

Are You Giving them God?

By Jay Wegter

What does it mean to give them God? There is a trend in preaching today to set forth principles and to flood people with hyper-grace comfort, security, and assurances without actually exhibiting the character and attributes of God. What tends to be neglected in these principle-saturated sermons is the setting forth of God himself. When was the last time you heard a sermon on the majesty of God and his perfections? It seems that countless pastors opt of the default mode is preaching principles. May I suggest that it is harder to preach God than it is principles? In fact, we are asking more of our parishioners when we preach God than when we preach principles, for we asking them to think very deeply about the Godhead. We do not approach the subject of God as merely a set of propositions. For God is made known by His works, His ways, His wisdom, His providence, and not solely by the declarations He makes about His character. He makes Himself known by how He saves and why he saves. Our salvation is God's condescension, for He unilaterally makes a covenant with guilty sinners by placing certain claims upon himself. He binds himself to his covenant people in such a way that He commits to 'harness' his own attributes making the exercise of them predictable in His care of His people. This is the manner in which we assures us of His faithfulness and trustworthiness. For, He does not act of out caprice, but pledges to act in perfectly consistent faithfulness on behalf of His people. The psalmists had an intimate understanding and recognition of this, for their worship and meditations focus on *personalizing* God's character and attributes. The outcome is that they rest upon God as their Rock, Bulwark, and Refuge. But, God's actions of harnessing His own attributes within the safety of the covenant does not mean he is merely putting Himself at man's disposal. What it does mean is that God is revealing His perfections in what He has decreed in redemptive history, and thus is carrying out that decree in divine providence. But many pulpits which are regarded today as 'expository' seem to be drawn to endless principlizing of every text. May I suggest, it is possible to give out principles and not be declaring the knowledge of God? We can't see the forest for the trees if we are not exalting God as the exalted 'Hero' of every text. But, that is where the work is involved, how is God magnified in a particular text? If by implication (by what we do not say), we are merely asking our people to trust a principle and not the Person of God himself, we should not be surprised if Christianity becomes formal and mechanistic. God's works and ways and wisdom

and wonders must be set forth so that our listeners are captivated with God's Person. When our hearers are left primarily with principles only, we may find we have actually increased their private doubts. On the outside they may be saying, as they shake hands, "great sermon pastor." But on the inside, we may have left them with a disturbing question, "In the face of my deplorable corruptions and my fickle truant heart, what is it about our perfect, holy, majestic God that makes Him so trustworthy and gracious toward an underserving sinner like myself?" I dare say, if you have only preached principles you have not answered that question. The answer to that question is multifold. It is God's grand purpose to reveal Himself and glorify Himself in the covenants He makes in redemptive history. This is where our overly-principlized approach to the text pastes us against a wall of non-perception. For we do not associate His commitment to His Name with His daily care of us. We do not join in our thinking and affections in that God has purposed in Christ, that He will accomplish together, His own glory and our highest good. We have a very difficult time dwelling on that link, between his zeal for His Name and His free bestowal of grace, love, and hope. In the gospel, God gives the knowledge of Himself, and He gives us the knowledge of Himself by giving Himself to us in Christ. Pastor is that where your soul feeds, upon this all-consuming mystery? Or, is your verbal ministry quite telling about your soul's 'eating habits'? Are you managing a host of biblical principles and making them march in single file from your pulpit at your command? Principlizing can be very reductionistic, it does not give God to your listeners. Principlizing can sow to our religious flesh, which is all too eager to commodify the benefits of salvation. By 'commodify', I mean this, the penitent comes away from a principle-laden message with the following sentiment, "I have cooperated with a set of principles which are guaranteed to produce a reliable set of benefits, therefore, I am 'good' with God." Where then are the experiences of God described in the Psalms. From the pens of the psalmists we hear of: the comfort of God's presence, of exceeding joy, spontaneous worship, panting after God in spiritual hunger, contrition, devastation, copious tears, bliss, and ecstasy. Principles alone can leave us with a mechanistic, detached, and formal Christian experience. A gentleman I have been discipling over this last year, seems to be measuring the index of his spirituality by keeping his heart in a place of groveling. I do appreciate his effort at humility, for he is very expressive of that mindset which says, 'why would God save a wretch like me?' But what seems to be missing or lacking is the kind of adoration and spontaneous worship that produces self-forgetfulness. Our communing with God, and our honoring of God ought never to

be an exercise in the familiar. God's moral majesty will always slay us with awe and wonder. For God's transcendent holiness is co-extensive with the infinitude of His other attributes. Thus, when one has been staggered by the truth of God's moral majesty, the greatest question implied is, "How can the defiled creature become right with God's righteousness?" The answer is not something that is neatly tied up as a package and filed away. God's purposes in grace do not square with any of our natural intuitions about God and religion. Our powers of cognition during the investigation will immediately fall short. For 'the mystery of godliness' and the mystery of His predestinating grace will, of necessity baffle us. It does not square with any earthly experience. Yet, our salvation is the result of this divine will and purpose. God makes a unilateral covenant in which, and by which, His own glory and excellence form gospel promises which showcase and exhibit this glory and excellence. We can never outgrow this incredible formula, namely, that God wills to be known by the satisfaction of His unchanging standard of righteousness through the Substitute He appoints. The fact that this decree is incredibly personal is thrilling. For, the story/message of this redeeming Substitute features the voluntarism and infinite love of the Substitute. We cannot say that the Substitute's love for His bride is greater than His love for His Father. For, in His infinite love for His Father and for His bride, He accomplishes both the glory of the Godhead and the salvation of the church. I fear that many pulpits have isolated the Person and work of Christ from this overarching purpose of the Godhead. This has an effect of giving us a sentimental Jesus, who evokes more sympathy than wonder and awe. Pastors need to develop the infinite merits of Christ and as Jonathan Edwards has said, "The glory of Christ is tied to the equipment he earned in order to save." This bothers people because it makes it sound like Jesus is mutable and had to earn something in order to be a Savior. But it is vastly shortsighted to suggest that Christ was God's lamb who takes away the sin of the world apart from being sacrificed. When you read the lyrics of Jesus' Joy of Man's Desiring, God's purpose and Christ humility are beautifully joined. Pastors, are we preaching manageable truth? There are countless aspects of God which are incomprehensible, we can only scratch the surface. That means that an encounter with God's self-revelation in Scripture will at times affect us in the following ways: we will be baffled, staggered, speechless, at a loss for words, no longer glib and garrulous. Is there a single thing in your sermon like this? Or is your sermon an exercise in, all *managing* and no *marveling*? Because preachers are not giving their congregations God himself, the fear of God is at an all-time low. There is no shuddering and quaking over the fact that God is like a furnace

who will very publicly consume everything that is not like Him in holiness. Have you proclaimed what it is about God that inspires reverential fear and awe? Psychology, with its rank humanism, has given us a god-concept, stripped of anything that would unnerve our fragile psyches. So how does this covenantal glory that God has purposed to reveal, transform those who behold it? If God's salvation plan is God giving us Himself so that the greatest gift of the gospel is God, then we better give them God when we preach. The fall of Lucifer and the fall of our first parents has not caused God to desist from his original purpose. He is still making men and women in his image by restoring them to His own image through Christ.

Thoughts from Psalm 19: There is Trauma in Praying the Way the Psalmist Prays

Why does presumptuous sin lead to great transgression? Well the Hebrew word for presumption in psalm 19 means *insolence*. It means to thumb your nose at God thinking you can escape consequences in his moral government. And as a Galatians 6 would say, it is a failed attempt to mock God. God's moral government in the grand demonstration described in Romans 9 go together, hand-in hand. Far from being able to use God, God uses people for his holy ends in the grand demonstration. The sheer weight and gravitas of being His image-bearer is stunning. For every individual will ultimately be a vessel of wrath or a vessel of mercy; a perpetual object lesson to the rational watching universe. No wonder David prays in Psalm 19, Lord acquit me of hidden faults. The Psalmist is continually conscious of God's moral government therefore he makes God's attributes as personal as possible. Yes, God is dealing with me in the safety of a covenant but I am relating to one who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. These omni-attributes mean that God is my environment. I am to live a Godward life in which I share my thought life with the Father. Do we fear God because He has a divine mallet of condemnation? May I suggest that for believers, our fear of God ought to be more closely tied to his grand demonstration, which is a plot to display His moral majesty in both justice and mercy. No creature can, or will complain. The weight of carrying the image of God means that every person's creational identity is to reflect their Maker. Fallen man does not contemplate what he owes God by virtue of being God's image.

Jesu' joy of man's desiring
Thou whose love shines down like a guiding light
Drawn to Thee with souls aspiring
Through our Father we reach a celestial height

Son of God we pray we may reach Thee
May we live in peace we beseech Thee

Open doors of truth unknown
As Thy love comes down from the heavenly throne
Teach us from Thy heavenly throne

Open doors of truth unknown
As Thy love comes down from the heavenly throne

Jesu, joy of man's desiring
Holy wisdom, love most bright
Drawn by Thee, our souls aspiring
Soar to uncreated light
Word of God, our flesh that fashioned
With the fire of life impassioned
Striving still to truth unknown
Soaring, dying round Thy throne

Jesus, joy of man's desiring
Holy wisdom, love most bright
Drawn by Thee, our souls aspiring
Soar to uncreated light Word of God, our flesh that fashioned
With the fire of life impassioned
Striving still to truth unknown
Soaring, dying round Thy throne
The original song continues with these words:
Through the way where hope is guiding
Hark, what peaceful music rings
Where the flock, in Thee confiding
Drink of joy from deathless springs
Theirs is beauty's fairest pleasure

Theirs is wisdom's holiest treasure
Thou dost ever lead Thine own
In the love of joys unknown

Why we need a regular Romans 9, 'reset'.

In a world of men deluded by their imagined sovereignty God says, "I alone am sovereign." (John 1; ; 6; & 17, Corinthians 1, Romans 9). There is no saving grace apart from divine sovereignty. Men are self-deceived in their imagined autonomy, thinking they can placate God and protect themselves from Him. They imagine that their status before God is self-directed and self-determined. Thus, sovereign grace is the most humbling doctrine in the Bible. It brings low because it states that God makes distinctions out of His own good pleasure. As the only Sovereign, He alone is the Distinction-maker. Therefore, what distinguishes you from your reprobate neighbor must be credited to His sovereign pity alone. His gracious choice is designed to eliminate all boasting. We ought to frequently read Romans 9 with the intent of having our perspective reset. As it says in Proverbs, "though a fool is ground in a mortar and pestle, his folly will not depart from him" (Prov 27:22). Our folly is the autonomy lie—it is wedded to our flesh.

Prayer and the gospel make God big, and people small. The themes of Romans 9 have the power to reset our thinking. Those Romans 9 themes are: *God's purpose is realized by election, God, the potter has the absolute right to select His objects of mercy and compassion, the cause of His grace is not due to man's willing or running, but to God who has mercy, God recognizes no merit on earth that should earn reward, God uses people, people do not use God, as the sovereign potter He has the right to harden whom He desires and have mercy on whom He desires, He has the absolute right over the clay to make vessels of honor or to make vessels of dishonor from the same lump, His intent is to pour out the riches of mercy on vessels of honor, and pour out His wrath upon vessels of dishonor, He will call every elect vessel through faith.*

We desperately need a regular Romans 9 reset because public education, the media, entertainment, culture, politics, and psychology all operate with the full assumption that we live in a man-centered world in which humanism is normalized. The message of God's sovereignty crushes man's trust in his own righteousness, in his own will, and his imagined autonomy. This brings a man so low that he is finally made to see that he desperately needs the exercise of God's sovereign pity. If that truth were not enough to baffle us and bring us low, the

parallel truth is that God never violates the will of the creature, whether the Pharaoh of Egypt or Saul of Tarsus. God's intent according to 1 Corinthians 1-3 is to publicly destroy all human wisdom. As the divine means of destroying carnal wisdom, I picture God lowering the cross onto this planet like an immense wedge of carbon steel. Every time it touches human wisdom it reduces it to dust and rubble.

God has two great ways of destroying carnal wisdom. God's wisdom has two parts 1) Christ Himself and 2) Him crucified. God's wisdom is not esteemed by men as wise or strong, yet it is cherished as the wisdom of God and the power of God by those who are being saved. The first point of God's wisdom is the mystery of Christ Himself, the hypostatic union. God's infinite wisdom is shown in His giving of Christ. The glory of our Savior is seen in His fitted-ness to be our perfect Substitute (Hebrews 7). That the God man should be the propitiatory sacrifice in order to be for sinners, the God-approved righteousness, and the very covenant of His people, is not comprehensible to the natural mind. No person who clings to a single speck of self-righteousness has ever really understood the two aspects of God's wisdom. For the message of the cross, believed and applied, completely destroys a legal spirit (see Rom 7).

Another way which God destroys carnal pride is by choosing people that are not esteemed as wise or noble. God establishes His purpose by choosing the foolish, the unwise, the base, and the poor-born, and He does this to accomplish His purpose of ultimately removing what the world regards as wise and mighty (see God despising what man esteems). This is astounding, God seeks to shame what the world esteems. 1 Corinthians 1 terminates with this statement, "That by his doing you are in Christ Jesus," (not by your doing). God's wisdom is Christ and Him crucified and His distinguishing, redeeming love of His elect—that grace may be truly grace (Rom). God is eliminating the possibility of even one instance of boasting when it comes to a person's salvation. His purpose is that our faith may rest in His divine wisdom and not in the wisdom of men (1 Corinthians 2). Christ and Him crucified is where our faith should rest. This object of divine wisdom, Christ and Him crucified is where our knowledge of God must reside. For the giving of Christ to those who are elected unconditionally is joined to the gracious granting of the knowledge of God, who gives Himself to the sinners He calls by the gospel. But further, how does the proclamation of this message of Christ and Him crucified, and God's sovereign bestowal of grace, how does that give us God (or the knowledge of God)? When we consider what it is about God that moves us to admiration, and worship, and awe, it is not the mere academic study of His

attributes. Though there is rich spiritual food in studying God's character and perfections (see Charnock), but, if we merely study God's attributes as an academic exercise, we might find ourselves admiring but not exulting. For God's attributes are showcased and exhibited in their exercise as God plans and obtains our salvation. This is featured up close in 2 Peter 1:2-4. God's own glory and excellence are harnessed by God, and then cast into glorious and magnificent gospel promises. These promises make us partakers of the divine nature, and escapees of the corruption that is in the world by lust.

So how does God's wisdom in Christ, and Him crucified give us God? We are to view God's attributes from the vantage point of union with Christ, for our Savior is both our 'observatory' (from which we behold God), and the object of our beholding (2 Cor 3:18; 4:6). When the eyes of my heart focus on Him by faith, I understand that He, in Himself, restores everything I lost in Adam and infinitely more (Eph 1, 3). God in giving his Son to those who were dead in sin, become recipients of the gift of God Himself.

Now, back to how we are to think upon His attributes, consider that at the cross, the full spectrum of God's attributes were put on display. Christ being bent over in agony on Calvary's cross was like a crystal prism bending light to enable us to see all of the spectral colors of the rainbow. All of God's attributes were put on display in our salvation. Think of it, Christ's death is made our death to sin, Christ's resurrection and glorification is made the cause of our resurrection and glorification. For, our salvation includes the glory we will gain in Christ at our glorification (2 Thess 2:13-14). When we consider that our cleansing, righteousness, sonship, justification are all wonderful salvific blessings which are traceable to God making us the objects of His attributes, it should stagger us, for His attributes were exercised in forming the very gospel promises that made us His people. Therefore, the question, "what is God like?"—must be joined to how He saves. What is there about God that rocks me, staggers me, fills me with wonder, love and praise, reverential fear and adoration? The answer is the fact that He should make His glorious self-revelation take place through the manifestation of His attributes, put on display in our salvation. The true believer is a beholder and a possessor both. The true believer can say, "I will never be able to exhaust all that God is toward me in Christ."

The world sees no value in the dereliction of the Son of God. They see no wisdom there. But this is wisdom that towers over the human intellect. For the sinner cannot be beautiful to a holy God but by the cross. And the holy God cannot be beautiful to the sinner but by the cross of Christ. There is no eternal

life for those who are not right with God's righteousness, only physical death, and the second death await them. But, true believers are right with God's righteousness because their Substitute is the perfectly righteous Son of God. They are accepted in the Beloved; united to Christ Who is their life (Col 3).

Just a word again about God's non-violation of the human will. This is a stunning truth that is true both of the reprobate and the believer. Though the sinner is in a state of spiritual deadness and depravity and has total spiritual inability, his will of desire is not violated by God. This begs the question, "What is the created purpose for the image of God?" Is there an immense conjunction between the image of God and salvation and reprobation? (JRW will develop later). If you can be saved by trusting human wisdom, then it would primarily be the wise who would be saved (1 Cor 1). Preachers of the First and Second Great Awakenings, knew how to preach total depravity, original sin, the bondage of the will, and the urgency of salvation. They knew how to shine an exposing light on the chains that held the unregenerate sinner fast. They could preach the dire urgency of salvation without preaching human ability. They never flattered sinners. They actually believed that the new birth was sovereignly and monergistically bestowed. But, God does not violate a man's will even when He grants the new birth. These doctrines are certainly a paradox when considered together (human responsibility, human inability, and divine sovereignty). In theology, we refer to this apparent contradiction as an antinomy. On judgment day it will be publicly revealed that those who love and desire Christ, belong to Him, and will be with Him forever. But, it will also be revealed that those who do not desire Christ will experience a Christ-less eternity (for Judgment Day will prove that they lived and died as 'enemies of the cross of Christ'—Philippians 3:18). The challenge of preaching this way today is vigorously opposed by man-centered psychology and the enthronement of reason. We have lost the ability and the desire to preach the antimony. We have refused to take pages from Moses' sermons in which, through him, God commands his hearers to circumcise their own hearts (Deut 10:16). How is a command like this to be perceived if we have removed the antimony? If we have dismissed the antimony, then men will imagine that they can do what only God can do. And yet what Moses commands, something that is humanly impossible, is consistent with Jeremiah's assessment that a leopard cannot change his spots (Jer 13:23). Jeremiah goes on to say that your sins are indelibly written on your heart by an iron stylus containing a diamond point (Jer 17:1). Your sins are more dear to you than your own children (). But today's preachers see the antimony as counterproductive, as a

discouragement to sinners, even an insult to them. Why would God command what is beyond our power and capacity? That would be foolish and silly. But as packer points out in his Introduction to Owen's *Death of Death*, the sinner, in hearing about his inability, is actually hearing something that is advantageous to his conviction of sin and thus to his awakening by the spirit (example of playing poker in a burning warehouse). Preaching the antinomy has been used throughout church history to produce the *desperation factor* for as long as sinners think they possess the golden key to their salvation, as if it is resting in their pants pocket, they will continue in their apathy, presuming that salvation is within their own power and capacity.

When the spirit is going to save someone, He introduces true desperation into the conscience so that the individual's cry for mercy is not only the cry for compassion and pity, but also is the cry for the ability to believe and repent! George Whitefield preached what we fear to preach today, namely that the gospel is dead apart from the Holy Spirit (endnote). The Gospel is good news because of the Holy Spirit—the gospel is the power of God because of the Spirit, and because the gospel comes bringing with it the ability to comply with what it requires and demands. It has the power to grant faith and repentance, and to resurrect the dead sinner from his tomb of total depravity. This very resurrection which the sinner so desperately needs, finds its source in Christ's resurrection.

How salvation begins sets the believer on a path in which he can consciously and rationally say, 'no good thing dwells in my flesh' (2 Cor 3), and even in all his serving, he can say, 'not I, but Christ' (Gal 2:20). And, of our utter dependency, Christ also said 'apart from me you can do nothing' (John 15). So how God saves puts us, all of grace through faith, places us on a path governing how we are to walk (quote Col 1).