

Pursuing God

Our message today is a continuation of the study we began last week, as we observed the way in which John the Baptist sent some of his disciples on to follow after the Lord Jesus.

You will recall that John the Baptist was being held in prison for having criticized King Herod for his sinful relationship with his brother's wife. And while John was there in the prison, some of the disciples of John had been following the Lord Jesus around the countryside, witnessing Jesus teaching and preaching and healing many who were in need.

And here, in these words of Luke chapter 7, we find those men reporting to John the Baptist all the many things they had seen and heard Jesus do. Follow along with me as I read those words, beginning with verse 18.

¹⁸The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, ¹⁹calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" ²⁰And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?' " ²¹In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. ²²And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. ²³And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." (Luke 7:18-23)

Last week, as we began our study of these precious scriptures given here in Luke chapter 7, we noted that God is able to use many different ways and means of "grace" as He draws each of us to the Lord Jesus. And here, in these words, while it might seem as if John is asking a question about whether or not Jesus is the "coming Messiah", we said that John's sending of his followers to make inquiry of the Lord Jesus, was for the greater purpose of actually passing these men on to be disciples of Jesus.

John knew that during the time these men had followed with him in his ministry of repentance, they had taken the first steps toward their eternal life. But now, they would need to take the next step, the step of salvation, and that it would

be Jesus and Jesus alone who could provide that step. And so, John then sent them to the Lord Jesus.

And in doing that, we need to understand that the answers these men would receive, were meant to bring about a permanent change. These men would no longer be followers of John. They would become disciples of Christ, the Lord Jesus.

And God has given these words and this understanding to you and me also. It has been that often, you and I will begin our Christian experience simply as followers of the ideas and concepts of Christianity, doing churchy things, church attendance and other such things.

But there must come a time within our souls that we too will go directly to the Lord Jesus and personally ask of Him, are you the "One", the "One" who will be my "Savior", my personal, my one and only "Savior"? And once, we have taken that step, God truly intends for our life and our lifestyle to change. It is at that point that God's Holy Spirit will put an intensity within our relationship with the Lord Jesus and will move us on from simply doing the usual Sunday "churchy things" to actually begin to do as A. W. Tozer words it, "following hard after Jesus", experiencing an insatiable desire within our hearts to go further than we have ever been before, and to "pursue" after the Lord Jesus all the rest of the days of our lives.

Folks, this is God's design for each of us. That we ourselves would not follow after one preacher or another, or one church or another. But instead, that we would only pursue after and follow the person of the Lord Jesus.

And this should be the desire of every preacher, every pastor and every church leader, that every member of their church would be a disciple of the Lord Jesus and of Him alone.

I do fear that in this age of Mega Churches where Pastors and church leaders seem to want to accumulate followers to themselves, and to assimilate members into an ever-growing congregation, that there may be an essential element missing from their focus.

May I say again that within the plans and within the efforts of every pastor and of every church, small or large, there must be this same message that John The

Baptist is giving here in these words, the message that each person must be sent to Jesus personally to ask the question, "are you the Savior of souls and will you be the Savior of my soul?"

And then once the answer to that question is satisfied, the person must begin from that moment forward to pursue after and follow hard after the Person of the Lord Jesus.

May we pause for a moment and remind ourselves of how we got to this precious circumstance of our coming directly to the Lord Jesus and asking these essential questions. Hidden within all the many efforts of prophets like John the Baptist, and also the preachers and evangelists of our day, is the secret working of God's Hand to draw each of us to Himself. It is all part of God's first step of "grace," the grace spoken about in Ephesians 2:8-9,

⁸For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: ⁹Not of works, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Folks, this blessed gift of "grace" actually began with a transaction that was completely unknown to us. Ephesians chapter 1 tells us that it actually began even before the foundations of the world were laid, with God choosing to save our souls. And then as the Book of Revelation tells us, He then wrote our names down in a special Book called "The Lamb's Book of Life", all without our ever knowing it took place.

And then also, sometime after we were born on this earth, God took another step of His "grace" by doing as John chapter 6 tells us, "He drew us to Jesus" to receive our final salvation. I think perhaps that this was what was taking place as John the Baptist sent His disciples to Jesus to ask those questions about whether He was the coming Messiah.

In the Book of John chapter 1, we are told that as we are drawn to the Lord Jesus, we must "believe" on Him and we must "receive" Him. And with that, then the first part of "grace" is complete. We are saved!

But as here with John's disciples, their trek had only begun. And so has ours!

Coming to Jesus, believing in Him and receiving Him as our Savior truly is only the first step of the gift of "grace" that God gives to us. Next comes a required

response from us, from you and me. This is the point in God's "grace" when our hearts begin what A. W. Tozer calls, our "Pursuit of God".

But how does that actually work out for us in our individual lives? What is it that causes you and me to turn from the busyness of our day, from those old desires of our souls, from the plans that we've made for ourselves, to turn and leave it all behind to find another, more powerful, more demanding thing? The answer is, "It comes out of the heart of God through the mysterious working of His Holy Spirit".

In his book, "The Pursuit of God", A. W. Tozer speaks about that stirring up of men's souls and the drawing of them into the plans, the purposes and even into the very presence of God. He calls that "stirring up" of men's souls, "Prevenient Grace". It's a term that we don't use very often, but for you and me, it simply means that before a man or a woman can begin to seek after God, God must first have sought after them.

Before a sinful man or woman can think a right thought of God, there must first have been a reaching forth by God, a work of illumination, "a lamp unto his feet, a light unto his path" done within that man. The man's steps are unsure and imperfect at first, but a true work nonetheless is begun. And, as A. W. Tozer puts it, it will be the secret cause of all desiring and seeking and praying within his soul that will follow.

Folks, we must understand that we pursue after God because, and only because, He has first sought after us. He has first put an urge within our souls that draws and spurs us to that pursuit. As we mentioned earlier, the Lord Jesus has said that,

"No man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him". (John 6:44)

And then, by God taking that first step, every vestige of credit for our coming to Him belongs to God and never to us. Our impulse to pursue God originates with God, but the outworking of that impulse is ours, our "following hard" after Him. All the time we are pursuing him, God already has hold of our hand, leading us and guiding us towards Himself.

In Psalm 139, we read those simple words, "your right hand will hold me fast".

In God's divine upholding, and our human "following" there is no contradiction. All is of God. God and His "stirring up" is always "previous" to our own.

Let me say this another way. In a very practical sense, you and I must put forth our own effort to pursue after God. But, at the same time, our pursuit is an irresistible response to His secret drawing of us. We feel the same need that David felt as he cried out to God, in Psalm 42 saying,

- ¹ As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So pants my soul for You, O God.
- ² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. (Psalm 42:1-2)

And yes, this desire within us to pursue after God will seem especially strange to our newly converted soul. It arises from deep within the hidden parts of our soul and spirit. And God reminds us in Romans chapter 8 how in the weakness of those moments, we don't even know how to pray. But God's Spirit knows how to pray. And with groans that you and I can't comprehend, the Holy Spirit cries out from within us to God the Father, expressing truths that only God can understand. And then, by a powerful unction of God's Holy Spirit within us, our own spirit begins to answer His call.

Dear friends, I do fear that in today's evangelical rush to get men and women saved, it is too often the case that we substitute something far less than all of this. It seems that we can convince men and women that they are saved, without any of this "hungering" or "thirsting" for God taking place.

I do fear that many people within today's congregations are far more caught up in the many vigorous activities and festivities, that an intimate relationship with the Person of Christ gets forfeited in favor of a Christianity that is centered upon catering to the personal needs of the individuals.

And that all seems good, and to some extent it is. But such is not all that God wants and desires of us.

He wants you and me to move on past the many desires that we have for our own selves, on into having an intimate desire for Him, personally. He wants us to truly come to know Him personally and to hunger for a relationship with Him.

And yes, God is God, and in His being as God, He is truly unknowable. But yet, in Christ, He has revealed Himself to us in a form and in a personality that we can

reach across that divide and come to know Him well and intimately. Jesus said, "When you have seen me, you have seen the Father".

And thankfully, God does not even stop there. He goes on further and also gives us His Holy Spirit to abide in our presence, ever revealing the person and personality of Christ.

Simply put, God has made Himself available to you and to me so that we might come to Him and have a deep and intimate love relationship with Him. He has given us everything that we need to make knowing Him an easy effort.

But in order for that to actually take place, we must willingly and intentionally join with God in His "grace", join with Him by pursuing hard after the Lord Jesus, with an always ongoing and continual pursuit.

We know that we cannot get to know another person with only a chance meeting, or even with several encounters. It is only after many, many interactions and exchanges of thoughts and ideas and favors that we are able to perceive the thoughts and the intents of the other person's heart and begin to enjoy and trust them.

And in that same way, it is only after many, many personal interactions and exchanges with the Lord Jesus, the opening up of our heart to Him and the receiving of His favors and blessings, that we are able to comprehend His heart and begin to know and to enjoy and to trust Him.

God truly is a person. He is not just some entity out there in the heavens. He is truly a person. He loves, He hates, He is patient and longsuffering, in Christ He weeps, in His Holy Spirit, He grieves. God is truly a person and He wants us to love Him as a person. In both the Old and the New Testaments, that is His cry to us, "Love me! Love me with all of your heart, all of your soul, all of your mind and all of your strength".

Folks, let me say again that we dare not allow ourselves to see God as some distant unfeeling deity. God truly is a loving and caring person. And He created us in His image so that we could have a deep and intimate relationship with Him. And the Lord Jesus came in the flesh to show us who God truly is.

And it is only as we pursue after Him that that deep and intimate relationship will come to be. And again, it is not as if our pursuit is a difficult thing to do. In actuality, the pursuit is done for us . . . by Him.

As I reminded us at the beginning of this message, God Himself initiates the relationship. He pursues after us. He reaches out to us and draws us to Himself. He woos our affections and He bestows great and wonderful blessings upon us. That is what God was doing when He put the words into John's mouth to send His disciples to see Jesus.

We are the "Beloved bride" of God's "Beloved Son". God Has arranged the relationship and the marriage of us, His "bride" to Christ, His Son. And we are "drawn" to Him and His love is shed abroad in our hearts making everything to be of Him, and everything easy for us. All that we have to do is surrender ourselves to His loving pursuit and begin to pursue Him back.

These scriptures that we have before us today, of Jesus walking the earth, preaching the gospel, giving sight to the blind, healing the sick, raising the dead and saving men's souls, is all part of God's "drawing all men" to His Son for redemption. And these men, the followers of John the Baptist and even John the Baptist himself, seeking to know who Jesus is, is all part of men's response back to God in "pursuing after Him".

We do not have to know exactly what is taking place all of the time for this pursuit of God to be going on. It is a wondrous mystery that God is ever and always working together for our good, "bringing many sons to glory".

All that you and I have to do is surrender ourselves to His loving pursuit and then surrender ourselves to the desire to pursue Him back.

So let me ask you, "Do you sense the 'stirring' of the Holy Spirit within you?" "Do you sense the urging of God to draw up nearer to His Son to find love and warmth and compassion and forgiveness?" I assure you that God is doing that right now. These words that we are studying here today, where John is sending his followers to the Lord Jesus are also words for you and me, sending us to see and to meet and to know the Lord Jesus.

My dear friends, God is pursuing after you and me to have an intimate relationship with us. My plea to you, and to myself, is that we do not allow our

Christianity to become just some dull, churchy kind of religion. But instead, let us pursue hard after this Bridegroom with all the love and the passion that our hearts can muster.

As we close, listen again to these words of the Psalmist David as he cries out to God.

¹ As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So pants my soul for You, O God.

² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.(Psalm 42:1-2)

May we Pray.