

The Magnification of the Master

Holy Obsession – Part III

Romans 15:17-19

Introduction

When Chan Gailey was the head coach of Alabama's Troy State football team, they were the unlikely team playing for a National Championship. In the week before the big game, interview requests were pouring in from everywhere.

A few days before the championship, Gailey was heading to the practice field when his secretary called him and wanted to transfer a call to him. Somewhat irritated, he told her to take a message because he was on his way to practice. She responded "Are you sure? It's *Sports Illustrated*."

"I'll be right there," he said.

As Gailey made his way back to his office, he began to think about the article. It would be great publicity for the program at Troy State – in fact, three pages would not be enough to cover the great story.

Coming even closer to his office, Gailey started thinking that he might even end up on the cover. "Wow . . . should I pose or go with some kind of action shot," he wondered. He wrote that his head was spinning with all the possibilities.

When he picked up the phone and said, "Hello," the person asked, "Is this Chan Gailey?"

"Yes, it is," he replied with a measure of pride.

"This is *Sports Illustrated*, and we're calling to let you know your subscription is running out . . . do you want to renew?"

Coach Gailey concluded the story by saying, "You are either humble or you will be humbled by life."¹

This is a good truth to remember.

There is nothing more harmful to a believer than too much of himself. Preening in front of a rear view mirror usually causes accidents.

There is nothing more damaging to relationships and the work of Christ at-large, than the spirit of Diotrephes, who, as John the apostle wrote,

. . . loves to be first [preeminent] . . . (III John 1:9).

John the Baptizer, on the other hand, got it right when he said of Christ, as recorded in John 3:30,

He must increase, but I must decrease.

The antidote to the poison of self is the glory of Christ.

The tragedy of the church at-large in the past twenty-five years, is that it openly and unashamedly made the human being the object of attention. We are now constantly looking into the mirror – not of the word, but of our world. In the average church today, Christ is decreasing and we are increasing.

The problem is, the more we stare at ourselves, the more we twist the motive for assembling into self-help sessions; the more we turn the Bible into quick and easy principles for successful, comfortable living; the more self-centered we become. And since we can never be satisfied with ourselves, our dissatisfaction only grows greater.

Ladies and gentlemen, the way to improve life is not a better understanding of who we are, but a better understanding of who God is. The cure for what ails us is not necessarily thinking less about us, but thinking more about Him.

We do not need a better view of ourselves, we need a fresh vision; a newly kindled obsession – an obsession with the glory of God. We then, like Moses, would long to see the glory of the Lord; we would say, as Moses did,

. . . [Lord], show me Your glory! (Exodus 33:18)

In a little book I keep on my desk at home, entitled, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, John Piper writes,

People are starving for the grandeur of God. And even those who go to church – how many of them can say when they leave, “I have looked upon You, oh God, in the sanctuary, beholding Your . . . glory.” (Psalm 63:2)ⁱⁱ

What is the glory of God? It is:

- the sum and substance of His character;
- the beauty of His holiness;
- the revelation of God in Christ – for when He came to dwell among us,

. . . we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

Paul reminded the Corinthians that the glory of God was the main point of apostolic preaching, when he wrote,

. . . we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord . . . (II Corinthians 4:5)

In the next verse, Paul said that the glory of God was the subject of our ongoing study,

. . . God . . . is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God . . . (II Corinthians 4:6)

Imagine, on the evening when the shepherds were tending their flocks, when an angel appeared before them and,

. . . the glory of the Lord shone around them . . . (Luke 2:9)

You might say, “I wish I could see what that’s like!”

You will! That element of God’s glory will one day be tangibly revealed to us all in the heavenly city. John the apostle wrote, in Revelation 21:23,

. . . the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it . . .

Even today,

The heavens are telling of the glory of God . . . (Psalm 19:1)

The honoring and exaltation of God is the objective of everything we do, for in,

. . . whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (I Corinthians 10:31)

In other words, we are to do everything to the exaltation of God – the honor of God; the pleasure of God; the leading and sovereign right of God.

In a very plain sense then, living for the glory of God means that in everything, we emphasize Him and de-emphasize ourselves.

This is like Raymond Lull, a missionary to the Moslems many years ago. He lived by the life-long refrain, “I have one passion – it is He, it is He, it is He.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The glory of God is our goal, our subject, our hope, our delight, our message, and our future. This is what it means to be obsessed with the glory of God. This is the magnification of the Master.

In his personal comments, near the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul has revealed nothing less than the same obsession. In Romans chapter 15, we have already uncovered his obsession for godly living. Then, we looked closely at Paul’s obsession with the grace of God. Today, we will see him revealing his devotion – his obsession – with the glory of God.

Delighted in Elevating the Person of Christ

First, notice Paul’s delight in Romans 15:17.

Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God.

My first point would simply be that Paul delighted in elevating the person and work of Jesus Christ. In other words, Paul refused to be the primary topic of conversation.

The truth of the matter remains, we cannot be obsessed with God’s glory and our own glory at the same time. These are mutually exclusive preoccupations. We cannot promote His reputation and our reputation at the same time.

This verse is Paul’s way of saying, “Allow me to brag about Jesus Christ. Let me boast of Christ.”

This is difficult to do if we are wanting to add to the prayer list our latest spiritual achievement.

More often, we are like the Little Leaguer who put all his sixty pounds into a ferocious swing and barely connected. The ball scraped by the bottom of the bat, jiggled straight back to the pitcher, who fumbled it and then, threw it over the first baseman's head. The slugger flew on toward second base. Somebody retrieved the ball, but threw it over the second baseman's head into left field. The hitter rounded third as another throw went to second base, and he touched home plate as the ball sailed past the catcher. He was heard to say, "That's the first home run I ever hit in my whole life."

That is so like us; we step to the plate for Jesus, barely tip the ball, He arranges everything so we make it around the bases and then, we announce at the prayer meeting how we managed to pull it off!^{iv}

Paul would write,

. . . may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . (Galatians 6:14)

This is the magnification of the Master.

"It is He; it is He; it is He!"

The apostle Paul delighted in elevating the person of Jesus Christ.

Declined the Pedestal of Human Praise

Secondly, and closely associated with the first thought, Paul declined being placed on a pedestal.

Notice Romans 15:18.

For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed,

This is just like Paul – he refuses to accept personal credit for spiritual fruit.

Gentile masses are coming to faith in Christ and obeying the truth of the gospel and Paul is the signature spokesman. However, he writes, in effect, "Don't put me on a pedestal; don't elevate me, elevate Christ working in me. I wouldn't even presume to talk about anything I've done, without putting it in the context of Christ working through me."

Open the New Testament and read, to soon discover that Paul had more reason to boast than any

of the other apostles, including Peter and John. He was used by God to reveal more of the New Testament than any other human writer, and the greater part of the book of Acts focuses on his ministry.^v

If anybody deserved to be on the cover of a magazine – *Time Magazine's* Missionary of the Century – it would be Paul.

There is no doubt among Bible believing Christians that Paul was, and still is, the most influential Christian author, theologian, pastor and teacher of all time. He impacted the world.

I found it interesting that the *Christian Science Monitor* reported last year that there are more than 100 books in print with titles that include the phrase "that changed the world". Some of the titles include:

- Gunpowder: The History of the Explosive that Changed the World;
- El Nino: The Weather Phenomenon that Changed the World;
- The Pill: A Biography of the Drug that Changed the World;
- Mauve: How One Man Invented a Color that Changed the World;
- The Twist: The Song and Dance that Changed the World;
- Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World;
- Model T Ford: The Car that Changed the World.

We, no doubt, live in the land of the overstated and the easily impressed.

This is the way the world works, however. Make any impression; create any trend; make any discovery; start any fad; sell a number one of anything; lead an organization; make strides in any field and the pedestal awaits – expect it, welcome it, make the most of it. The more visible you are, the less real you can become.

By now, it should be Paul the celebrity. He can do anything.

If Paul could sing, he would be among the final contestants singing before the judges in the final episode of American, what? Right – "American Idolatry".

The press reports of one communist country's leader would be almost laughable – if they were not so tragic. North Korea's leader is presented as

brilliant, perfect, gifted, etc., etc. MSNBC reported last year that the press in his Stalinist-state promote him as the greatest man – perfect in every way. He supposedly goes through daily intensive memory sessions and can now, as he himself said, “remember all the computer codes and telephone numbers of government workers.” In spite of his busy schedule, he evidently has the time to compose entire operas and produce movies. North Korean propaganda stretched too far recently, however, when it reported that their leader played golf for the very first time in his life and in that round of golf, shot eleven holes-in-one.^{vi}

This is the mentality of human nature – he is the great leader, so he must be great at everything!

Listen to the great leader of the church, as he refuses this kind of press report. He demonstrates an unwillingness to step up on the pedestal that every one of us would assume he had the right to mount.

In this text, Paul writes,

... I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me ...

He writes to the Corinthian believers,

... I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (II Corinthians 12:9b-10)

Follow the progression of Paul's own growth as God became greater and greater to him over time and Paul became more and more the object of God's grace:

- In I Corinthians 15:9, Paul referred to himself as,
... the least of the apostles ...
- Later, in Ephesians 3:8, Paul wrote that he considered himself,
... the very least of all saints ...
- Finally, near the end of his life, Paul wrote in I Timothy 1:15,
... sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.

“But Paul, c’mon, you’re the great apostle! You’re the chosen instrument to herald God’s grace to the Gentile world. What’s all this ‘foremost of sinners’ stuff? That doesn’t look good in the press

reports. Why not just say you have struggles every once in a while? Look at what you’ve accomplished, Paul – c’mon, take a look in the mirror.”

Donald Grey Barnhouse summarized what Paul could have easily gloried in:

Paul had this ability to enter a completely pagan city which practiced devil worship and gather a group of transformed believers in the name of Christ. He then hovered over them in prayer and, by constant admonition, lifted them from the most corrupt stratum of heathenism to the highest level of Christian godliness and morality.^{vii}

Certainly Paul does not deny what God has done with him and through him, nor does Paul belittle it either – that would be false humility. But at the end of the day, he teaches that we are all simply instruments in the hand of God, and no Christian should ever look for the pedestal for what God does through him. The pedestal belongs to God alone.

No paint brush can take credit for the masterpiece it was used to paint. No violin takes credit for the beautiful music the musician makes with it.^{viii}

As a young man, one Christian composer and singer who was popular in England, had become proud of his accomplishments and his fame. He and other singers and musicians formed a small group that led music for his home church. On one occasion, their pastor confronted them with what he perceived to be pride in their musical ability and performance. He told them that they had lost the reason they were doing what they were doing and had neglected true worship.

These musicians were insulted by the charge and every one of them packed their instruments and left the church – all, that is, except this one young man. Soon afterward, he wrote the song that for several years, has been sung on two continents. It is a prayer of confession and rededication to the Lord that acknowledges the Lord wants more than a song – He wants a life. Some of the lyrics in this prayer to the Lord are, “I’m coming back to the heart of worship and Lord, it’s all about You.”^{ix}

This is Paul’s perspective. He is intent on the magnification of the Master.

The apostle Paul delighted in elevating Jesus Christ and secondly, he declined the pedestal of human praise.

Directed the Spotlight on the Holy Spirit

Thirdly, Paul directed the spotlight on the Holy Spirit.

Notice Romans 15:19.

in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.

Paul informs us of the truth that the apostolic community had the authenticating miracle working power to demonstrate that they were indeed servants of the living God.

A sign simply served to mark something. The shepherds were told, as a sign, the baby would be wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger (Luke 2:12).

Wonders were simply that – they caused people to marvel.

Combining wonders with signs gave spiritual significance to the marvel of the miracle.

Signs and wonders were their badges of authenticity.

In II Corinthians 12:12, Paul clearly stated that they were for the apostles to use, when he wrote,

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.

In Paul's day, the New Testament did not exist, of course. Paul never heard the Sermon on the Mount, or read John 3:16. He could never pick up a copy of I Peter or Jude or James. He had never heard of the book of Revelation, because it had not been written yet.^x

The badge of authenticity was Paul's ability to heal the sick and give sight to the blind and raise the dead.

Without signs and wonders, before the scriptures were completed, the apostles would have lacked any verifying evidence that they were truly of God, as they laid the foundation of the church in this dispensation of grace. So God in His providence, gave to His apostles the same ability Christ had demonstrated – they did the same things He did – they gave sight to the blind, raised the crippled to walk again, and raised the dead. It was an undeniable sign of God's favor and seal.

Today, we are not laying the foundation of the apostles – we are building on their foundation. The verifying seal and sign of God's approval on any

preacher or teacher today, is their association with the word of God. The litmus test is now, true doctrine.

The test of whether or not a man is a herald for God depends upon his connection to and explanation of the scriptures. Why? Because the word of God is now sufficient to prepare every Christian for every good work (II Timothy 3:16-17).

Someone once said to Barnhouse that it was not fair that we could not turn water into wine anymore or do other miracles of that nature. Barnhouse said, "I've seen an even greater miracle than that – I've seen an alcoholic father of a newborn little girl give his heart to Jesus Christ, and by the power of the gospel, we saw whiskey turned into milk."^{xi}

However, go back in time to when the apostle Paul lived and served. Imagine being at a testimony meeting with the assembly when Paul is in the audience.

"Anybody have a testimony of something God has done for you or through you?"

"Yes, Paul?"

"It was so amazing in Lystra, where that man who had been crippled from birth was listening to me preach. I looked at him and then, with all the courage I could muster – right out there where everyone could hear and know whether or not I had the power of God – said to him, 'Stand up and walk.' He leapt to his feet and the people began calling me Jupiter – one of their gods. Man, that was so exciting!"

"Anybody else have a testimony? Yes, Paul – another?"

"Oh, let me tell you about that demon possessed girl in Philippi. She kept following me around, and it was so annoying [Acts 16 tells us that Paul was greatly annoyed]. Finally, I turned to her and simply commanded the demon, 'In the name of Jesus Christ, come out!' and the demon came out. Wow, what power!"

"Hey, do you want to hear the one about the guy I raised from the dead?"

Who could follow that?

However, in case you missed it, Paul inserted the phrase, tucked inside Romans 15:19,

... in the power of the Spirit ...

This could be read, "in connection with the Holy Spirit's power."

In other words, Paul is saying, "It wasn't me – it was the Spirit of God at work in me and through me."

Paul was obsessed with the glory of God and did not want in any way, to rob God of praise or glory. He delighted to elevate the person of Christ, he declined to be placed on a pedestal of human praise, and he directed the spotlight of attention on the person of the Holy Spirit. More than anything, Paul wanted the magnification of his Master to be obvious to everyone.

I was reminded of a story I read some time ago, about a well known Christian leader who was picked up by a seminary student at the airport. The student was awed to be in the car with this man and he offered compliments and then, plied him with questions. This leader refused to accept any accolade – almost distancing himself from his successful ministry. Finally, the young man said, “Surely you see yourself and your gifts as the primary factors in your ministry’s success.”

The older gentleman paused and then, said,

Young man, when I was growing up on the farm, I had to walk to school and back every weekday. I’d walk along a pasture where there was a wooden fence with long wooden rails attached to fence posts every ten feet or so. One day, I remember coming across a turtle perched up on top of one of those fence

posts. I knew someone had put him there; a turtle can’t climb a fence and get there by himself, you know. Son, I am nothing more than a turtle on a fencepost.

This is what is called refusing the pedestal of praise, redirecting the spotlight, magnifying the Master as a result of being captivated by and dedicated to the glory of God.

This is good news for every ordinary Christian – and the truth is, we are all very ordinary. Whether you are well known or unknown:

- God’s truth is displayed through the simple;
- God’s strength is revealed to the weak;
- God’s grace is distributed to the needy.

God’s glory is magnified when weak, simple, needy, ordinary Christians praise Him and refuse the pedestal; love Him and redirect the praise to Him; worship Him and elevate His name above any other name.

We are ordinary Christians who are nothing more than turtles placed on fence posts – and when asked, we will magnify our Master, for we are obsessed with the glory of God.

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ⁱ Chan Gailey, <http://www.preachingtoday.com>, 4/20/2004.

ⁱⁱ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Baker Books, 1990), p. 107.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, *Romans* (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 290.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 289.

^v John MacArthur, *Romans* (Moody Press, 1994), p. 333.

^{vi} <http://www.msnbc.msn.com>, 8/2/05.

^{vii} James Boice, *Romans: Volume 4* (Baker Books, 1995), p. 1863.

^{viii} MacArthur, p. 335.

^{ix} “Midday Connection,” Moody Broadcasting Network, 11/28/2001.

^x Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Romans: Volume 4* (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 94.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 96.