



THE FIRST WORD

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THE MASTERPIECE I NEVER KNEW

SERMON BY REV. JUNE BARROW ■ OCTOBER 15, 2023

It was international news in 2017. In New York City, the upscale auction house Christie's sold this painting, called *Salvator Mundi*—Latin for *Savior of the World*—and it set a record price; it sold for 450 million dollars. The painting is about 18 inches by 24 inches, not a great size. So why the high price? It is almost certainly an original Leonardo DaVinci and believed for centuries to be lost.

DaVinci painted it about 1500. Several copies were made by his students; it is how the students learned to paint, by copying the master artist. The original painting traded hands. About a hundred years or so after it was painted, it ended up in the palace of the King of England, King Charles I. Surely a royal palace is a safe place for a masterpiece. But in the 1640's there was a civil war, and the king was dethroned, executed, and the entire royal family lost their jobs. The royal goods were inventoried and this painting by DaVinci was listed and valued at 30 British pounds.

And then, quite literally, people just lost track of it. How do you lose track of a masterpiece? It was owned by one person, then another. Sometimes it was sold, sometimes inherited. Many of the owners did not know what they had. The painting was not seen for what it was, it was not treasured, and so it was not guarded, and so it was damaged. The canvas was scratched and one corner had paint missing. A few times, repairs were tried. Paint was added to cover what was missing, trying to make the canvas presentable enough to hang on the wall.

Always, the art world knew the masterpiece had existed, but as time passed, when people saw this canvas, which had been treated first casually and then carelessly for centuries, they thought it must just be a copy. Though they looked at the painting, they could not really see it, could not recognize it for what it truly was. And again, because it was not recognized, it was not treasured or valued or guarded. In 1958, a man in England, who had inherited it, sold it for 45 pounds. Less than 70 years later, someone bought it for 450 million dollars. From 45 pounds to 450 million dollars in 70 years.

How did that happen? A couple of investors, interested in art and looking with careful, trained eyes for it, spotted this painting for sale in New Orleans. They paid just over \$1,000 for it, believing that DaVinci's real masterpiece did exist and that this might be it. After meticulous study, the removal of all the overpainting added through the years, and very precise restoration, the prevailing opinion of the art world was that the masterpiece, the *Salvator Mundi*, the lost Leonardo, had at last been found.

That is a true story. Many people over 500 years had a masterpiece in their possession and did not understand, did not recognize it. So they didn't value it, treasure it, or guard it.

The Masterpiece of the Gospel

Here is another true story. The great preacher Paul wrote two personal letters to his friend Timothy, who was like a son to him.

In the first one, Paul ends his letter like this:

Timothy, guard what God has entrusted to you. Avoid godless, foolish discussions with those who oppose you with their so-called knowledge.

1 Timothy 6:20, NLT

"Guard what God has entrusted to you." Paul urges Timothy to guard the gospel, to value, to hold onto the masterpiece of the gospel. Paul wrote a second letter to Timothy and this time he begins his letter with the same call:

Hold on to the pattern of wholesome teaching you learned from me—a pattern shaped by the faith and love that you have in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴Through the power of the Holy Spirit who lives within us, carefully guard the precious truth that has been entrusted to you.

2 Timothy 1:13-14, NLT

Hold onto it. Treasure it. Guard it. The call is for us too, for us to see the gospel, to recognize it in its splendor, and to guard it, to keep it, to treasure it for ourselves and for others.

What is the gospel? Is it advice for living a more successful life? No. Is it a self-improvement plan? No. Is it a self-help program? No. Is it 10 steps to better living? No.

The gospel is the only answer and a radical reply to the brokenness and darkness in the world. The brokenness and darkness are daily on display. The events of the last days in Israel, of the recent years in Ukraine, in Sudan, and many other places show us in bold print, in graphic image, how dark the darkness can be. In Ephesians, Paul describes our condition, listing the reasons why we needed God to act. Paul says we were dead in our sin, we followed the ways of the world, we gratified dark cravings, we were separated from Christ, we were outsiders to God's ways, foreigners to the promises of God, without hope, and far away from God. It's a grim picture.

And so God must act. What we do not have the power to fix out there or in ourselves, in our own lives, God restores. But God has acted on our behalf. What God has done for us in Jesus is a work beyond the full comprehension of any of us. It is a masterpiece of sovereign power, deep wisdom, pure kindness, and profoundly sacrificial love. How sad it would be if any of us missed it, did not comprehend at all the value of what has been given to us. That is the hope of this message today. Will you pray with me?

Lord, will you give us eyes to see with understanding and hearts to receive what you have done for us in the gift of Jesus, the masterpiece of the gospel. We thank you, Lord. Amen.

The Work of The Master

So what is the gospel? It's the good news of what God has done for us, on our behalf. This good news is personal, it's for you, and it's global, it's for the heartbreak and harms we witness that can make our knees buckle.

Here it is: Jesus lived the life we could not manage to live. According to the plan and purpose of God, Jesus, guilty of nothing, received the death penalty on our behalf. He paid the debt owed—the debt **we** owe—willingly suffered the penalty for our wanderings and rebellions. We were lost, but God was not willing that we should stay lost. The remedy was costly: the sacrificial obedience of Jesus, Son of God.

We are rescued not by advice or suggestions or guidelines or our own efforts. That's why people who say that Jesus was nothing more than a good teacher, that his teachings are all that matter, are simply wrong. Jesus didn't come to give us advice; he came to save us by the radical act of his own death and resurrection.

I love how the artist Lilius Trotter said it:

The world's salvation was not wrought out by the three years in which He went about doing good, but in the three hours of darkness in which He hung stripped and nailed, in uttermost exhaustion of spirit, soul, and body—till His heart broke.

We are rescued by an action, an event, by a historical happening. It was the work of God, taken on your behalf, but it is not your action, not your work. There was a debt that had to be paid and it was paid, in full.

The gospel is life rather than death because Jesus overcame death, defeating our great enemy. It is hope rather than despair, because there are many forces we cannot control, but God has the greatest power. It is light rather than darkness, because evil creates a fog of confusion, blurring what should be clear, and lures us into shadow and darkness. Life, hope, light—these are the promises and the

experiences of all of us who treasure the masterpiece of the gospel and trust God's truth and salvation. We cry out for God and we are saved.

The gospel is the masterpiece of God's very character, of God's purpose, intention, and heart. It is the outworking, the fulfillment of that beautiful blessing given to us thousands of years ago, "May the Lord bless you and keep you and make his face to shine on you and give you fullness of peace." You know that benediction. In the work of God through Jesus, those beautiful words are lived out for us.

It is accomplished, it is an act, it is done—but not by you or me. It is the work of God, so that no one can brag or feel superior to anyone else. "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God" (Ephesians 2:8). All of us stand together on a level playing field, all of us bringing nothing but our need, and God is the one who has accomplished the work of rescuing us, of paying our debts, great though they are, of bringing us into the family, and giving us life, hope, and light.

A pastor said it like this: "The gospel isn't the ABCs of the Christian faith; it's the A to Z." It is done. It is finished. It is accomplished.

A musician wrote it like this:

*Not because of who I am, but because of what You've done.
Not because of what I've done, but because of who You are.*

This is the masterpiece of the gospel. Now, how can we see it more clearly? How can we train our eyes to see it?

I've told you two true stories today and now here is a third. One of our own church members was at a thrift store right here in our area. In front of him was a bin holding a stack of pictures. You could buy any picture for \$5, said the sign. He flipped through picture after picture and then held one up. "This is good," he thought. He is an art teacher. "It looks like a Thomas Hart Benton." He paid his \$5, took it home, and then did something important. He took it out of the frame. And there was a signature, Benton, in pencil which is how Benton signed his art. The signature had been covered by the frame.

He took photos and sent an email to an art auction house, describing his find. Immediately came the automatic reply: “We receive many inquiries. Do not expect a response for six weeks.” But the very next morning, there was a personal message in his inbox. “We want to see the painting.” How does this story end? He had paid \$5 for a picture pulled out of a bin at a local thrift store. He sold it for \$20,000.

How do we learn to truly see the masterpiece of the gospel? Unframe the gospel. Whatever you’ve heard or inherited or been taught or picked up about Christian faith—that’s the frame, and the frame can hide the genuine signature. Take away the frame of the cultural messages. For everyone—on every continent, in every century, in every place—cultural understandings color our thinking. Every generation in every age has to do this, has to ask, “What does the Bible actually say, what does the Christian faith actually mean, who is Jesus actually, and what is just cultural overpainting that I can scrape off?” There is bad religion out there, wrong ideas, taught by small minds and greedy souls. Scrape all of that off. All of us have received this masterpiece of the gospel in a constructed frame made up of what we’ve been told, what our peers think, what our family background is, what our cultural moment is like, what our own hurts and harms have been.

Take it out of the frame, look for the signature, authenticate the faith. In a thrift store bin, a frame hid the signature of the artist. God’s signature is in his Word and in Jesus Christ. So compare what you’re hearing and what you’ve always believed with what the Bible says. Wipe off the dust, discard what is an addition, restore what has been removed by careless handling. Life in Christian community, with faithful biblical teaching, can do this, can give you opportunity to see it with your own eyes, to have your own experience of the masterpiece of the gospel.

The Value of the Masterpiece

Jesus said in Matthew that the gospel was like a treasure hidden in a field and when a man discovered it, he sold everything he had to

buy that field and have the treasure of the kingdom of heaven, the altogether right relationship with God:

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”

Matthew 13:44-46

It is a treasure; it is like a pearl of great price. It’s what we most need, most long for, what our hearts truly cry out for beyond any other desire or acquisition or relationship. To be in right relationship with your Maker, with the God who created you—there is no substitute.

You need not be smart or educated. Some years ago, Masterpiece Theatre showed a film called *Framed*. In the fictional story, there has been a water leak in The National Gallery of art in London. The curator, sophisticated and educated, must quickly relocate many paintings to a safe place in Wales. The point of the film comes near the end, when the highly educated curator explains the meaning of an art masterpiece to a simple, local Welsh schoolteacher. The expert explains the lines of sight and the structure and says something like, “This painting is about balance and proportion.” The schoolteacher, seeing the masterpiece for the first time, looks at him and says, “You think this painting is about balance? This is about love and passion.” And it’s clear to the viewer that this is the point of the film. She sees the meaning, she truly sees the masterpiece. You need not be smart or biblically confident to see and understand and claim the glory of the gospel, to embrace what God has done for you in Jesus.

Do you know who paid \$450 million dollars for the lost DaVinci, the *Salvator Mundi* painting? The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. Since its purchase in 2017 it has not been seen. For a few years, it was on the prince’s private yacht. Now the official word is that the painting is securely stored awaiting the completion of a new art museum being

built in Saudi Arabia where the painting will be shown. The Crown Prince wants a great art museum for his own people in his own country. That's a good thing. He owns the painting. He owns the canvas and the paint. He can look at it whenever he wants.

But I don't think he truly sees or owns the meaning of the masterpiece. Look at what DaVinci says to us in this painting. Jesus is the Savior of the world. That's his point. That's the message of the masterpiece. That ball that Jesus holds in his left hand is not just a globe of this planet, of our world. It is a crystal orb, representing the celestial sphere, meaning everything, all that was created by God, the heavens and the earth, the universe and each of us. That's the meaning. **Jesus is the Savior of the world.** Yes, the Crown Prince certainly owns the canvas. But I own the true masterpiece, the salvation of God, because God through Jesus who is the Savior of the world has given it to me and to you as a free gift. It is a gift beyond price, freely given.

Last week at a staff meeting, Pastor Brad Rogers reminded us of the great gift of the gospel. He quoted Tim Keller:

We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.

We can also say that the darkness of evil, sin and brokenness in this world is very great, but that God is greater still; that what is beyond us to repair, God will restore. This is the character and power of God. This is the gospel. This is the masterpiece. And it belongs to you. Jesus, the Savior of the world is for you. ■

