



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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Through the Lens of Faith  
Matthew 16:13-20; Romans 12:1-8

In case you missed it, I think I heard reports of some sort of rare astronomical event on Monday. Did you? In the days leading up to the solar eclipse, it seemed that the entire country was preparing for it in some way. It is estimated that over five million people traveled to somewhere along the Path of Totality, joining the more than 12 million people who already live within the 70-mile-wide, coast-to-coast path. Millions more stopped what they were doing to go outside or get online to watch, schools closed, signs along the highway warned of traffic congestion, and some reports estimate that over 100 million pairs of solar eclipse glasses were sold.<sup>1</sup> As many have observed, the total eclipse of 2017 eclipsed all of the growing tensions and division in this country, and if only for a couple of hours, our entire nation stopped bickering, came together, and looked up to see the wonders of the heavens.

While Monday's eclipse was educational and exciting, I admit that some aspects of it were also amusing. I joked last week that with all the hype it was getting, I felt like I needed to stock up on bread and milk, just in case. And I couldn't help but chuckle at my Facebook newsfeed on Monday evening, as I scrolled through dozens, if not hundreds, of photos of my friends and their family members donning paper glasses (or welding helmets), looking upward, and smiling at the sun.

The glasses themselves became quite a news item as people were scrambling to find them. Some people who had purchased them online had their glasses recalled because of questions about safety. One of the major manufacturers which had hoped to produce 90 million pairs experienced production delays and were only able to ship about 40 million pairs, leaving many stores with shortages. And even with the glasses, many eye care professionals warned viewers to use caution because, unless they were worn in precisely the right way, permanent retinal damage could still occur. But since these glasses provided most people the only possibility of filtering out

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<sup>1</sup>"Solar Eclipse 2017: Business Booming for Makers of Glasses." Doyle Rice. USA TODAY, July 7, 2017.

enough of the harmful radiation to get a clear view of the eclipse safely, some people spent a great deal of time and money to acquire them.

It occurred to me at some point on Monday evening, after the tv talking heads returned to their constant chatter about the North Korean threat, protests and racial divisions in cities across our land, the ongoing conflict in Iraq, and predictions of how what was then Tropical Storm Harvey would develop, that it would be nice if we had a version of eclipse glasses that could help us see the rest of the world more clearly.

Wouldn't it be easier if we could see the complex and daunting issues of our time through a lens that would filter out all of the confusing distractions and the harsh and harmful voices which only ratchet up the volume and blur any accurate picture of what's happening? Wouldn't it be nice to have some way of helping us zero in on what's essential to understanding actual events? But too often, when we look around us at all the troubling situations and disputes going on, it's more like looking through a kaleidoscope, which, though appealing and interesting, reflects and spins color and light in so many directions that it prevents us from seeing or understanding with any clarity. We end up feeling trapped in a cycle of swirling misinformation and heated opinions, unsure of how to make sense of any of it, unclear whether we have become so distracted and misdirected that we'll ever be able to find an unobstructed view.

When we look at Paul's New Testament writings, the image of a kaleidoscope may also seem appropriate. Paul most often writes to churches he founded, usually in response to specific questions or conflicts which have arisen within the fellowship. Since he is writing to people he knows about circumstances familiar to them, and we only have his side of the correspondence, reading Paul can, at times, feel like listening in on one side of a private conversation. We have to be careful not to take individual verses out of context and to do the hard work of trying to understand the people, places, and situations which Paul is addressing.

Romans is a bit different, though. It is the closest thing we have to a distillation of Paul's theology, written to a congregation he does not yet know as a way of introducing himself and urging the congregation in Rome to be attentive to the message of the Gospel without being distracted by peripheral issues. As with all of the early churches, the Romans were challenged by external persecution and internal disagreements, and Paul urges them to stay focused on their calling as believers.

Over and over, through words such as "I am not ashamed of the gospel; for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" (Rom. 1:16); "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8); and "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), Paul reminds the Roman Christians of what is at the heart of their life of faith. Though other questions and problems and even crises will arise and require attention, for the followers of Christ in first-century Rome and for those of us who claim the name of Christ in twenty-first century Rocky Mount, it is the message of God's grace for all people, demonstrated through the love of Jesus Christ, which is the lens through which we are to see and interpret our world.

At the heart of Paul's letter to Rome, we find today's Epistle Lesson, the beginning of the "so what?" of Romans. Paul has written about God's grace through Christ and how that grace is available to all—not just to the Jews—but to all who humble themselves to admit their need of it and to confess faith in Christ as the Incarnation of it. And now, with chapter 12, Paul explains what our new life in Christ will look like, what it means to interpret ourselves and the world in light of our faith. But with so many distractions and distortions, how are we to see clearly what shape this new life will take? With so many influences and perspectives coming at us from all directions, how are we to do the work of discerning which ones we are to embrace and which ones we are to reject? How do we filter out all of the distractions which cloud and clutter our line of vision so that we can see the image of Christ clearly?

At some point, each of us who seeks to follow Jesus must answer for ourselves the question he asked of his first disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" And if we proclaim, along with Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," then we are declaring Christ to be the lens through which we see and interpret ourselves, one another, and the events of our world. If we take that confession of our faith in Christ seriously, then the life and teachings of Christ will become the model by which we form opinions about the issues we face, how we interact with others, what our priorities will be, and how we will use the time and talents we have been given. And because ours is a world, a nation, sometimes even a religion which has too often obscured the good news of Christ's gospel with the sins of hypocrisy, legalism, injustice, or greed, there are times we will need to refocus our vision by clearing out things which obstruct our view. If our faith in Christ is to be the lens through which we see the world, there are some things we must first clear out of our line of vision.

First, in order to for us to see Christ's image reflected clearly at the center of our lives, then we must refocus them so that they are no longer

centered around us. In this new life in Christ, Paul says, there is no room for arrogance. When we claim Jesus as Lord, we undergo a complete transformation of the old self—body, mind, and spirit. Paul echoes this thought in his second letter to the Corinthians when he writes, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). The life of faith is no longer about us at all but about Christ who lives in us, who transforms us, who reorients our lives, not for our own notoriety or status or wealth but for the purpose of reflecting Christ within us. Christ didn't come to redeem us just so we can become some new and improved version of ourselves. He came to make all things new, including us, and that means first ridding ourselves of any pretense of where we stand in relation to God. Before God, we are all sinners who have fallen short of God's glory and who are all utterly dependent upon God's grace.

But if we stop there, at considering only our status in relation to God, then we have created a false humility. When Paul urges us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought (v. 3), he goes on to celebrate the diversity of gifts required to make the body function. So while we cannot allow our view of how we relate to God to be obscured by arrogance, neither can we let our view of how we relate to one another to be blurred by hatred or prejudice. The First Letter of John says it even more directly: "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar" (1 John 4:20). For anyone who claims to follow Christ, there is no room—none at all—for hatred or discrimination or claims of superiority based on race, culture, language, creed, sexual orientation, gender, or any other way we have sought to divide rather than unite ourselves. I believe it grieves the heart of God deeply to see anyone, but maybe especially those who claim to be followers of Christ, uttering hatred and perpetrating violence against others because of the color of their skin, the political party with which they affiliate, their religion, or their immigration status. We should debate these issues openly and honestly, and we may reach different conclusions about where we stand, but we may not, as followers of Christ, hate or abuse or reject one another because of those differences. In the end, we may not understand those who are different from us, but nowhere in scripture does God call us to understand one another. God does, however, command us to love one another.

As if being transformed weren't already daunting enough, Paul then tells us that when we have received the gift of the grace of God, we need to get up and get to work. We cannot have a clear view of the world's needs if our vision is impeded by complacency. In the first half of Romans, as in many other letters, Paul is clear that our salvation comes through grace, not by works, but as he describes his vision for new life in Christ, he is equally clear that the life of faith is to be active and engaged. Here, Paul writes that ours

is a faith which prophesies, ministers, teaches, encourages, gives, leads, and shows compassion. In other writings, he adds to that list speaking knowledge and wisdom, healing, showing mercy, and extending hospitality. Ours is a faith that calls us above all to love, but not with a sentimental, warm feeling. When we follow the example of Jesus, ours is a love which seeks the welfare of the other, stands against injustice, speaks with courage, and extends kindness. When we look at the world through the lens of our faith in Christ, we see a world which desperately needs to see the compassion of Christ modeled through Christ's Body, the Church, through you, through me.

There are, of course, many other obstacles we could name which might cloud our vision of how we are called to respond to the events in our world. Even when we try with all our might to view all of life through the lens of our faith, there seem to be so many challenges and distractions that it is difficult to get a clear picture. But I believe there is one more worth mentioning—one more danger which threatens not only to obstruct our vision but even to crush our spirits. For those of us who have professed faith in Christ and who seek to focus our lives on emulating his, we must not, no matter how dire the circumstances may seem, allow the light of Christ within us to be overshadowed by dark clouds of despair. C.S. Lewis makes the claim that "despair is a greater sin than any of the sins which provoke it"<sup>2</sup> because it obliterates our hope in God's promises and causes our trust in God to fail. No matter what we face then, whether personal tragedy, national unrest, natural disaster, or global crisis, our faith in the God who is the Creator of the universe calls us to a peace which passes our understanding and hope which does disappoint. Because our faith is in the God who came to dwell among us through Christ and who continues to abide with us through the Holy Spirit, no matter the current evidence to the contrary, we can proclaim, along with Paul, that nothing "in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). Because ours is a resurrection faith, we can proclaim boldly that we are an Easter people with enduring hope and a vision of abundant life which defies the darkness and death which seem to reign in our world.

We teach our very youngest children to sing their faith with simplicity and clarity: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," and "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world." But somewhere along the way, we stop living as though we believe those words to be true. As we grow older and confront the many issues facing our world, we come to realize that life and faith are a bit more complicated than that. But every once in a while, by the grace of God, something happens to cause us to pause, look up

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<sup>2</sup>C.S. Lewis. *The Screwtape Letters*, chapter XXIX. 1942.

to the heavens, and with the wonder of a child, see clearly how God is at work transforming our world. May we go forth from this place with our eyes and hearts open to God's vision and ready to live so that others can see Christ clearly reflected in us. Amen.

## **Prayer of Thanksgiving**

**August 27, 2017**

In times like these, Holy God, we scarcely know how to pray. Like Jesus' first disciples, our hearts are heavy and our thoughts confused from the events of the week, and we gather to worship with a myriad of questions and emotions, seeking solace in our pain. We have watched in horror as tragedy visited our community once again, as nature unleashed its fury through a powerful storm, as neighbors around the world mourn lives lost to senseless acts of terror, and we have confronted our own fears and uncertainties in light of our neighbors' suffering.

But still we come to worship, O God. We come because in this place and among these, our brothers and sisters, we find strength and comfort. We come because you bless our doubts and call us to trust in spite of them. We come because we seek to put aside our desire for vengeance and to follow your way of peace. We come because we are a people filled with resurrection hope because Christ has conquered sin and death for us and for all of creation. Every need we have we entrust to you, and for every gift we receive we offer to you our thanks, most Gracious and Holy God.

Were it not for our faith, the images we see on our television screens and the challenges by which we are confronted in our own community might be enough to lead us to despair, O God. Instead you have called us to respond with generous hearts, with creative minds, and with diligent hands, believing that what we do in this place and what we carry with us from this place will make a difference in our lives and in our world. Teach us to reach beyond ourselves and our comfortable places to ease the suffering that engulfs so many lives. Grant us wisdom and courage to face the complexities of our world and to seek solutions with creativity and mercy. Help us to be a people of compassion and to respond to those in need out of the abundance we have received from you. Teach us to be merciful even as we have been shown great mercy. Holy God, grant us the grace to quiet our fearful minds, and let nothing shake our confidence in you. Hear now, O Lord, these prayers of our hearts and those offered by your children of every language and nation, through Jesus the Christ. Amen.

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