

The Gospel Changes Everything

Understanding the Gospel

We are going to spend the next four weeks considering the Gospel. When we grasp the meaning, significance and implications of the Gospel, it changes everything. Here's our road map for this series.

- 1) Understanding the Gospel. What does the Gospel mean? We'll tackle that subject this morning.
- 2) Believing the Gospel. What's the necessary response on our part to the Gospel?
- 3) Living the Gospel. What impact should the Gospel have in our daily lives?
- 4) Sharing the Gospel. How might God use us to see others' lives changed by the Gospel?

What is the Gospel? You would think that would be an easy question for the average Christian in the average evangelical church to answer. Unfortunately, that's not the case. The responses you get would probably be all over the map. Why is that? A couple of reasons occur to me.

1) Many Christians are essentially illiterate biblically. This is the fault of the church corporately and the believer individually. In many churches and denominations, the Scriptures are either not the centerpiece of Christian study and thinking or they are used to justify only certain aspects of Christian positions on issues such as justice, social issues, ministry of the Spirit, feeling good about oneself, realizing one's potential, etc.

The result is that other things assume the place of authority in what we believe and why. Examples would be church tradition, personal experience and so forth.

2) There are many other "gospels" out there. The gospel of social action; the "feel good" gospel; the health and wealth gospel; the gospel of self-fulfillment. Paul ran into the same problem in the first century. Notice what he said to those in Galatia:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. – *Galatians 1:6-8*

Paul warns that there are people out there who will proclaim a different Gospel than the one he proclaimed, than the one God has revealed to us in holy Scripture. In the classroom setting of one of the *Peanuts* comic strips, on the first day of the new school year, the students were told to write an essay about returning to class. In her essay Lucy wrote, “Vacations are nice, but it’s good to get back to school. There is nothing more satisfying or challenging than education, and I look forward to a year of expanding knowledge.”

Needless to say, the teacher was pleased with Lucy and complimented her fine essay. In the final frame, Lucy leans over and whispers to Charlie Brown, “After a while, you learn what sells.”

Some of what is passed off as the Gospel today is done so because it sells.

If we have a weak, shallow or even mistaken understanding of the Gospel, there are several consequences. Let me suggest three:

- An inadequate understanding of the Gospel means a weak salvation.

If we don’t really understand the Gospel as revealed in the Scriptures, our salvation rests on shaky grounds. Only when you know clearly what the true Gospel is can you firmly place your trust in that knowledge. Other-wise it is either a moving target or a faulty one.

- An inadequate understanding of the Gospel leaves room for a distortion of the truth. The Apostle Paul encourages all believers to grow to maturity in Christ –

... so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. – *Ephesians 4:14*

Many Christians are susceptible to false gospels because they aren’t grounded in a right understanding of the Gospel as shown in the Bible. Something comes along that sounds good, feels good, looks good, and they are easily led astray. This doesn’t mean that they necessarily abandon their faith, but their faith rests in something other than what the Gospel really is.

- An inadequate understanding of the Gospel weakens our worship. Greg Gilbert, in his book *What is the Gospel?*, writes:

An emaciated gospel leads to emaciated worship. It lowers our eyes from God to self and cheapens what God has accomplished for us in Christ. The biblical gospel, by contrast, is like fuel in the furnace of worship. The more you understand about it, believe it, and rely on it, the more you adore God both for who he is and for what he has done for us in Christ.

A good place for us to start to get an accurate understanding of the Gospel is Paul's letter to the Romans. The heart of the Gospel is contained in four major truths. We will look at three of them today and the fourth one next week.

1) God is our Creator and we are all accountable to him.

The Bible opens with a grand account of creation: "In beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The text goes on with some detail about what God creates. Then we reach the apex of creation:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. – *Genesis 1:26-28a*

God placed them in the Garden of Eden to rule over all he had created. But with the responsibility came accountability. And God laid out the ground rules in how the man and woman were to live under his sovereign reign.

This was a loving God who delighted in his creation, especially the human beings who were created with the ability to relate to their Creator in a way unlike anything else.

But sadly, they chose not to obey; they chose to reject his rule in their lives. The Old Testament is the story of a promised redemption, of a restored relationship lost in the Fall. The good news of the Gospel was a promise given to Adam and Eve that God would do something to remedy the consequences of sin.

Voltaire, the 18th century French philosopher and atheist, once wrote something to this effect: “In the beginning God created man in his own image, and now man has returned the compliment.” Ever since the beginning of time, people have shaped a view of God from their own perspective. In the Garden, what did the serpent say to Eve? “Listen, the only reason God told you not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is because if you do, you will like him; you can be independent from God!” Eve was asked to see God her Creator as someone he was not – someone who just wanted to keep her down, someone whom she just didn’t need to be accountable to.

We do the same thing, don’t we? If you were to ask people today what they think is the most important, the most significant, the most prominent attribute or character trait of God, what would they say? Most would say God’s love. By that, most seem to mean that love is the supreme value that governs everything else. This is the view that leads to what we call in salvation language *universalism*, that is, in the end everyone goes to heaven because God, after all, is a God of love.

Now listen, God is a God of love, thank goodness. But you simply cannot divorce one of his attributes from the others. They all work together in perfect harmony, never contradicting one another, but always controlled by a unity of character. We cannot hold a view that God’s love trumps all other attributes. God is not inconsistent in character.

When Moses was up on Mount Sinai, receiving the second set of the tablets of law, God said to him:

The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin.... – *Exodus 34:6-7a*

What a gracious and loving God. Doesn’t that make the point of what most think of God? But wait; he goes on to say to Moses:

Yet he will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. – *Exodus 34:7b*

Whoa! This is a God who is loving and compassionate, but who executes judgment according to his holiness. This is a God to whom all are accountable – required because of who he is.

Now, let's go to the book of Romans. Paul states his thesis in chapter one, verses 16 and 17. It is the grand theme of this letter, and indeed, the grand theme of Christianity. Look what Paul says: **Romans 1:16-17**

This Gospel, this good news which has the power to save, reveals the righteousness of God. God is always in the right; he is right in everything he does and everything he requires.

Paul goes on, then, to speak of this accountability to our Creator – **Romans 1:18-23**

Paul explains over the next two-and-a-half chapters this fact. Just like a prosecuting attorney Paul lays out the legal case against every one and the conclusion is:

2) Every person is a sinner and stands before God guilty and condemned.

Paul brings the pagan personified in Gentiles before the judgment bar of God, lays out the case against them, and the verdict is delivered: "Guilty." Then he presents the moralist and lays the case out against them. This is the person who would say, "But I live a good life. I am a moral person." The verdict is the same as the pagan: "Guilty."

The last group of people that Paul brings before the bar of justice is the religionist. This is the person who says, "Wait a minute. I go to church. I give money to the poor. I'm very religious!" God's judgment is the same: "Guilty as charged."

In chapter three, Paul comes to his summation before God the Judge. Here is his conclusion: **Romans 3:10-19**.

Everyone is accountable before God. That is the horrible dilemma we all find ourselves in. His final, sweeping statement is in **Verses 22 & 23**.

What a devastating reality. Every one of us is a sinner and thus stands condemned before a holy God. We dare not try to sugarcoat the just judgment of God!

Paul goes on in Romans 6:23 to declare the ultimate consequence of our sin. He writes: "The wages of sin (that is, the just penalty for sin) is death." Not just physical death, but spiritual death – spiritual separation from God.

God requires death. Now, I cannot die for your sins; I have my own to be paid for. The same is true for you. Only a sacrifice acceptable to God could ever set aside his holy wrath against sin.

So, now, here is the third truth of the Gospel – the really good news:

3) God gave his Son to be our substitute and God judged him in our place.

Go back to Romans, chapter three, and see how Paul explains this good news of the Gospel. Let's start reading at verse 21:

Romans 3:21-26

Paul says that God is both just and the justifier. In other words, because of his solution to our dilemma – namely, that Jesus the Eternal Son would come and die in our place, meeting the just demands of God's holiness, God can declare us righteous (that's what the word *justify* means) and at the same time still be just.

There is no conflict between God demanding justice for sin and also forgiving the sinner. The reason is because God took the judgment that should have fallen upon you and he placed it upon his Son. Christ, by dying for us, in our place, fully satisfies the justice of God. On that basis, and on that basis alone, God can forgive, pardon, the worst of sinners.

Consider this truth from another perspective from Second Corinthians. Paul writes:

He (God the Father) made him (God the Son) who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him (Christ). – *II Corinthians 5:21*

God took your sin and mine and put it upon Christ. I don't fully know what that means. But Paul says that Jesus became sin. Then God the Father poured out all his holy wrath against that sin, and in some real way, Jesus died a death that was meant for you and me.

John Flavel writes:

Oh the depth of the evil of sin! If ever you wish to see how great and horrid an evil sin is, measure it in your thoughts, either by the infinite holiness and

excellency of God, who is wronged by it; or by the infinite sufferings of Christ, who died to satisfy for it; and then you will have deeper apprehension of its enormity...

If Christ's death satisfied God for our sins, how unparalleled is the love of God to poor sinners! If Christ, by dying, has made full satisfaction, then God can consistently pardon the greatest of sinners that believe in Jesus.

This is the bad news/good news of the Gospel. The bad news is that you and I are sinners under the wrath of God. The good news is the Jesus dies to pay the penalty for our sin so that if we repent, believe the Gospel and trust in Jesus Christ, God forgives and saves.

The Cross is the center of the Gospel. Without it, there is no Gospel. Without it, there is no redemption. Without it, there is no forgiveness. Without it, there is no hope.

Then, because Jesus' death was sufficient in paying the penalty for our sin, God raised him up out of the tomb on the third day as evidence that God's justice was satisfied. This, too, is part of the true Gospel. Turn over to the next book, the letter of First Corinthians, chapter 15.

I Corinthians 15:1-8

Look what Paul says at the end of the chapter – **I Corinthians 15:56-57**

The Gospel of Christ, the Gospel articulated by the apostles and proclaimed by the early church declares that God created us and we are accountable to him. We choose to live apart from him, in rebellion against him, unwilling to submit to his kingship, his reign, over us. But God, rich in mercy, sent his Son to die in your place. That's the Gospel.

The fourth and final truth that we will focus upon next week is this:

4) My response to the Gospel is to repent and believe.