

GOYO

Overcome Your Character Flaws

Texts: John 15:5; Romans 6:22; Phil 2:12-13

Chased By Grace

On a fateful night in 1962, George Wright and an associate accosted a gas station attendant and demanded money. When the man objected, the two thugs beat him till he surrendered some seventy dollars in crumpled bills. Angry that this was all the man had, George Wright's associate shot the owner at point-blank range. The two men then proceeded to go out for cheeseburgers and a game of shuffleboard.

George Wright was eventually arrested for this heinously selfish crime and sentenced to up to 30 years in prison. Conscious that he had not been the one who actually pulled the trigger, George was filled with a perverse sort of comparative self-righteousness. The thought of spending most of the best years of his life withering away in jail was unthinkable for him, so he managed an escape by hotwiring the prison warden's car.

For years, George Wright managed to stay under the radar. He went on a fugitive odyssey that took him to Algeria, Germany, France, and finally Portugal. Along his long journey, George changed his country and domicile many times. He changed his clothes, his appearance, his language, and even his name. He succeeded at escaping everyone who was after him, save for what one poet has called "the hound of heaven."

It was not until September 26, 2011 that the law finally caught up with George Wright, now living under the name of José Luis Jorge dos Santos. In the subsequent hearings in which Portugal denied the U.S. request to extradite him, the issue was not whether Interpol had arrested the right man; it was whether they had arrested the same man.

You see, the blind, selfish loner, George, had gotten married. He'd joined a church and been baptized. He'd raised two healthy children. He was known for cleaning graffiti off the walls in Lisbon and for helping to renovate an outreach center for HIV-positive children. He served dinners for homeless people. He planted public flower gardens. He grew into a senior citizen, and in his fifty years of hiding, did not amass so much as a parking violation. Still a fugitive from the law, this lost man had been found many years before. "I've asked God to forgive me," he says, "and I think he has." Human justice still demanded a stiff penalty; but divine grace had begun a stunning work in him.

Getting Right with God

The GOSPEL message -- the "good news" that is the joy of Christians and the hope of the world -- is that God is in search of sinners. He's looking for people who have done terrible things and for people who are so blind or self-righteous that they can't even see how terrible are the sins of omission or commission that sully their souls. God is looking for people who don't even have a concept called sin -- people who think that all the problems we're having in our politics and our race relations and with our environment and within our families or workplaces or personal health can all be fixed by better education, more technology, or getting other people to be more like us.

God is seeking out people who still don't get that our fundamental problem is that we have fallen out of relationship with the One who is our Source. We are ruled by pride and fear and anger and a whole lot of other deadly passions because we're out of sync with the One who is Loving Holiness himself. But the good news is that God has never stopped looking for fugitives like George Wright or you or me. He pursues us not to condemn us but to realign or re-justify us with Him and to restore the flourishing of his creation. Jesus put it this way: **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him"** (John 3:16-17).

This season, we're trying to get our arms around the hugeness of this message together. We're trying to "Get the Gospel" in all its amazing dimensions. As the Korean evangelist, Watchman Nee, once wrote: "The Christian gospel begins not with do, but with done." The Gospel begins with the fact that the greatest Justice in the universe has offered us a get out of jail free card. On the Cross, God himself paid the full penalty for my sin and yours. He's written us a pardon. He's cancelled our debts. He's offered us adoption papers into the most fabulous family in history. He's handed us a giant check from the Bank of Grace. But we need to sign it to cash in on the benefits.

We need to GET RIGHT WITH GOD. How do you do that? Eric and Felecia reminded us last week. Admit you need God's forgiveness. Believe that Christ's sacrifice was sufficient to purchase it. Commit yourself to following Jesus for life. This is how you move back into a life-renewing relationship with God. It's the part of Gospel living that the Bible and theologians call "justification." I hope and pray you've taken this step.

Becoming Holy

But please understand that the GOSPEL doesn't stop there. The good news is a lot "gooder" than that. Once your sins have been forgiven and you've committed yourself to following Christ, that connection with God starts to lead to a whole lot of other marvelous things. The Apostle Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Romans: **"Now that you have been freed from sin... the**

advantage you get is SANCTIFICATION. The end (goal) is eternal life.” (Rom 6:22 NRSV)

I want to think with you about that word “Sanctification” today, because it’s the second crucial dimension of the Gospel that many people miss. The word sanctification comes from the Latin word “sanctus” = meaning “holy.” To be sanctified is to be made holy. The word holy has fallen into disuse in our time or has taken on negative connotations, as in “holy roller” or “holier than thou.” Properly understood, however, holiness is the most beautiful condition a person could ever have. We don’t have time for a full Bible study on this. Suffice it to say that to be made holy is to be made like God. It is to develop the sort of pure, fruitful, purposeful, powerful character we see in Jesus or in people like Pope Francis, or Mama Maggie, or maybe your mom!

Honestly, it was the thought of one day having that sort of character that made me interested in getting right with God in the first place. I’ll never forget meeting the first group of vital Christ-followers I’d ever run across. The disciples who first reached out to me displayed a **“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”** (Gal 5:22-23) that was incredibly attractive. I know now that what I was seeing was what the Bible calls the Fruit of the Spirit – the expression of holiness, the evidence of God’s presence in these disciples.

At that point all I knew was that these people clearly had something going on in them that I didn’t have happening in me. My life was dominated by character flaws I did not know how to fix on my own. I was insecure and deceitful and condescending and angry and lacking in self-control. I vacillated between wanting to be King of the World and wanting to be an international assassin so I could wipe out people I didn’t like!

My character has changed over the years. The process of justification (getting right with God) started a process of sanctification (of the Holy Spirit working in me) that has had an effect on my character flaws. Now I only bore people to death. I only wield a scepter on weekdays. Honestly, my story is like the character of Eustace in one of C.S. Lewis’ famous Narnia tales. Eustace was a sniveling, selfish, backstabbing kid until the great Lion King Aslan drew him to himself. But from then on a kind of glorious magic began to work its way within Eustace. Lewis writes: “It would be nice and fairly nearly true, to say that ‘from that time forth, Eustace was a different boy. To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different boy. He had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But most of those I shall not notice. The cure had begun.”

Sanctifying Steps

How about you? As our high school ministry puts it: How much do you want to **GOYO** – meaning “**Get Over Yourself?**” Even after we’ve been freed from the full penalty of our sin and committed to following Jesus, the ingrained habits of sin remain to be worked on in our lives. If you can’t list yours, ask somebody who lives or works next to you! Believe me, you’ll need more paper! The helpful question is: Is there anything we can do to advance this curative, sanctifying process? The answer is YES.

If you want to accelerate the sanctification process, then **FIRST**, take some steps to deepen your COMMUNION with Christ. Jesus said: **“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing** (John 15:5). Christ has the power to help you overcome your character flaws, but you have to be communing with him for that power to flow. Up the frequency with which you take part in worship. Go to the Start Here station in the Commons and ask about resources for practicing a spiritual discipline between weekends. The better your connection with the Vine the more likely you will see the fruit of his Spirit showing up in your character.

SECONDLY, do life in close COMMUNITY with other believers. You’ve heard me say this before: We grow in groups best. The Bible says that it was when the disciples **“were all together in one place”** that the Holy Spirit came down upon them and transformed them from a bunch of cowering characters into the band of believers that changed the Roman empire (Acts 2). We’re told in Colossians 3, **“Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another.** (Col 3:16). We make far more progress on repairing what’s wrong with our character when we’re in community with people who model great character and challenge ours than when we’re out on our own. If you don’t have a close community like that, stop by the Grow Center in the Commons and we’ll help you find one.

Robert McAfee Brown once observed that: “It is probably more appropriate to speak of becoming a Christian than of being a Christian.” It takes a daily, intentional investment of yourself to really become a disciple of Jesus Christ. Maybe that’s why my old mentor, Lewis Smedes, used to say that while you are waiting for God to fully complete the process of sanctification, practice a little CREATIVE HYPOCRISY.

The legend is told of a scoundrel who fell in love with a beautiful girl. Knowing she would never love someone like him, he donned the mask of a saint, and began to act like an honorable hero in order to win her heart. After a long time, others who knew the man’s true nature could stand the charade no longer. Rushing into the room where the scoundrel sat with his beloved, they threw the man down and ripped off his mask. Gasps of shock filled the room. For there beneath the mask, where once hid a scoundrel, was the shining face of a saint.

What masks do you suppose George Wright donned over the decades as he ran and hid from the police? Maybe he really had to work at looking like an honest, upright man. Perhaps he strained hard to appear kind and compassionate to others. Maybe going to church was at first just a pose. Perhaps doing all those humble acts of service for others was just another way of deceiving people. Or did his communion with Christ in that church, and his close community with others in that Portuguese village, and those acts of creative hypocrisy that he practiced for so long unleash a magic in him? Did God actually transform a criminal into something of a saint?

Wouldn't you like to know for yourself? Then let's take to heart these final words from a saint who was also once a scoundrel, an accomplice to murder: **"Now that you have been freed from sin... the advantage you get is sanctification." (Rom 6:22).** So, **"Continue to work out your salvation, with fear and trembling, for [once you are right with Him] it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose"** (Phil 2:12-13) – to the end that you may overcome your character flaws and become like Jesus.

This is the good news of the GOSPEL.
Thanks be to God.

SLIDE A

Get Right with God (JUSTIFICATION)

Admit you need God's forgiveness
Believe that Christ's sacrifice was sufficient
Commit yourself to following Jesus for life

SLIDE B

GETTING THE GOSPEL

G et right with God	Justification
O vercome your character flaws	Sanctification
S et your course by truth	Revelation
P articipate in renewal	Redemption
E njoy life beyond death	Resurrection
L ove with the greatest Love	Glorification

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Many years ago, a brilliant but drug addicted poet by the name of Francis Thompson, penned the tale of a similar odyssey: I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years... [and] down the labyrinthine way of my own mind; and in the midst of tears I hid from Him... from those strong Feet that followed, followed after. But with unhurrying chase, and unperturbed pace... they beat -- and a Voice beat more instant than the Feet... [saying] naught shelters thee, who will not shelter Me... Rise, clasp My hand, and come! (The Hound of Heaven)

Adapted from Make Nappa, God in Slow Motion (Thomas Nelson, 2013), pp. 35-37.

For a more thorough treatment of this theme see chapter 1 of Leadership Essentials (InterVarsity Press)

C.S. Lewis, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader