue service. No one ever wants to get a call from those people. Whenever you hear from them it's a bad day. But this was a particularly disturbing message for it said that they have filed a lawsuit against us. Yeah, that was more than a little upsetting. The message gave a number for us to call to find out the information about this lawsuit. I immediately called them back and identified myself. The agent from the IRS informed me that we were being sued for errors on tax returns from 2008 to 2013. He said that they had tried to contact me on several occasions and failing to do so had filed this lawsuit against us. I was astounded. I had heard nothing from them about errors on our tax returns. I explained that I had heard nothing from them. He pressed me and said that if I did not take care of this problem I could actually be arrested and even put in jail. It was at that point that I began thinking clearly. Prior to that time I think I was mostly in a panic. But I began to think this through. I knew the IRS was not going to put me in jail. I also began to realize that this is not how the IRS would address such a situation. I knew they would have sent me a letter to start off the process and there had been no such letter. Finally I told the supposed agent that I didn't think this was the way the IRS does business. So I said I was going to hang up and call the IRS to verify the information I was being given. Immediately he hung up the phone. The whole thing was a scam. He was trying to get me to give them money and even my personal information so that they could steal more from me.

This was a call from a group of fellow human beings who are putting great effort into trying to rip people off. Does that sound like something that people who are basically good would do? Perhaps you could maintain that the human race is basically good with a few bad apples if this were the sort of isolated incident. But it is not. We have to deal with a constant flood of efforts to scam us, con us and rip us off from all points of the compass. We've had to have our credit card account closed on repeated occasions because some fellow human beings had somehow managed to illegally obtained our credit card number and were trying to use it for their own illegal purchases. Just this week I got an ad in the mail from the company called life lock warning me that I need their services to protect me from identity thieves. I really don't think that company would need to exist if people were basically good.

While we were on vacation we found that our hotel rooms had a safe in them and we were told to never leave valuables in our room without locking them up in the safe. Our rental cars had notices on them warning us never to leave valuables in the cars. Why are such notices important when people are basically good?

The fact is there are a lot of good and nice people in the world. But are we all really basically good? Watch what happens when you're boarding an aircraft and space in the overhead bins starts to run out. People start looking out for themselves pretty quickly. There's a savage in all of us that lies not far below our nice civilized veneer. Our flight home from vacation was quite crowded and there were a number of people who were traveling together but we're not initially seated together on the airplane. The flight attendants did all they could to try to accommodate requests to rectify the situation. Unfortunately that was easier said than done. People started getting a little testy. Honestly they weren't being basically good. Finally I heard an exasperated attendant say, "this isn't musical chairs, people!"

There are some ideas to keep in mind about the premise that people are basically good. First, I'd draw your attention to the movie the princess bride. In it, the hero, Wesley, is seriously injured at one point. He appears to his friends to be dead. They take him to miracle Max. Max examines him and says that he is only mostly dead. He points out that there is a difference between being dead and being mostly dead. Because he was mostly dead there was a chance to revive him. And that of course is what Max proceeded to do. There is a parallel between being dead and being good. The parallel is this: just as being mostly dead is not the same as being dead, so being mostly good is not the same as being good.

This is very easy to understand. Suppose that you went to a restaurant and were informed that their food was mostly good, meaning that it was mostly free of E coli. Is that the same as being truly good? Obviously not. You know how the health department here gives letter grades to restaurants? I make it a habit to only eat in A restaurants. It was unsettling to find that in Hawaii that is a pa fail deal. I realized I could be eating in a place that passed with a D grade. I want no part of any food that is mostly good but has a little E coli in it. So all we need to do is ask ourselves if we are 100% good. At every moment are you perfectly, totally loving and good toward every single person in everything you think, say and do? We all know that there are two possible answers to that question. One is no, the other is a lie. So by that analysis we are not truly good and not worthy of being judged righteous and approved.

Furthermore, consider Jeremiah 17:9, which says “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.” That verse tells us the problem is much deeper than even our actions. It says the problem is in our hearts. There is something wrong with them. And it is that wrongness that causes all of the problems. That thing that is wrong in our hearts taints even the good things that we do. In other words, even when we do a good thing there is something wrong with it because of what is in our hearts. That means there is never a moment in our lives when we are truly good, not even one.

Given that these realities how in the world are we ever going to find the approval that our hearts are desperate for? How will we ever be judged to be righteous? The answer is that by our own character and actions we never will be. God knew that, so he provided a way for us to be declared righteous that has nothing to do with our own goodness and ability. He said that he would declare us righteous if we would simply believe him. Believe his promise, trust him, and he will declare us righteous. That is something that any human being can do. So yes becoming righteous by faith is absolutely necessary. In fact it is our only hope.

HOW IS THAT FAIR?

If God declares someone righteous when in fact that person is not truly good, how can that be a good thing? When we looked at Genesis 15:1-6 I said that God was doing divine accounting. But man, that’s some pretty creative accounting isn’t it? It’s saying that something is good when it isn’t. That’s not true. Is God lying?

This is a serious issue when we consider the rationale for God judging anyone. Our culture hates the idea of judging. It is totally committed to the idea that everyone

should be able to freely do whatever they feel is right for them with no consequence and certainly no condemnation. In our culture judging is the only wrong. What rationale can we give for God to judge someone then?

The rationale is that to be loving he must judge evil. Would you condemn the health department for judging food at a restaurant to be unacceptable because it has E. coli in it? That would be stupid. We want the health department to do that because failure to do so would expose us to something harmful. We could get sick and even die from it. In that case judging is a truly good thing. We demand it. And so it is with God. Evil, by definition, does harm. God must judge evil to protect his creation and his people, for evil will always create damage and death.

But if God declares righteous and approved people who are in fact not truly good, is he not allowing evil, the evil in us, to continue unchecked? That would be like the health department finding E. coli in food at a restaurant and declaring it good anyway. How can God do such a thing?

Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is death. In other words, the penalty for evil is death. That is God's entirely appropriate pronouncement. The evil must be eradicated or it will do harm. So the penalty we all deserve is death. But that brings into play a principle that is recognized by our own legal system. Suppose that one of our children got a traffic ticket and for some reason did not have enough money to pay the fine. Would the law allow me to pay the fine on their behalf? Yes, of course it would. The fine must be paid, but if someone steps in and bears the cost on behalf of the offender, that is totally acceptable. And that is exactly what God did. 1 Peter 2:24 says "he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross." In other words, he paid the price of our evil. The price was death and he paid it.

But hold on a moment. He was one man. If I paid the traffic fine for one of my kids that doesn't pay all the fines of every traffic offender in the world. How could one man dying be enough to pay for the infinity of the billions of human beings who have ever lived? How many people have ever lived? Perhaps as many as 13 billion. How many sins have those people committed? Well, considering that every moment of the lives of every one of them was impacted by sin according to Jeremiah 17:9 the answer really can't be measured. It approaches infinity. So if the penalty for sin is death and there is an infinity of sin in humanity, you end up with death times infinity. In other words, infinite death. On the other side of that equation you have Jesus. He was actually God in the flesh. God is an infinite being. When he died you had death times infinity. In other words, infinite death.

His death is the other side of the equation. Because he is infinite he can pay for the infinity of human sin.

Skye Jethani is a pastor and author. By his admission he is not a baseball fan. He wasn't a baseball player nor did he follow the game. Yet not too long ago he had an amazing opportunity. He was invited to come to the baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York for the weekend that the latest class of Hall of Fame players was inducted. He had his picture taken with Cal Ripken, Jr., who holds the record for most games played in a row (2632). He had conversations with all time greats like Johnny Bench, Wade Boggs and Carlton Fisk. He hung out with former Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda. He said it was terrific. He knows lots of people who would have given anything to be there. On his own, he had no right to be there. So how did that happen? One of the inductees that year was a man named Deacon White. He was an early superstar of baseball back in the 1870's. And it turns out that Jethani's wife is Deacon White's great, great granddaughter. He got into the party and the event not because of what he had done, but because of what someone else had done a long time ago and his relation to him. And so it is with us. We are accepted by God, invited to his hall of fame, not by what we do, but by being related to Jesus, believing what he has done for us.

BUT DOESN'T THIS FAIL TO DEAL WITH EVIL?

Well in a legal and judicial sense I suppose that works, but doesn't it still leave evil existing in us? Doesn't it mean that God hasn't really done what a good God would do and eradicate evil? In fact, hasn't he just turned a blind eye to it and said it's all right because it's paid for? In a way hasn't he made it worse, because now he's said we can be evil and get away with it? Doesn't that even make him unfit to judge?

Let's start with admitting that God is the Creator and Ruler of all. Psalm 24:1 says, "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it." Psalm 100:3 says, "Know that the Lord is God; it is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture." Romans 9:20-21 says, "Who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'why did you make me like this?' Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?"

The point here is that God owns us. He rules over everything thus has the right to determine what justice actually is. In other words, God has the right to judge, and it is in fact, his right to determine what is just and what is not. There is no real standard of justice that he has to abide by, for he is the one who declares what is

just. Our job is just to accept what he declares. Did I have the right to decide that the muddy, worn tennis shoes I had were worthless and thus should be left behind? Yes, because they belonged to me. God has the right to judge us however he chooses. We need to accept and acknowledge this.

Unfortunately, the “because I said so” explanation has never been very satisfying. Is there any other response that can help us with this question of God dealing with evil? Yes, there is. We need to start with how we think evil can be eradicated. We usually think behavior is changed by the combination of reward along with the threat of punishment. If there is no threat of punishment for wrong doing there will be no teeth to the command to not do evil. Strangely you would think that the fact that evil has harmful consequences even for the evil doer would be enough to deter us from evil, but that proves not to be true much of the time. For illustration I point you to the myriads of people who smoke cigarettes despite knowing it will destroy their health. Or the people who take illegal drugs, knowing they will have a devastating impact on their lives.

We think the only way to get rid of evil is to dangle some reward for doing good in front of them but especially to threaten them with some punishment if they don’t comply. Imagine that you are teaching a class in school, one that is required for the students to graduate. Suppose you began the class by saying, “No matter what you do or don’t do this semester, you will get an A in this class.” How hard do you suppose they would work? There might be one or two that will work hard, and some that will work, but most will slack off. Some won’t do a thing. With no fear of negative consequence they aren’t motivated to do the right thing.

It would seem then that this idea of being declared righteous simply by believing God’s promise is a disaster. It won’t eradicate evil, it will promote it. In fact, some people think exactly that. Paul wrote in Romans 3:8, “Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—let us do evil that good may result”? Hey if more grace results from more sin, let’s sin all the more.

There are some important thoughts to help us answer that concern. First, the threat of punishment never really eradicates evil. In Romans 8:3 Paul wrote, “For what the Law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh.” Think of Law as Paul used it as the system of reward and punishment. It is a standard of measure. Meet the standard and you get the reward, fail to meet the standard and the hammer comes down on you. Paul says that system was powerless to actually eradicate evil in us because it was weakened by the flesh. In other words, some

principle at work in us renders it unworkable. In fact it never has produced people totally free of evil and never will.

As exhibit A I give you the ancient Jewish Pharisees. They were some of the most scrupulously religious people who have ever lived. They had a rule that they were supposed to give a tenth of all of their income to God. They fretted to make sure that they gave a tenth of even the herbs they grew in their garden. In fact, they were very good people. They cared about being good. They obsessed about it. They didn't lie or steal. They never raped anyone. They stressed faithfulness to marriage vows. They protected children. They were good. But they also despised Gentiles. In other words, they were racist, and didn't think that was a problem. When Jesus showed up they reacted violently to him. He never did a single thing wrong in his entire life. He was the perfect human being, yet they plotted to have him killed. They did so because they perceived him to be a threat to their system of theology and most importantly, to their position and prestige. If people followed Jesus they would see them as wrong, so Jesus had to die. Is that good? That is being as evil as it is possible to be. That system can make people appear to be good, but it cannot make them genuinely good. It never has and never will.

True goodness is way deeper than just some things we do on the outside. The real eradication of evil, means that a person is at all times good in every way, that he never even has an uncharitable, impure, unkind or ignoble thought. The Law approach, the threat of punishment approach, demands that we work hard to stamp out every trace of evil even in our thoughts. How is that going to go?

While we were on vacation we did a spectacular first for us. Our terrific son-in-law, Michael, is a Marine fighter pilot. So we rented an airplane and he flew us around, giving us an aerial tour of the islands of Hawaii. It was amazing. But we encountered something gross before we took off. We were on the general aviation side of the airport, across the runway from the commercial terminal where everything is clean and efficient. On the other side it's not quite so nice. We all decided to use the restroom before our flight since there wasn't going to be one on the little Cessna we would be flying. When we got to the restrooms at the hangar we found a sign posted on the women's room door. It said, "Do not open. Thousands of cockroaches inside." It gave the number of the airport manager and encouraged us to call him to demand they get someone out to exterminate the roaches. We asked one of the guys who worked there if it was really that bad. He said one wall was covered with them. It was a solid wall of cockroaches. He said it was like something out of a horror movie. Laurie dared me to open the door. No way. I didn't want to see that because there are some things you will never be able

to unsee. So here is my question. How successful would you be at eradicating those roaches if you took a hammer into that room and tried to use it to smash them one by one? In addition to being a terrifying nightmare that would be a total failure. You couldn't hit them much of the time and you would never come to the end of the task. And that is what happens when we decide we are going to eliminate sin and evil in our lives by trying harder. We miss a lot of the time and the few we actually eliminate are just the tip of the iceberg.

Much of the time our understanding of the evil in us is way too shallow. Our problem is much more pervasive and far deeper rooted than a few failings or sins. God knew that to eradicate evil was going to require a total transformation of us. God's plan was to give us a whole new heart. He did that by starting with an incredible gift. It is the gift of righteousness, approval, simply by believing his gospel. The effect of that is to put gratitude, peace and love for him in our hearts. It is this gratitude, this peace, this love for him that changes us. It sets us free to begin being truly good because we are so thankful to him and because we love him so much. We are safe with him. We are welcomed by him, so we can relax, we can quit hiding, quit pretending, and just seek to live out our love for him.

The threat of punishment cannot change hearts. It cannot put real humility, love and peace in them. It can only coerce outward complicity, but it cannot put zeal and enthusiasm for true goodness in a heart. It can't put love for God in our souls. Only God's grace can do those things.

Romans 8:29 says, "For those God foreknew he predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." What God has done is not just save us from punishment, but put into effect a plan that will change us into people who are just like Jesus. Oh we won't have the divine qualities that he has. We're not God. But we will have the holy, good character of Jesus. We will have that some genuine, total goodness.

That process is happening right now in those who truly are gripped by the gospel. I despair at times for how frequently I see Christians promoting self-improvement programs, discussing of how to eliminate particular sins in their lives. Get out your hammer and start smashing those bugs. It won't work. It will only mimic the problem of the Pharisees. We need to be gripped by the good news that God loves us and accepts us through Christ. Believe that, and live free in gratitude and love for him, and God will transform your heart. That process will only be complete when our life here is done. We see these great words in 1 John 3:2, "Dear friends, now we are children of God. and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him."

God's legal action of making it possible for us to be declared righteous because of what Jesus has done for us has also made it possible for him to work in such a way that he uses his supernatural power and grace to finally totally transform us. We will finally be rid of the evil that does so much harm to ourselves and others.

WHY IS FAITH SO IMPORTANT?

So this whole discussion is based on the idea that we are declared righteous by God because we believe his promise. Faith, trusting his promise is the key. Ephesians 2:8 says "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith." Why would God make that the pivotal matter? Why is just believing a promise such a big deal?

One reason is that it is something that we can actually do. I can't stomp out every single roach in my heart. I can't come anywhere close to making myself truly good. But I can believe God. I can do what Abram did, which is to say if God promised it then that's all I need. I believe it.

Another aspect of this answer, though, is that all evil begins with failing to believe God. Every disobedience to God begins with failure to believe God. A teenager sneaks out of his house to go to a party that his parents have refused to permit him to go to. He disobeys them. Before he ever disobeys he has had a failure of faith. His parents say, "we know what is best for you and want what is best for you, so we are saying no." But being all knowing, as most teenagers are, he is certain that his parents, being old fuddy duddies, neither know what is best or want what is best for him. They just want what is easiest for them. They want to control him. He does not believe in them, so he disobeys. Notice that his disobedience began with lack of faith in his parents.

Every time we disobey God, every time there is evil in our hearts and lives, there has first been a failure of faith. So Hebrews 11:6 tells us "without faith it is impossible to please God." Pleasing God, who always wants good for us and in us, begins with faith. Without faith, there will never be true goodness.

IMPLICATIONS

LIVE IN THE REALITY

This is a thunderously crucial truth for all of us. It is the most joyful, peaceful news that we will ever hear. God tells us to believe his promise and he will count it as righteousness to us. There is nothing we can add to that. There is nothing we must do to maintain it. Nothing can subtract from it or take it away. Let the wonder of this truth fill your soul, for it is the peace, the humility, the gratitude and the love

that this truth brings that transforms us. It changes us from striving, fighting, defensive, critical, fearful, resentful people, into joyful, peaceful, humble, accepting, confident, grateful, hopeful content people who love God fiercely. There is no other force, nothing else we can do that can bring about that change. And when we are confident, hopeful, content, joyful, humble, grateful people who love God we will more and more become good from the very core of our being out.

LIVE OUT THE REALITY

This has huge implications for how we see God, how we see ourselves, and how we relate to other people. When we live out the reality of this incredible gift that God has given to us, understanding our utter inability to fix ourselves, it will have an enormous effect on how we think about and treat other failing, flawed people who are also unable to fix themselves. It means our response to them will be one not of disdain, or judgment, or criticism, but of empathy and acceptance.

On our flight home Laurie and I watched a movie called *The Water Diviner*. In it Russell Crowe plays Josh Conner, a farmer in the Australian Outback whose 3 sons join the army to fight in World War I and end up in the awful battle of Gallipoli. All 3 end up casualties. The resulting grief is too much for Josh's wife, who loses her grip on reality. She manages for 4 years, but eventually kills herself. There is a scene in the movie where Josh goes to the church his wife attended faithfully every Sunday to ask that she be buried in the church cemetery. The priest tells him the church's doctrine is that suicide is a sin, and that a person who commits that sin as their final act is not in a state of grace and cannot be buried in the consecrated ground. It is the law.

The man displays an utter lack of compassion and grace. It's just a movie, but it speaks to the face that Christians all too often have presented to the world. As I watched I thought, "Well, that's religion, no doubt, but it's not the Gospel of grace." If this message of righteousness by faith and by faith alone truly takes root in our hearts it is going to seriously soften them. It is going to fill them with compassion for fallen people. I know that because when I see Jesus in the gospels I see a man who had great compassion for the worst, the lowest people in his society. The only people he seemed to have a problem with were those very proper and religious people who had all the answers. If I am being changed into his image I think it a safe bet that is also going to be true of me.