

Christianity 101: The Basics of the Christian Faith

#3 Prevenient Grace...A God Who Seeks

Matthew 18:12-14 & Luke 19:1-10 (esp. v. 10)

By John Gill

How long has it been since you have played “Hide and Seek?” If you have had small children around your house like we had for many years, you know that “Hide and Seek” is a favorite past-time for kids, especially on rainy days. I think all children love the challenge of trying to find someplace in the house they can hide where their parents will never think to look.

It reminds me of an incident I heard about some time back. A young boy wanted his mother to play Hide and Seek with him, but she was too busy. So, he began to play by himself. He would run and hide, then call-out to his mom to find him. She would stop whatever she was doing just long enough to locate him, then return to what she had been doing. This happened several times, and each time, mom went and found her son.

Then the calling-out stopped, and mom assumed that her son had gotten bored and had started doing something else. After twenty minutes or so, the mother realized that it had been AWFULLY quiet and went to call her son. He didn't answer. Alarmed, she began to search the house, looking in all the usual places he was likely to be, but he has nowhere to be found. Frantic by this time, she searched outside, and then ran to the neighbors to ask if they had seen him. No one had.

Beside herself with worry, the mother ran back into the house to call the police. As she was dialing, she heard a noise coming from the kitchen. She hung up and followed the strange noise to the cabinets where she kept her pots and pans. She opened the door, and there, to her great relief, found her little boy...curled up and fast asleep.

“Hide and Seek:” It's a game kids love to play. But you know...they aren't the ONLY ones! We grown-ups like to play “Hide and Seek,” as well...except WE try to hide...from God! And, thank God, He is willing to “seek” after us.

You know, the Bible is full of stories of persons who were lost or tried to hide from God, whom God sought out: In the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden from the Book of Genesis (which we looked at last Sunday), we read how, after Adam and Eve had sinned, they tried to “hide” from God. But, God went

walking through the Garden in the cool of the evening, seeking after them until he found them.

We also have stories about others who tried to hide from God, but whom God sought-out and found: Moses hid from God in the land of Midian. But God tracked him down and spoke to him through a burning bush. The prophet Elijah tried to hide from God in a cave, but God found him there. The reluctant prophet Jonah thought he could flee from God, but discovered that God would go to the ends of the earth to search him out.

Even in the New Testament we see that our God is a God who “seeks.” Jesus sought out the twelve Disciples, calling them from their everyday mundane lives and challenged them by saying “follow me.” The Risen Christ sought out Saul who was persecuting the church and made him Paul, the greatest missionary the world has ever known.

But nowhere do we see that our God is a “God who seeks” more powerfully than in the life and teachings of Jesus. The two stories read this morning tell us this. After his encounter with Zacchaeus, Jesus proclaimed the purpose of his coming into the world: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” And how could this be more beautifully expressed than we find in the parable of the lost sheep that tells of the determination of God to search and search...until every “lost sheep” is found.

You know, I think that the whole Gospel of Jesus Christ can be summarized this way: “Our God is a SEEKING God” ... a God who, like that Good Shepherd, won’t rest until all those who are lost have been found and brought back into the fold.

You and I are not so different from all those people in the Bible. Just like them, we have a tendency to try to “hide” from God...sometimes by deliberately turning our back on Him, but more often, simply by ignoring Him. The good news is that God is always actively seeking us out...and aren’t we thankful He is!

This truth is the “second step” along John Wesley’s “Path of Salvation:” “Prevenient Grace...A God who Seeks.” As we will learn over the course of our sermon series, one of the main hallmarks of United Methodist Christianity is the emphasis on the Amazing Grace of God that permeates all of life.

Grace is God's answer to the Original Sin that holds our life captive – it is the key that unlocks the chains that bind us, and frees us to love God and others as we should.

What do you think of when you think of “grace?” If you're like most people, you probably think of that grace available to us through the power of the cross of Jesus Christ...the grace which covers our sins. And we WILL be talking about that aspect of grace in the weeks to come. But perhaps you haven't thought of grace as being “prevenient.” That's a word we don't use very often. What do we mean by “Prevenient Grace?”

“Prevenient Grace” is what Wesley called the grace of God which “comes before” our conversion. Wesley taught the God's grace is at work in our lives, even BEFORE we are aware of it, leading us, prodding us, urging us to repent and be saved. Let me explain:

In the scriptures, the relationship between God and God's people is often compared to marriage between husband and wife. For instance, in Revelation, the church is described as being like a bride who is adorned and prepared to meet her Bridegroom – who is Jesus himself. Well, if professing faith in Christ is like exchanging vows on our wedding day, prevenient grace is that courtship period of the relationship where God “woos us,” inviting us to have a relationship with Him.

Another way Wesley described this first stage of grace was “Leading Grace.” Bob Pierce spoke sort of tongue-in-cheek about “prevenient grace” when he said this: “God gently leads His children along...me he yanks!” (Sometimes, that is our experience of prevenient grace, too.)

John Wesley noted three ways in which prevenient grace “leads” us. First, he said that it is the work of the Holy Spirit which creates in us our first sensitivity to God's call in our lives - our first awareness that God is seeking us and has a plan for our lives. Secondly, it produces the dawning awareness that we have violated God's will (conviction of sin) and that we have not responded to the divine call. And Finally, it stimulates our first wish to please God.

In other words...prevenient grace sparks our first inkling of faith. Without any effort on our part... before we are even aware of it... God's grace leads us to the point that we are able to profess Jesus Christ.

Karl Barth, the great German theologian, described it like this: he tells about a man on horseback who, without knowing it, crossed over a lake in the dead of winter when the lake was frozen over. When he reached the opposite shore and was told the truth about the route he had taken, he broke down and wept. He could THEN see how, it was only by God's grace that he had made it safely on his journey. Without knowing it, God had led him along his way.

This is how we often experience God's grace. Like that rider, we can look back over our lives and see how God has been at work ...leading us, prodding us, urging us... even without our knowledge. And, just like this man, the providence of God – this leading in our lives is ONLY EVIDENT in hindsight.

Think back to the time you accepted Christ (if you have). You may have THOUGHT that you came to faith by your own volition. But if you will stop and consider your life before your conversion, I'm sure that you would be able to see how God had been working on you all along. Perhaps He planted the seeds of faith in your heart by giving you Christian parents or grandparents. Maybe you attended Sunday School or youth group, and the love of a Sunday School teacher or youth counselor revealed a little of the love of God. Or maybe even the events and circumstances of your life (both good and bad) had a role to play in bringing you to faith.

Who was it in your life that God used to reach out to you? Looking back, how have YOU experienced prevenient grace in your faith journey?

You see, it's a fact that we do NOT save ourselves. Even when we come to faith, it is NOT of our own initiative that we come, but instead, it is OUR RESPONSE to the initiative of God...a God who seeks us out, even before we know we are lost! (By the way, that is why we baptize infants – but that's a different sermon all together!) That's "Prevenient Grace!"

There's a wonderful hymn in our hymnal that expresses this truth beautifully:

*I sought the Lord, and afterwards I knew
He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me.
It was not I that found, O Savior true;
No, I was found of Thee.*

Or, as Jesus himself said: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

So, friends – are you still playing “Hide and Seek” with God? He’s seeking after you – right in this very moment! If you are playing hide and seek with God, my prayer for you this morning is that you will stop hiding, and let Him find you.