

## What Matters Most

As a general rule, in life when there is some area where we want to know if we're doing well, we'll rely on certain kinds of tools or instruments or resources to let us know what our status is.

For example, **this is a mirror**, and this is what you want to look in when you want to know the truth about your face. **Every line, every wrinkle, every gray hair, every missing hair, every blemish, and every liver spot**—it all shows up in the mirror.

When you're a guy, and you wake up and look at yourself in the mirror in the morning, it's a sobering thing. When you're a woman, you have certain options to kind of "upgrade" your face.

Women use products with interesting names like "**concealer**." That's kind of a scary thought, isn't it? But when you're a guy, it's a little frightening, because when you look in the mirror first thing in the morning, you know,

***This is as good as it's going to get all day long!***

And what's really depressing is that next year, it's going to get worse. But this is what you look at when you want to know the truth about your face.

You all know what this is? This is what you step on when you want to know the truth about your body [weight]. We try to finesse these things. Sometimes you can tell the gender of a person by the way they get on one of these. People of a certain gender will often take their shoes off before they get on...or their clothes off, their jewelry off, take out their contact lenses, exhale before they get on. I'm not kidding you! One time at a Weight Watchers Meeting (oops), I spoke with a person who said that she always blow-dries her hair before she gets on the scale!

We get statements in the mail on a regular basis. This is a bank statement. We expect this to give us an accurate picture of our financial condition.

*Well, we here at the bank think you did OK this month. We would give you more details, but we're afraid you might get kind of depressed. You might want to think about bringing in a little more cash.*

We don't get statements like that from the bank. We get numbers—red or black.

If an area of life is important, generally people want to know,

**How am I doing?**

We get report cards to assess our kids' academic standings.

We get performance evaluations to assess how we're doing at work.

Here's why I raise this issue. When it comes to what is indisputably the single most important aspect of life, which is:

**Where do I stand spiritually? When my life is over, which it will be one day, how will I be evaluated by a just and holy God?**

All of a sudden, many people get real fuzzy and vague about how they're doing spiritually. I know people who are amazingly rigorous in wanting to know:

- ◆ How am I doing financially?
- ◆ How am I doing vocationally?
- ◆ How is my physical life?

But ask them about what matters most:

- ◆ **How do things stand between you and God?**
- ◆ **How do you know?**
- ◆ **What are you trusting in to give you accurate information about this?**

And a lot of people shrug their shoulders,

***I don't know. I think I'm doing OK.***

People in our society will tolerate a level of fogginess in this area that they would never allow in a lot of other areas of their lives, and that's not a good idea. So, I want to devote this message to what the writers of Scripture say about this one topic.

This is going to be a very, very important message. I have one goal, and the goal is that when you walk out of this building today, you will be crystal clear on what the writers of Scripture teach about how a human being can know that he or she is right with God.

**That's the most important thing in the world.**

And toward the end of this message, after I've explained as simply as I know how, how the Bible says it is possible to be right with God, I want to give you an opportunity to respond. And for some of you, this is your day. This is the most important decision you will ever make.

Now, the Bible says that God made us all—that we were all created in His image—and that's a very good thing. **God is delighted that you exist, but you have this problem.**

We find it in the opening statements in the Book of Genesis. **We've all faced temptation; we've all given in; and we're all "fallen."** One of the images that the Bible uses to talk about this is **the image of a stain**. Something's marred. Something's not right.

Years ago, when Gail and I were first dating she convinced me to eat lobster (the best food on the planet according to her!). Growing up I had allergies to all shellfish and had given up eating lobster. I tentatively agreed because I wanted to impress Gail. If you've ever eaten it you know that you dip the pieces into butter. I began by cracking the claw open only to have it spray my white shirt. I tried to do "stain management" by covering it up with my napkin. No sooner had I dipped the claw into butter and was hoisting it to my mouth than butter dribbled all the way down my shirt and all the way

down my pants—I'm not making this up—and thinking I'd have better luck with the tail I dipped it into butter and, just as before applied the butter directly to my clothes. At that point, the stain management approach was not working any more!

Now here's what the writers of Scripture say, and you have to decide what you think about this. This is what Scripture teaches:

**I have stains not just on my clothes. I have them on my soul. I have them on my character.**

According to the writers of Scripture, one of our biggest problems is that we tend to underestimate the stain factor in our lives. We tend to look at it much more lightly than it merits.

Interestingly enough, in some ways, contemporary social science is confirming this. I recently read that in the field of social psychology, there's a dynamic called the

**"Fundamental Attribution Error."** The way it works is this:

**I tend to explain other people's bad behaviors in terms of their character flaws, but I explain my bad behavior in terms of extenuating circumstances.**

So when I see someone else yelling at their kids, I assume it's because they can't control their temper. But when I find myself yelling at my kids, I assume it's because they were

misbehaving so badly that even Mr. Rogers would yell at them if he were trying to parent them. And I end up seriously underestimating the extent to which I am stained.

The Bible says that this stain factor—this sin factor—is operating all the time, and it's what makes our world such a mess. It's not an *"occasional lapse"*, and it's not an

*"understandable shortcoming."*

- ◆ Every time that somebody sins,
- ◆ every time that somebody cheats on a test,
- ◆ And with every lie or act of deception, the stain spreads a little more.
- ◆ Every piece of gossip about somebody or sharing of information that will damage them, that spreads the stain.
- ◆ Every act of envying somebody who has more than I do or closing my eyes to somebody who doesn't have as much,
- ◆ every racist thought,
- ◆ every piece of selfish behavior,
- ◆ every hurtful word,
- ◆ every episode of mismanaged anger,
- ◆ every greedy motive,
- ◆ every sexual misdeed,

- ◆ every refusal of servanthood,
- ◆ every act of secret cruelty that I think nobody will ever know about—

All of this keeps adding to a massive stain. And it goes on all the time and in every life.

I'm a pastor, and it took me about thirty seconds to generate this list. Do you know why?

And no, it's not because of people in the church. It's because the truth about me is that

I'm stained. And so are you. It's a universal deal.

The Apostle Paul puts it like this:

**For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.** (Romans 3:23)

Later in that same letter—Romans—the Apostle Paul goes on to say:

**The good things that I want to do, I find myself not doing. And the things I know I don't want to do—that violate my values—I find myself doing. There is sin in me, and it is deep, and it is serious, and it separates me from a holy God.** (Rom. 7: 15-20)

That is what the writers of Scripture teach. So then the great question is:

*How does that gap get bridged? How do things become OK with God if He's holy and unstained and pure, but I'm stained?*

When it comes to this issue, a lot of people in our society think that it's their job to do

“stain management.” People think,

**Maybe if I just do enough good things, those good things will outweigh the bad things in God's eyes. Maybe if I just go to church enough, or give enough money,**

**or do enough good deeds, or get involved in some charity, or do some moral self-improvement exercises, maybe that will be enough to satisfy God. Maybe then things will be OK.**

**But what would ever be enough? How would you ever know? How do you ever know?**

Nobody longs for a world that is **51%** set right. We want it set right all the way, don't we? We want a world where there's **no more wars, no hate, no ghettos, no cracks in the sidewalk...just purity, honesty and love**, and the Bible says that's God's standard.

God's standard for human beings is not that they live in **49% deceit, manipulation, greed, selfishness**, but **51% good**. God's standard is not about 49% vs. 51%. **God's standard is total, unmixed, shining purity**. That's what all of us, in our hearts know and want, but we can't pull that off. This leaves us in a very serious situation.

Often, the people I talk to hope that God grades on the curve. They know that there has to be justice in the universe sooner or later, but they hope that God uses a Pass-Fail system, and Fail always seems that it ought to come a little lower than whatever my score happens to be. People hope that when Judgment Day comes, they'll be standing in line behind some real stained people so they'll look good by comparison.

They hope they're in line behind Hitler and Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, because then they'll come out looking pretty good.

But what if they're not? What if they're behind Mother Teresa and they hear God say to her,

**I'm sorry, Mother Teresa. If you had just done a few more good deeds, I could have let you in.**

**Next.**

The Bible is very, very clear on this issue:

**I've got a problem. I've got a stain, and I can't make my stain go away. I can't live up to God's standard on my own, and neither can you.**

God puts it like this through the prophet Jeremiah:

**Although you wash yourself with soda and use an abundance of soap, although you try to do moral self-improvement, you go to church, you give money, the stain of your guilt is still before me, declares the sovereign Lord. (Jeremiah 2:22)**

**So God, out of His infinite love, made another way.** And it's not the stain-management

way. And it's not the earning way. It's the grace way. This is at the heart of our faith:

**God's Son, Jesus Christ, came to earth, became a real person just like you and me. He was tempted just like we're tempted, but never sinned. And then He went to the cross.**

And, in a way, what He was saying on the cross was,

**I'm going to take your stain on me. I'm going to take your guilt, the burden of your sin, I'm going to take that on me so that you can take the gift of forgiveness and freedom and life from me.**

Jesus died on the cross, died in my place. The Bible says,

***The wages of sin is death.***" (Romans 6:23)

**Sin always leads to death— Spiritual death and physical death entered the world through sin.** Jesus died the death on the cross that by all rights should have been yours and mine.

He paid the debt that I could never pay to God so that I could be cleansed.

John put it like this:

**"That the blood of Jesus Christ (*that is His sacrificial death on our behalf*) cleanses us from all sin."** (1 John 1:7)

So I can be clean, unstained in God's eyes. The stain-management deal, the Bible says, doesn't work.

- ◆ I cannot do enough good deeds in a million years, but I don't have to.
- ◆ I can just accept life and grace and forgiveness from God as a free gift, if I'm willing to humble myself and confess my sin and then just receive it.

There's another part of what Jesus offers. He doesn't just offer to forgive sin. This is kind of staggering. He wants to be your friend. He puts it like this:

**Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you follow me.**" (John 15: 13-14)

We just moved here about two and a half years ago, and people sometimes ask me,

**What do you miss about California? Do you miss Fresno?**

**No, I don't miss Fresno. I don't miss 115°. I don't miss the traffic and the crime.**

People ask me,

**Do you miss the weather?**

**Well, yes, I miss the weather in some parts of California. But no, not in Fresno.**

**As I said, 100+ days for weeks on end are pretty tough. And when you can see and taste the air, well... I could go on.**

**But I believe the weather in Fresno is the way it is, because a long time ago someone did a real bad thing!**

**But I'll tell you what I miss often. Sometimes I miss some of my friends.**

I was talking a couple of weeks ago to a friend of mine in I met in Fresno. We used to go quite often to Starbucks (I know that's a surprise to many of you) and sit out having Frapaccinos. **Bob** and I would get into really deep conversations. We would disclose our hearts to each other and to tell each other the deep things that we think about that we

don't talk about a lot. What began as an acquaintance moved to a relationship and became a friendship.

In the heart of everybody in this room is the longing for a friend that no human being can ever fully satisfy. Human friends get separated. They die or sometimes they move away. **So why then would God give us this longing, if there's no way to satisfy it?** The Bible says He doesn't. The Bible says that God doesn't just have a stain-removal plan, God has a friend-providing plan and that, in Jesus, God says to you,

- ◆ I'd like to be **your friend all the time.**
- ◆ I'd like to be **with you first thing when you wake up in the morning, and**
- ◆ I'd like to be **with you last thing when you go to sleep at night.**
- ◆ I'd like to give you **comfort** when you're sad, and there's nobody around,
- ◆ And **hope** when you're discouraged.
- ◆ I'd like to **guide** you when you're confused.
- ◆ I'd like to give you **courage** when you're scared.
- ◆ I'd like for you and me to **change your world** a little bit.
- ◆ I'd like for you to be a **part of my mission** to redeem this sorry, old earth.
- ◆ I'll be with you when **you're on your sickbed,** and
- ◆ I'll be with you when **you're on your deathbed,** and

- ◆ I'll be with you on the other side of death. And
- ◆ I'll never stop loving you, no matter how badly you blow it. And
- ◆ I'll never give up on you, even when you give up on yourself.
- ◆ I'll come make my home with you.
- ◆ I'll be your friend, and there's nothing you can do to earn this either.

It's just part of the gift.

This is the heart of our faith:

**That Jesus Christ came to earth and lived like one of us to teach us, to die in our place, to be raised again, so that we could receive what God has for us as a gift.**

Christianity is not about doing a little spiritual self-improvement; it's not about trying to earn God's approval; it's not about going to church more often or giving more money.

It's about grace.

**And now you understand about the offer of our stain-removing, sin-forgiving, friend-providing God. That's our God.**

But it's not enough that you understand this. It's not enough to have been baptized, even though baptism is a great thing. This past Spring I had the most wonderful experience. I got to baptize my son, Graham. And I've done many other baptisms. But I'll tell you, I've never done a baptism in colder water. It's a wonderful thing when you see folks being

baptized, but there's nothing magic about the water. **The water doesn't save anybody.**

It's an expression of something that happens in a person's heart.

As a child you can understand this, but eventually you have to respond. You have to decide and no one can do this for you. So, if you have never declared yourself with God before, and you understand what the Gospel is about—**this gift of forgiveness and friendship with Jesus that is offered to you—**

**I want to give you a chance to make that decision right now and to receive from God the gift of salvation and new life so you can know how things stand between you and Him.**

You don't have to be fuzzy about this.

I'm going to say a prayer in just a moment. I'm going to say the words out loud, and I'll invite you to say them in your heart...just to say,

**God, I understand I've got a stain,**

**I confess my sin to You,**

**And I recognize now that I can never bridge that gap,**

**That I can never earn Your approval,**

**That I can never make things right just by working at it.**

**I understand that Jesus died on the cross on my behalf,**

**So I want to receive that gift this moment,**

**And from here on, I want to live as Your friend.**

I'm going to say those words out loud, and I want to invite you to say them privately to

God. I invite you now to pray these words:

Heavenly Father, I know that you made me. I know that I'm not here by accident. And I understand that you love me. And in this moment, this morning, right now, God, I acknowledge my sin. I confess that I have a stain, and it's serious, and it's deep, and I can't get it out. And I understand now, God, what it is that happened on the cross. I understand that Jesus took my place, and that He suffered on my behalf. He paid my debt. He did it for me. So now, God, at this moment on this morning, I accept your love. I accept your forgiveness. I accept the grace that you offer me. I'm through trying to earn my way to you. I'm through struggling against you. I want to go through my life with you. I ask you from this moment on to be my Forgiver and my Leader and my Friend. This is the sincere desire of my heart. And I pray this, God, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Some of you are not ready to make this commitment yet. You're still learning about God. I want to encourage you to write down on a piece of paper what the next step is for you to take on your spiritual journey.

- ◆ Maybe you've never read the Bible much. **You want to get a Bible and start reading it.**
- ◆ Maybe it's to make **a commitment to start attending church regularly and learning.**
- ◆ **Maybe it's just to pray and ask God to guide you.**

But if you aren't ready to make this decision yet, just write down the next step that you can take—that you can commit to.

For some, you have already made this commitment some time ago. This is a time for you to express thanks to God, because you remember when you received grace. One of the best ways that you can thank God is to start praying for somebody who doesn't know God yet. I would encourage you to write down right now the name of somebody that you know who you think is far from God. Say a little prayer right now,

***God, I'd be willing to pray for this person.***

Maybe it's somebody in your family, maybe it's a neighbor, or somebody you work with.

**God, I'm so grateful for Your grace that I'd be willing to share my life and my faith with somebody else.**

Write down that person's name right now. And take it really seriously.

For anybody who prayed that prayer a couple of moments ago—who made that decision to receive God's grace and forgiveness—here's what I want to invite you to do.

Write your name down on that piece of paper along with the day, and put it someplace where you'll have it—maybe in your Bible.

When you have doubts, or become discouraged, or just blow it, take out that card and look at the day you signed your name. And I encourage you to tell someone who's a Christian about the decision you've made.

There's a little booklet written by Bob Munger called, *"My Heart, Christ's Home."* And there's another booklet called *"First Mornings with God."* These are perhaps a couple of the most helpful tools that I know of for getting started in spiritual life. They will help you to launch your friendship with God and we'd like to give you these as a resource and a gift this morning.

Let's pray.