

Luke 2, we have tons to do today, so we're just going to dive right into it. We're going to pick it up in verse 1, and we're going to get into some of the basic tenets of our faith. And then from there, I want to point out what I believe is a very common addition to what we believe that sounds right but in the end will kill you. So that will be the important part. *“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.”* Now I was really tempted here to spend our time here this morning talking about the sovereignty of God over governments. Micah 5:2 is a prophecy hundreds of years before then that says that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. And so, we've got Mary great with child, but we've got to get her to Bethlehem. So how does God decide to get her to Bethlehem? Well, use Rome like Legos or something. I mean, He just played with it. That's how He gets her and Joseph to Bethlehem. Verse 6, *“And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’”* I think that whole kind of progression is funny. You've got these guys in the middle of nowhere, angels blow up the sky, say the Messiah is here, the sky goes black again and they kind of look at each other and go, “Maybe we should go to Bethlehem and head into town.” Verse 16, *“And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”*

Now, this whole story, from beginning to end, is about as crazy as you can think up and about as contrarian as you can think up. Here's what I would tell you. From very early on, the Old Testament points outside of itself. It sets up a system that's impossible. Here would be the example I would give you. The Ten Commandments are basically Morality 101. I mean, they're not complex, they're not difficult, there's not a lot of depth to them; they're just pretty straight forward, basic, junior varsity morality. “Don't kill anyone.” I

don't think that's a big one. "Don't lie. Maybe you shouldn't touch your neighbor's wife. Maybe you'll have a happier existence if, instead of looking at what other people have and always wanting it, you appreciate what you have." I mean, this is Morality 101. Now let me ask you a question. If we had to grade ourselves out of Morality 101, how are we doing? Uh oh! Most us can't pass the 10. So I've said and I think the truth of Scripture is this. The Ten Commandments weren't given to us so we might obey them but to teach us that we can't, that we are in need of a Savior. The entire Old Testament is this kind of circular, people being disobedient and God showing up and destroying half of them, people being disobedient and God showing up and destroying half of them, people being disobedient and God showing up and destroying half of them. And this is kind of the rhythm that the Old Testament functions in. All the while, this promise that a new day's coming, a new way is coming, a promise is coming, a Messiah is coming, a Savior is coming, and then it just goes quiet for 400 years.

Now, at the apex of earth's history and really future until the return of the Son, the plan unfolds like this. God gathers the heavenly host and says, "Here's how we're going to play it. Gabriel, fly down to Zechariah." "Zechariah? The old bitter priest?" "Yes. The old bitter guy. The one that's angry at Me because I've never given him a son, let's go bless him." "Shouldn't we punish him?" "Yeah, we should probably kill him too, but here's what I want to do. I want you to go to him and tell him he gets the forerunner." "Well he's not going to believe. His wife's like 140 years old." "I know, go tell him." So Gabriel shows up to Zechariah and says, "Good news. You get the forerunner. Call his name John." So we know the story. Zechariah isn't excited about the news, so Gabriel flies back into heaven and God goes, "So how did it go?" Gabriel goes, "It went bad. I told him, he doubted, I shut up his mouth. I'm not going to let him speak for nine months." God goes, "Excellent, right into my plan. Alright, now go tell Mary." "Mary who?" "Mary, the fourteen-year-old peasant girl. Go tell her that's where we're putting the Son." "The peasant girl? The Nazareth peasant girl? Nazareth?" Um Nazareth is El Paso. I don't know how else to explain it other than that. And I know I'm going to get a dirty e-mail about that describing the sunsets, but Nazareth is El Paso. And so they're like, "Seriously? You're going to send the Messiah to El Paso? Seriously?" And God's like, "I'm God so, yeah." And there goes Gabriel again and shows up for Mary. "I bring you glad tidings..." and there we go. Then He moves them to Bethlehem and they get to Bethlehem and basically they give birth to the Son of God in the alley behind the Hilton. This is a funny story. Not ha ha funny but hmmm funny. And then it's time to herald it. I mean, can you imagine the heavenly host have been sitting around for eternity waiting for this moment "and now we're going to declare to the world that the Messiah is here? Where are we going? Rome? Are we going to Rome, the pinnacle of human life at the time? Are we going to Rome? No no no, we're going to Jerusalem. We're going to the Temple Mount." "No no no, neither. We're going out in the boondocks—a field—outside of Bethlehem," which is more ghetto than Nazareth. "We're going to a field and we're going to shepherds." I mean, if you're looking at this purely from a tax-bracket standpoint, they're not even on the list. I mean, tax collectors don't even come to them. What do they want, wool? I mean, these are the lowest of lows. Okay, so at this point in the story, the herald of the Messiah who the entire Old Testament points to and every man in the world is looking towards and it gets sent through an old bitter priest, a virginal

fourteen-year-old girl, He comes onto the planet in the alley behind the Hilton and they heralded it to the poorest of poor. Weird story. Definitely not the story you were expecting for the Savior of the world, huh? And listen, not only will the story be like this in the first two chapters but the story's going to be like this for the rest of the book. Over and over and over again, you just see that God has this really beautiful heart for the lowly, for the bitter, for the murderer, for the adulterer, for the wicked in heart, for the lazy. I mean, He just seems to really come after those people, and not in the fundamentalist "fire from heaven" kind of way. It's peculiar.

So I want to try to explain it. I want to try to explain why. And the only way I know to explain how and why this is is to explain to you the gospel, just the simple gospel, what this thing's all about, what the cross of Christ is all about, what Jesus is all about, what this thing is all about. And then I want to talk to you for just a little bit on an idea that's being pressed into that that will absolutely kill that if we absorb that into the Christian thought and life. We've got to be careful because a lot of our brothers and sisters out there are proponents of it. So we've got to be very, very, very careful. Now, if I could take a minute and not teach or preach here as a Christian but just as a sociologist, I would tell you this about our culture. Everybody in North America knows that something's wrong with the human condition. Everyone knows that something's a little off in us, and so we're all trying to fix it. And I know this because they just opened up a Barnes & Noble down the street. And you can walk into Barnes & Noble and the largest section of books in Barnes & Noble is Self Help. This is the North American way of saying, "Something's busted in you. Let us tell you how to fix it." And here are their ideas. Go down there. There's great food down there. Get you some lunch after I let you out of here. Get yourself something to eat and then head down to Barnes & Noble. Here's what you're going to find. There's a large section of books on physically being stronger, as if we could get a little more flexible and get a little sexier, then we're finally going to be whole, there's not going to be anymore issues in our heart and we're going to feel full and complete. And then there's another big section on money. And then there's a huge section that's not really titled, but I'll call it "the Oprah Winfrey" section. And in that section is book after book after book after book about authenticity and wholeness, none of which really get you any closer to it but just tell you that's where you should be. And then you literally have half the store on what I'll just call self-esteem books, the idea that if you just feel better about yourself, that you're good enough and pretty enough and, by golly, people like you. And if you could just get that and quit being so hard on yourself... And here's the danger. I'll kind of tip my hand a little bit here. Much of Christian thought right now leans to that way, that somehow the cross is an echo of your value. I mean, that's not biblical, but it sure is a popular notion. So everybody knows something's wrong with the universe, everybody. I mean, I'm not talking spiritually. Just go have a cup of coffee with the most pagan guy know and go, "What's wrong with the human condition?" I mean, it's education, it's government, it's the mythical "man" that's apparently trying to kill all of us and steal our money. And then even the church will jump in on this. The church would say, "Sin is what's wrong with the universe." And you're right, but it's the nature of sin that I think might surprise you. Because what we do is go, "Drunkness. Being a drunk is a bad deal. That's what a sinner is." But did you know, according to the Scripture, being religious but religious outside of an active

relationship with Christ is just a sinful, just as wicked? Nobody preaches that one. You ain't getting anybody to tithe with that little nugget.

Romans 1 says the nature of sin, which means all sin can be traced back to it, is one of three things. Here's what it is. And everybody's guilty. Nobody gets away clean...not even Billy Graham. Everybody's in. Here's how it works. Romans 1 says that you and I and everybody in this room and everybody you know and everybody that has lived on this planet have pursued creation rather than the creator. Which means we've said, "Forget God. I'll take His stuff. I don't really want God. I just want the things God's made." And so we spend our life, our energy, our money, our vitality and the life of our mind on God's stuff rather than God. Now the problem with that is God created all those things for us for His glory. So all those things are good and right as long as they're not our god. Because listen, women, wine and cars make really bad gods. So that's the first kind of nature of sin. Here's the second one. Everyone in this room, me, you, the elders of this church, we've believed the lie over the truth of God. If I could break that down as simple as I could, one way or another, we believe we're smarter than God. And nobody would ever say that. Nobody in this room would be like, "Oh, I'd smoke Him. Bring out the Trivial Pursuit game." I don't think we think in that way. I think what ends up happening to you is every time you hear the truth of God or a command that was meant by God to lead us into joy, not begrudging submission, every time God gives a command and we go, "I'm not being obedient to that; I'm doing this," that's you going, "I'm smarter than You. I'm smarter than You for my marriage. I'm smarter than You for my money. I'm smarter than You for life. I am smarter than You are, God. You created the whole universe and manage it to this day and I had to do the 8th grade twice, but I know more than You. And then the third problem and this is a monumental problem, and then we'll get into how religiosity is just as sinful as wicked, is that all of us have failed to acknowledge God. And what that means is if God is the creator of all things and is sovereign over all things, that means all that you have, from your natural abilities to all that you've accumulated because of your natural abilities, is God's and it's been given to you by God for God. So to you touch it, make it your own and pretend it's all about you, makes you a blasphemer.

Now, let me tell you why this is such a bigger deal than going, "You know what sin is? Sin is lying. Sin is stealing. Sin is drinking too much." Now all those things are true, but those things are outward actions from a sinful heart. This is the nature of sin. Let me tell you why it's so absolutely devastating. You can morally and evangelically do everything right and be just as pagan and just as wicked as the most horrific person you can imagine. I'll give you the example. Let's say you get up out of this place this morning and you sell everything you have. If you're one of our 20-year-olds in here, you've got \$13. If you're maybe a little bit older, you sell everything, you sell your car you sell your house. All you're left with is the clothes on your back, and you take all that money and then you give it to the poor and then you go into God's throne room and say, "See what I've done to You?" Do you know that the Scriptures say your little gift is like filthy rags to God. "Thanks for the dirty dish towel. Get out of My throne room." This is why the book of Hebrews says the altar's closed. Yeah, so this should make a little bit of us nervous. I mean, if you've lived your life in just Evangelical perfection, according

to this definition, the biblical one, you're still guilty. If your mom, great with child, fell down up at the altar, shot you out onto the altar, baptism water tipped over, as you gargled you said, "Jesus," and you had a birthmark of the cross on your side and you lived your whole life, you're still guilty, still in trouble. You will have believed that your righteous acts are better than the cross, you will have failed to acknowledge you need, you desperate, infinite, not-going-anywhere need for the God of the universe. I mean, this is the problem. So if you're a quick thinker, you should be thinking right now, "So what? Are we all damned?" Yeah, pretty much. You've got nothing that's intrinsically valuable to God. You have no way to barter with Him. Isn't that terrifying? You have nothing to barter with. You can't come to him and go, "I'll trade You three of these for one of those." He's like, "Yeah, those three are already mine, dummy. That's already Me. You can't give Me what's already Mine for exchange of what's Mine. That's not how this works." So you've got nothing. And in darker moments, you know it. So yeah, we're stuck. Every one of us guilty. I mean, the blasphemies that occur because of these things is through the roof. Like here's what you'll never see. Every time an airplane goes down, you'll find somebody on Larry King talking about "Where was God?" They'll mention 9/11 over and over, "Where was God on 9/11? Where was He?" But here's where the blasphemy occurs. Do you know that up until that point, there had been nearly 100 years of air travel where no terrorist hijacked a plane and crashed it into a building, and no one ever went on the Larry King Show (it's been on the entire 100 years). No one ever went on the Larry King Show and said this, "How awesome is God that for the last 100 years nobody hijacked a plane and crashed it into a building.? How awesome is He? How gracious is He? How beautiful is He that He's protected us in such ways?" So He gets absolutely no credit for the beautiful day and every ounce of blame for the horrific one. Blasphemy. Yeah, it's who we are. And we're unapologetic about it.

Alright, so we're in a mess. If there's nothing we can do to fix ourselves, if there's no amount of righteous acts or religious acts or goodness that's going to save us, then we're in a lot of trouble. The only way we get out of this is if somebody who doesn't owe can somehow pay. Because I know the answer that everyone's got in their heads, "Well, God just forgives us." Yeah, God does forgive us, but He can't *just* forgive us or he's not just. If God just looks at your sin and says, "It's not a big deal," then He's not just. And what I mean by that is if a judge here in Dallas just let a murderer off because he said he was sorry, that judge is not just. Correct? He's not, especially if he's like, "I'm going to try not to kill again, but some people are begging for it. You know it, I know it, judge. I might have to kill another." Alright, the judge isn't going to be just for this. Make him completely impotent missionally, pull him away from all his pagan friends to hang out with his pagan friends wearing Christian t-shirts and just ruin him, just absolutely destroy that passion of sitting under the grace of Christ. That's the message. The message is just that, that Jesus loves you right now and that if by faith, you'll believe.

But here's what's happened. Somehow the message of your helplessness, your frail, useless brokenness and the necessity of Christ and the glory of Christ has been replaced with instead, "You're good, I'm good, we're good and the answer to our woes is feeling better about ourselves and then attaching Jesus' name to it." It's what I'll lovingly call "the cult of self-esteem." That's what it is. And here's what people do. They proof text

like crazy. They'll take like one fourth of one verse in one book and build this entire theology around it. Like I can't tell you how many times I've heard somebody quote that Zephaniah text, "We're the apple of His eye. Look how much He loves us." I don't even know what that means. You know why you're the apple of His eye? Not because you have any real, intrinsic value, but instead because you are evidence of His grace and goodness. That's your value. Or my favorite, and what I mean by favorite is the one that enrages me, is the "Love your neighbor as you love yourself. If you would just love yourself more, you would be able to..." I mean this is devastating. Okay, I'll move my Bible back, and we'll just talk as humans. Do you know the problem with high self-esteem? It will absolutely make you go to bed at night knowing you're a liar and knowing at any moment you're going to be exposed for the lying fake you are. Because you're not good, and neither am I. Intrinsically, by the time I was two, I was stealing. So were you. Everybody in here's got that story, especially if you have kids, where you get home and you're unpacking stuff and you're like, "Uh oh. What's this?" "I got it." "No, you're two. You don't get anything." You just realize, "Hey, I just stole from Target. Awesome." I guarantee you that you were lying by five. Let me ask you a question. Who taught you how to lie? Maybe is it intrinsically in your wicked soul? Did anybody here growing up bite and hit other kids in the nursery? I wonder what it was in you that said, "I'm not getting what I want. You know what the answer is? Physically harming another human being." Oh, could it be that your soul is wicked? So here's what ends up happening when you're like, "Oh, I'm a great man, and I walk in this...I'm a great woman..." The only way you can justify that belief is to look around for scoundrels and compare yourself to them. The problem is in the end, you're going to be compared to the holiness of God and you will be found lacking. And so, when all of a sudden self-esteem slams into the gospel, it's so contrarian to the idea of the gospel that you'll get one or the other but you will not get both. Because one says you're worthless and in need of a Savior and the other says you're so worthy you've got a savior. Those are different messages. One happens to be the message of the Bible; one happens to be a very notion among arrogant Americans. And listen, there are times in here where I can honestly say this to you. Why do you think I'm saying this? Do you think I'm trying to build the church right now? Do you think I'm trying to make you feel better about yourself? Could it be I'm doing this because I believe with my whole heart that what the Bible says is true and I love you enough to say it to you?

Let me show you. I'm going just read off a bunch of men in the Bible and how they viewed themselves. In dealing with the Lord about Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham in Genesis 18 said this, "*Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.*" Jacob, when he returned after 20 years of exile in Genesis 32 says this, "*I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant.*" When God came to Moses, you remember Charlton Heston, on the mountain and said, "You're going to lead My people out of Egypt, you're going to lead My out of slavery." Moses responds, "*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?... Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.*" Now let me read to you the response of God because this is profound. Exodus 4. "*Then the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him*

mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? 12Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." Let me show you what He didn't say. Moses didn't say, "I can't speak, I'm not a good enough leader, I'm not adequate enough," and God step in and go, "Now Moses, don't talk about yourself like that. You're a buddy. I love you. You're a good guy and you speak well." Is that how God responded? No, He went, "You are a stuttering moron. You're right. Here's the good news. I'm your God. I made the mouth, I'll give you the words, I'll lead you. Quit looking at your own inadequacies and your own uselessness and look to Me and live." Let's keep going. David in Psalm 51 says, *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."* David had just committed murder and adultery, so you usually respond that way when God busts you in those two. But in 1 Chronicles 29, when David is gathering the treasure for the temple, he says this, *"Who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you."* In the largest moment, in the largest act of virtue in king David's tenure as king, where he's finally getting to start of the construction of the temple, he's gathering all the gold and jewels that are going to be used, even in the highest moment of virtue in David's reign, he says, "Who am I that You would let us give back to You what You gave to us to give back to You to begin with?" He still won't buy in. He still didn't look at all the treasure and go, "Oh, we're good." He still didn't look at it and go, "Man, how great are our hearts that we were able to give so far above and beyond what was expected?" No, he goes, "Oh, we're still so wicked. How beautiful are You that You would let us give like this?" Solomon, David's son, says, *"And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in."* Job says, *"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you;..."* Listen to the response of Job after he sees God, because the popular notion is, once we see God, we'll feel so much better about ourselves that life will be easy. Job says, *"Now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."* That's a little different. Isaiah says, *"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"* John the Baptist says, *"I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."* A tax collector and a Pharisee are in the temple. The Pharisee looks over at the tax collector and says, *"God, I thank you that I am not like other men...even like this tax collector."* The tax collector beats his breast and says, *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"* Jesus says one of those justified. He's not talking about the Pharisee if you don't know how that one ends. A couple of my favorites from the New Testament. There was a centurion who wanted a servant healed and sent word to Jesus. And so Jesus started walking to the centurion's house, and before Jesus got there, the centurion sent another runner to Jesus. And the runner gets there, he's out of air and he goes, "Uh, the centurion wanted me to tell You that he's not worthy to have You even come into his home. And if You will, You can just heal the servant without ever coming into his house." And Jesus was like, "Yeah, he's right. Tell him his servant's healed," and He walks away. Pretty profound. There was the Canaanite woman who comes up to Jesus and asks for healing and Jesus goes, *"It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."* Her response is, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table," and God

heals. Peter, honestly you can pick any text that is ever in, but let me give you one in particular. Luke 5 says, *“When Simon Peter saw [the power of Jesus on the lake], he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.’”* Paul says, *“I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.”* That’s in Romans 7. In 2 Corinthians 4, *“We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”* In 1 Corinthians 3, he says, *“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”* And then my favorite in 1 Timothy 1, *“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”* If Paul who wrote 75% of the New Testament, the greatest missionary our faith has ever known is the foremost of sinners, I’m not sure what that makes us. He continues, *“But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.”*

In no instance in any of these Scriptures that I read does God ever correct their lowly view of themselves, ever. Not one does He step in and go, “That is not true.” Not one does He go, “I want you to quit saying that about yourself.” Not one does he say, “This is an unhealthy view.” It seems that healing and wholeness and the weight of the gospel slams into our soul not when we elevate and savor the self, but rather when we see our smallness coupled with the size of the grace and mercy of Christ. And for the record, doesn't the entire planet communicate this to us? No matter how cold your heart, is there not a twinge of awe when you drive through the mountains? Isn't there some kind of twinge that happens in you when you stand in front of the ocean? You don't even have to stand in front of the ocean. If you've ever just rented a movie about surfing, you just look at that thing and are like, “Whoa!” I mean, there's something about feeling small that makes us feel awe. You sit under a starry sky and feel awe. You think better. What you're feeling is what we call worship. It's what you were created for. It's why we take vacations to beaches and mountains. Does anybody take vacations to Abilene? I don't think you do. “Well, there's just nothing for miles. It's awesome.” You don't. You go where the soul can be in awe. I've got the entire west half of the state just furious with me in this one. You don't; you go to the beaches and you go to the mountains. Why? Because there's something in your soul, you feel awe, you feel like that works, you feel like that makes sense, it comes together. Here's what I wrote here. The gospel solution when a person is paralyzed by a sense of guilt or unworthiness or uselessness is not to increase self-esteem. The biblical answer to a paralysis of low self-esteem is not high self-esteem, it's sovereign grace. Let me read to you Isaiah 41:14. It's one of my favorite examples. Jacob cries out to God, “I'm a worm, I'm a maggot, I'm worthless.” This is his prayer to God. Here's God's response, *“Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I am the one who helps you, declares the LORD; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.”* It seems like how God heals, how God restores the heart of Jacob is not to say, “You're not a worm; you're a beautiful butterfly.” But instead, He says, “You are a worm, but I'm your God. I will lead you. I will guide you. I will never forsake you. You are a worm, but I'm here.”

Okay, turn over to Matthew 5. And while you're turning there, let me throw this out at you. How exhausting is pretending to be strong? I mean, that's why church can be so

exhausting. Because there's all these external pressures to be okay, despite the fact that the gospel's all about a celebration of us not being okay and having God love us anyway. Like, there's this pressure to be okay and to be more than we are. What ends up happening is we start learning the rules and we start trying to obey them. And we start finding out that we can't really obey them so what we start to do is pretend that we are obeying them and that things are working and that we don't have any doubts and that we're not concerned at all and that nothing's difficult for us and every time we read the Bible, the Holy Spirit audibly just tells us exactly what that means and everything's working out just fine and we begin to build this kind of pretense, this kind of pretending that all is well and everything's okay. I mean, it's just exhausting. It's just absolutely exhausting. It's such a far cry from David in Psalm 40, where he says, "I will never keep quiet about my sins in the great assembly." I can tell you this. We would only ask David how he's doing once and we would never ask him again. "How you doing?" "Ohhhh, sit down...Where are you going?" Because he would not just say, "I'm fine." You're not going to get "I'm fine" with David; you're going to get, "How long will You forsake me, Lord?" from David. He's just a different animal. It's just exhausting trying to pretend. It just really is. And not only that, I think pretending robs you of the very power of the cross. It's what steals from you depth and your shot of really being transformed.

Okay, here's the first sentence of the first sermon from Jesus to the crowds. *"Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."* Blessed are the ones, happy are the ones, being healed are the ones, growing in depth are the ones, worshiping are the ones who are keenly aware of their inadequacies, their failures, their uselessness, how prone they are to wander, their difficulties. Blessed are the ones who keenly understand their brokenness, for they will be comforted. So let me trace the two paths for you. You've got the one guy who's trying with all his might to not be the mess up that he really is. And every time he hears, "You're a hypocrite, you're a failure," he feels, "I know, I've got to try harder. I've got to get better. I hate this sin. This sin owns me," and he tries to work harder. So he comes to church every week and he hears someone talk best practices, "This is what a Christian should look like. This is how we should live." He knows he's not living up, and so he gets overwhelmed, he gets depressed, he thinks it's just not working for him and he contemplates giving up. That's track A; you're welcome to hop on it. Here's track B. Track B is, "Hey man, you're a hypocrite." "I know. How crazy is it that Christ still loves me? How crazy is it that He lavishes forgiveness and love on me? I'm doing the things I know to not walk in that anymore. And I now I'm constantly messing up, but praise His name that He still loves me right now." "Hey man, you're a bitter, angry man." "I know I am. This has become increasingly clear to me because I try to follow Christ, but how unreal is He? How beautiful is He? How amazing is Christ that, in the middle of my bitterness and rage, He extends grace and mercy and love to me?" "Hey man, you've got a real lust issue." "Man, I know. I'm in the step studies and I'm going to counseling and I'm trying to resolve this thing, but how beautiful is Jesus right now that, right in the middle of my lust, He loves me?" Not, "How great am I that Jesus loves me." You take that turn and that's blasphemy upon blasphemy upon blasphemy. Not

how great am I that He would love me; how great is He that He would? Now, I don't know how the gospel got hijacked and got turned into "Be clean! And when you're clean, you're a great testimony." How so? And I love when Christ grows us to that point where we finally get to walk away from the stuff that's haunted us. It's coming. But I can tell you this. I can tell you my early days of church, sitting in a room where they put the miracle guy in front of you, they put the miracle guy that's like, "For years, I drank a whole bottle of Jack Daniels, smoked a package of cigarettes and tried to sleep with anything I could get my hands on. I accepted Christ two years ago on Thursday and have not struggled with anything since. Christ shows up in the morning in my room personally, we talk, He tells me what to do, I struggle not in obeying him." And the dude just flies off the stage and flies back to his seat. And I'm in year one in my walk with Christ going, "What's wrong with me? I don't even have any wings." And I'd hear those testimonies and do you know what I'd think? "Something's broken. Something's wrong in me. I guess I'm not saved or I don't get it." I just one time want to hear the testimony of the guy that stands up and goes, "Oh, I believe He loves me, but every day's a war." Because that's so much more attractive to broken people.

Do you see why arrogance and the gospel can never hold hands? It's the same reason why high self-esteem and the gospel can never hold hands. They're contrarian to one another. You can't be arrogant if you understand the gospel. It's hard to judge people when you understand the gospel. It really is. It's hard to judge another when you realize your own depravity. It's hard to walk with a swagger and tell other people what they should be doing. The gospel creates humility, gentleness, graciousness, which is what we've been called to be. Because let's say you are type A and you figure out how to white-knuckle all the issues of your life—that ends in pride. You're right back to Romans 1. So this is the good news. This is why I'm here. This is how I became a preacher. It definitely wasn't, "These are the movies I can watch and the real lame t-shirts I have to wear." It sure wasn't "Hey, throw this on the back of your car." No, this thing tore my heart up, because when I was at my worst, Christ was like, "Oh, I love you." And it wasn't because of me He loved me. It was His grace, His glory, the display of His perfection. It's profound.

Let's pray. "Father, my prayer as we end here is that You would help those who are walking in the cloak of self-sufficiency to just kind of see the silliness of all that. I want to praise Your name because I'm broken. I have issues that haven't gone away and I've got things that haunt me, that it's hard to discipline out of my life. I have reactions that are unrighteous and ungodly and I like this world more than I should. I'm less faithful than I need to be. So I thank You that I can confess those things freely and clearly and You knew them before I said them and grace and mercy was extended in my darkest hour, not the one where all my discipline's working. I thank You for the promise that You began this good work in us so You will be faithful to carry it on to completion. So we are going to walk away from our sinful behaviors, we are going to walk away from those things that don't mirror You, but we do that because we've seen You. We don't do that to see You. You're better than we deserve. I pray that we would never listen to anything else but that, that it's in our weakness that we'll find strength and it's in our

inability that we'll be made whole. It's a weird paradox for our culture. Help us. It's for
Your beautiful name. Amen.”