

1.7.18 Closing the Gap on Faith and Love

Today we being a yearlong series called "Closing the gap on faith and love"

-7 seasons...7 sub-series with different applications of the same principle.

Five devotions per week tied to the scripture and theme for each week.

Today:

1. Introduce the concept/principle
2. Give the key scripture and other scriptures
3. Give our year long application that will show up in a variety of different ways.

INTRO:

The Washington Post had an article "What makes some men sexual harassers? Science tries to explain the creeps of the world."

Problem is, it can't...not really.

For all the helpful advances in scientific knowledge, they can tell us nothing about the real inner life of a human being...the soul, that is the engine that drives all human behavior.

They can't...because it is beyond the scope of science to understand or explain this.

Partly because many of them doubt the existence of anything that is more than the physical "us"...they don't believe we are anything other than "circuits"

Psychology is a word that means the "study of the soul"...but many psychologists don't believe in a "soul" as such.

But even if a scientist believed in a soul and decided to study the soul using the scientific method, how would she do that?

I know she could observe and measure...but its all from the outside...the soul cannot be dissected in a lab.

We must have help...we need God to tell us who and what we really are.

Because we live from our souls...we shape them through choice, and then they in turn shape our choices.

As to the "science of abusers"...There are some measurable factors that corrupted the hearts of these men but what led to their behavior was a process that always goes like this:

Over time...

They believed something (this is real)

They formed values based on what they believed (what is important and "good")

They acted/lived in line with they thought was valuable (I will do this now, I will not do that now)

Became what they acted on (what I consistently believe, value, and do becomes who I am)

Everyone, everywhere, all the time is undergoing spiritual development.

All humans are spiritual beings and all humans are being shaped as they move through the world into something.

All souls are changing into something other than what they currently are.

Everyone is closing the gap on where he or she is now and where he or she is "pointed" on the inside.

No one is static...all souls are moving in a direction.

If an object is moving through space at a certain speed in a certain direction it will continue at that speed and direction unless something changes.

Maybe the object is a space ship and an engine fires and redirects the ship...alters it course...new energy is brought into the circumstances.

Maybe it is sucked into the gravity of a planet.

You could predict the future of an individual if you knew all the aspects of their inner life.

Not their future in terms of what might happen to them...but their future in terms of who they will become.

You could plot a trajectory from where they have been, where they are...and where they will be unless something changes that trajectory.

They could make an entirely different set of choices...of course a set of choices always begins with a single choice...and they would change directions and who they will become.

But substantial, spiritual transformation is only possible if God intervenes in a person's trajectory.

He provides an engine and fuel that was not even present before.

If a person submits to God and begins to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and operate in community with other believers...then the trajectory changes in a new direction.

But I'm a believer and I'm not changing...I said "If" a person submits and continually cooperates with the Spirit and operates in community...that is an important "if"

The accurate predictor of who I will become...what shape I will take is what I am currently believing, valuing, doing.

If you have not seen someone in some time and then you spend time with them and are surprised by the change...for the better or for the worse...you can be sure it is not merely chance that brought the change.

It is not external circumstances either...it is internal factors that have made the person standing before you.

"That's not true! What about things that have been done to them or happened in their lives...those things change a person."

Okay, but think about it...what actually "changes" a person?

Is it what happens to them?

Or their consistent, over time inner response to what happens to them?

I first met a man years ago soon after he returned from combat...he was not functioning...not doing well...I met with him a few times.

I saw him again, after some years, just a few months ago...he was different, very, very different...joyfully functional...still struggling, but with some obvious joy and clear change in his overall life.

The same man, same events in his past (the past will always be unchangeable).

He had practiced different internal responses to those past events.

Same past, different internal response...different external life.

Everything changes everyone...we are not static.

I have known people who have experienced similar difficulties but have responded in very different ways internally...the same event did not send them in the same direction.

My point is not to cast blame or inflict guilt...but to cast hope and inflict vision.

My point in all this is to try and convince you of what I believe is clear from scriptures and experience...

That is you can decide to change, to grow, to become a person whose insides increasingly look like Jesus.

As this happens we are living closer and closer to our design and more and more we are experiencing life as God has intended it to be lived.

There are many things you cannot just decide to do or be...we are limited beings.

You can, however decide to become more like Jesus

God is all for it and if we become consistently for it ourselves...we will experience it.

It is important to understand how this change actually happens.

I used the analogy of an object moving through space...and that implies passivity...same speed and direction until something new happens.

And passivity is a choice, do nothing more or different than what you have done and you will continue the same direction...however there are lots of objects you can crash into.

Things can go well for the passive person...until they don't.

The choice not to choose is a choice...and it is always, in the end, a disastrous one

God can bring transformational desire and power in our hearts...but we must willingly and consistently access that power.

Even when we do...long years of choices that have become habits must be overcome over time.

The path of growth, maturity, and ongoing victory is the path of small, quiet, consistent steps.

Closing the gap...requires believing, valuing, and doing.

Your life can be different, your marriage, your emotions, your work perspective, we have a choice in all of these things and more.

I have challenged us to live a single story life

Because it is a single story world...to try and live otherwise is to try and live in unreality.

No part of our lives remains untouched by our inner trajectory...you are being spiritually formed...its happening whether you intend for it to happen or not.

And how you are being formed...impacts your work, your parenting, your thinking, your feeling, your future "you"

It is really, really important that you are spiritually formed in the right way, by ongoing choices, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The relationship you have with your spouse, parents, self...are directly tied to your relationship with God.

I understand it takes two to have a relationship...but it only takes one, to respond in a God-honoring way...and that one who responds to God(regardless of what others do)...will experience God.

This is not about trying harder, adding more things to your spiritual "do list"...pray more, prayer better, pray harder.

It is about understanding what it looks like to close the gap.

You may very well decide that it's helpful to pray more, or better, or harder (whatever that means)

But a life of ongoing victory over sin and spiritual growth is accessible to everyone...it is important that we understand what it looks like how it happens.

Proverbs 4:23 "Above all else guard your heart, it is the well spring of life."

We live out of our "hearts"...the inner "us"

They have been shaped and are being shaped by our choices and experiences...then they direct our lives.

This is true on a macro and a micro scale.

When you look around and see famine, war, epidemic...human catastrophes...these are almost always reflections of ruin and disaster in human hearts.

I don't mean individual sufferers are the cause of these disasters...I mean they are often suffering because of the ruin in some wicked ruler's heart.

Most often when there is large scale, lasting human misery...it can be traced back to human sin...ruined souls in charge of countries and armies and economies and disaster responses.

And the average person who just wants to live life, suffers because of the ruin in the leader's soul.

The same is often true of individual human disasters (hearts and relationships of people)...life produces plenty of drama all by itself.

But there is too often we create drama because of the shape our hearts.

It is really is about our internal response to God and life...that shapes us.

I have seen couples suffering through the loss of a child or some other terrible circumstance...and yet, their relationships and homes are places of beauty and peace.

It takes time for them to find their way and there are many tears along the way...but they do find their way, and they learn to weep together...and I have seen beauty emerges from the ashes.

I have seen belief...become value...become behavior...become beauty...in the midst of human drama.

I have also seen people turn their lives and relationships into ugliness unnecessarily.

They create drama where there need not be drama.

Either through the choice to not choose the good...or the choice to choose the bad.

Or just the choice to not choose...which is always a bad choice.

How much money and effort go into producing people who are merely capable of coping with their lives on earth in a non-destructive manner? (Willard)...military, prison system, police, many other parts of society.

You have a say in who you will be.

God has given it to you.

You cannot do it without him and he will not do it for you.

But you can join him in what he desires for you to become.

It is important that you believe this to be true and real (possible)

This is going to sound simplistic...and it is simple (as in not complex) but it goes to the root of change.

"Why would I look at that evil image, or do that deed, or say that unkind word...now that I know what is true and real about the world and now that I am learning to value what is valuable?"

When the heart is changing the behavior is changing...but its not legalism...**outside in.**

Or merely behavior modification...putting more and more pressure on the will.

We want our wanters to change.

Transformation that is inside out...what you see out here, is an the result of what you can't see in here.

The really good news is we can become people who increasingly want what we ought to want...we can learn to value what is ultimately valuable.

Ideally, you would do whatever you want to do...because you would want to do what you ought.

"Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." Ps. 37:4

This is not a verse that presents God as a means to our end (he will give us what we desire), but rather God is the end (if we delight in him, we will get our desire)

Spiritual formation is the Spirit driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself. (Willard)

The focus is internal; the results will always show up externally.

If internal change is occurring, external change will always follow.

**Closing the gap on faith...relationship with God
Closing the gap on love...relationship with others**

Great commandment that sums up the OT

"Love God with heart, soul, mind, strength"

"Love others as you love yourself"

What exactly does it look like, practically to close the gap on faith and love?

Theme verse for the year.

2Th. 1:3 We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.

4 Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

In every one of his letters (except Galatians, whom Paul was very unhappy with) Paul begins by thanking God for the spiritual progress of those he is writing to.

He feels an obligation to pay attention to their growth and to both thank God for it and to commend the believers for their part in it.

"We **ought** always to thank God for you"

"**Rightly so**"

Because your faith is growing more and more and your love for one another is increasing.

This growth they are experiencing is in the face of great persecution and trial.

A difficult external situation was not keeping them from internal orientation to God in faith and others in love.

Faith and Love simply and profoundly express the total Christian walk.

Here are some other verses that describe this truth:

1Cor. 16:13 Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. 14 Do everything in love.

Gal. 5:6b The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Eph. 1:15 For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints

Eph. 3:17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,

1 Thess 3:6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love.

My understanding of what it means to grow in faith and love is this:

Faith is revealed in obedience to God

Love is revealed in service and sacrifice for one another.

Both are practical...not merely theoretical.

Faith and love are about belief and values...but what we actually believe and value...we do.

John is super direct in showing how real and important this correlation is.

1John 4:20 If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

It is a terrible thing when people claim to know and love God and yet fail to show love to their families, their neighbors...let alone strangers and their enemies.

faith: obedience (Putting God first in my life)

love: service (Putting other's needs first in my life)

Sound like a bummer?

Sound hard and oppressive?

Stop and think about it.

When you have put self first...how has it felt...how has it worked out?

When you did your own thing over God's will and the good others...have you been happy, fulfilled, more at peace?

Of course not.

We want to close the gap on where we are now and where we can be in faith and love.

We are all undergoing spiritual transformation...we want to be proactive in what it looks like.

We want to be formed into the image of Christ and not malformed into another shape.

Faith: in Scripture is revealed most clearly in obedience.

-You might say "no, its shown in love."

-Okay...but love for God is revealed most clearly in obedience to him.

1 John 5:3 This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome,

Obedience is not bondage it is freedom.

We were made by God for God, we reveal our belief in this by choosing to value what he values...this shows up in what we do.

We obey.

When the doing of his will doesn't seem good to you...back up a step

What do you think is most valuable?

Back up another step...what do you really believe is true?

Now, move forward again to the doing...now, what do you really want to do?

Recently I thought I wanted to say something to Christy.

-Not yell, or fuss...but to critique (which is not always wrong, but also, often not right)

-On this particular day...I thought for a few minutes about what I believe to be true...about God, her, life.

-It led to me to "feel" what is valuable to me...loving her is valuable, the pleasure of God.

-I didn't say what I had wanted to say...**more importantly.**

I didn't "want" to say that anymore...it didn't seem good to me to do anymore.

This has not been a common thing for me, but it will be more and more...because I like it...I intend to close the gap more and more...on faith and love...**because it is just so good.**

I like it when I value what is valuable, and do what is beautiful...or fail to do what is not beautiful.

By all means if all you have right now is..."I want to say this, but shouldn't...so I won't."

Then good for you...hold your tongue.

But the direction we are heading is towards...wanting to do what is good to do and not wanting to do what is not good to do.

So the goal of growth is:

Faith: obedience

Love: putting the needs of others first

The path of growth is:

Small, incremental steps.

We are after heart change but hearts are shaped by habits and patterns and carefully choosing thoughts and beliefs.

So if you want to close the gap embrace the "disciplines" of the Christian life.

-Prayer

-Life in community

-Worship

-Scripture intake

-Quiet reflection

-and others

You might be disappointed if you were excited about "closing the gap and growing this year"

And hoped I had a new insight, or plan, or some gee-whiz program that will make growth seamless and easy.

I don't.

The plan is: talk to God, listen to God, talk to one another, listen to one another...show up, be honest, try, trust...sing, read, obey.

That's it...that's the plan.

But I am convinced that what God has given us: his Spirit, his Word, his people...is all we need to thrive and close the gap.

We do, I think, need to more consistently work smarter not just harder.

By smarter I mean...do the things that lead to growth, but think clearly about **how** they lead to growth.

Mindlessly reading verses in the Bible doesn't have any impact whatsoever...we have to understand what we are reading.

Because we have to do truth not just read it in order for it to show up as liberty in our lives.

Jesus said "Whoever has and obeys my commands...will be set free by their knowledge of the truth."

Forcing yourself to obey, to not say or see or do the dark thing is good

But it will be really helpful to take the time this year to contemplate the believing and the valuing that are empowering the doing or not doing.

Why do it?

Why not do?

What do I want? How do I learn to want what I ought to want?

For God's glory, the good of others...my own joy and liberty.

GIVE IT TO ME STRAIGHT

*Here I am right now (standing on stage)

*I will not be right here one year from now

*I will be different...I may be here, or there.

*God has given me both responsibility and privilege of deciding who I will be...but I must choose.

1. Believe your choice matters

-God is all for it...he wants you to be all for it as well.

2. Understand what you are after

-To be shaped like the Lord Jesus on the inside

3. Two ways this shape shows up

-Faith: obedience to God (doing what he wants, growing in wanting to do what he wants)

-Love: putting the interests of others first (learning to enjoy the joy of this)

Obedience and Love are his invitation for us to join in his joy and wholeness.

You are being spiritually formed.

You will not take a break this year from spiritual formation.

Everything you do, everywhere you go is shaping you into something.

It may sound oppressive...or it may sound exciting...you actually have a say in who you become.

God has given it to you.

You will be shaped...choose your shape...by choosing God's path of transformation.

"God invites us to leave our burdensome ways of heavy labor— especially the “religious” ones—step into the yoke of training with him. This is a way of gentleness and lowliness, a way of soul rest. It is a way of inner transformation that proves pulling his load and carrying his burden with him to be a life that is easy and light (Matthew 11: 28-30). The perceived distance and difficulty of entering fully into the divine world and its life is due entirely to our failure to understand that “the way in” is the way of pervasive inner transformation and to our failure to take the small steps that quietly and certainly lead to it. Willard, Dallas.

That is the challenge and the invitation before us this year...close the gap.