

# My Biggest Regret

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I marvel when someone says, "I have no regrets." That's not me; I have plenty. Perhaps my biggest regret, outside of not spending more time with my kids when they were growing up and not discovering Irish whiskey sooner, is that for much of my 30 years of ordained ministry I have not preached "the gospel." By-and-large I have been a nice man standing in front of nice people, telling them that God calls them to be nicer (S. Brown). And just about none of it was life-changing.

I have come to see that there are really just two ways to preach: one is the gospel, the other is get-better messages. The first is based on God's goodness; the second on self-improvement. Gospel preaching presupposes that, even though we deserve punishment for our sins, Jesus Christ suffered the punishment in our place on the cross. Get-better sermons, on the other hand, is moralistic advice in which a preacher mounts a pulpit to scold the people for not doing more or getting better (F Allison).

For more years than I care to think I preached get-better messages. I cringe thinking about my old sermons. I regret the lost opportunities of those messages that pounded home the idea that we just need to be better, try harder, pray and give more, read the Bible every day, attend church every week, and be nicer. It was plain ole Phariseism, works-righteousness under the guise of preaching – "an easy-listening version of salvation by self-help" (M Horton). Those who came were vaguely entertained, I think, because I am a fairly entertaining personality (so they tell me on their way out of church), but they left mostly feeling beat up and like they don't measure up. Instead of relieving guilt, get-better sermons reinforced guilt and our inadequacies. They didn't touch people where they need most. "Whenever you feel comforted or elated or absolved as 'fresh as a foal in new mowed hay,' then you know you are hearing the gospel" (P Zahl).

My conversion to gospel preaching was gradual. I don't remember what the initial catalyst was, except that people weren't getting better with sermons on discipline and how to improve your marriage. Those moralistic sermons doled out plenty of advice about what to do, but it totally missed what God has done for us in his Son. Christ came, not to help religious people get better, but to help sinners realize that forgiveness and salvation is outside themselves: in Jesus Christ.

St. Paul, in Romans, explains the gospel as God's power and God's righteousness (1:16, 17). This is exactly opposite of repairing your nature by a determined will. It is what God has done for us when we couldn't do it ourselves. He fulfilled the law. He took upon himself our sins. He burst the bonds of death to give us new life. When this message of one-way love – God's love without strings attached – love when we are not lovely – reaches our hearts, it causes our spirits to come alive to God and it fills us with meaning and purpose. The gospel speaks to our heart's deepest need.

When you get to church to find out that the preacher is in the third of a 10-sermon series on "10 steps to cure depression" get up and run out of there as fast as your depressed legs can take you. It's self-help, not the gospel. Chalk it up to a well meaning preacher who hasn't yet realized that our real hope is in God, in the sufficiency of his work on the cross and in the salvation that is not found in get-better sermons.