

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?
SELECTED SCRIPTURES

Ask the question, “What is the gospel?” (even in the church) and you will get almost as many answers to that question as there are people. There just does not seem to be much consensus on that question.

In his book, *What is the Gospel?* Greg Gilbert recounts some of the more common responses to what the gospel is:

The good news is, God wants to show you his incredible favor. He wants to fill your life with “new wine,” but are you willing to get rid of your old wineskins? Will you start thinking bigger? Will you enlarge your vision and get rid of those old negative mind-sets that hold you back?

The message of Jesus may well be called the most revolutionary of all time: “The radical revolutionary empire of God is here, advancing by reconciliation and peace, expanding by faith, hope, and love—beginning with the poorest, the weakest, the meekest, and the least. It’s time to change your thinking. Everything is about to change. It’s time for a new way of life. Believe me. Follow me. Believe this good news so you can learn to live by it and be part of the revolution.”

The good news is that God’s face will always be turned toward you, regardless of what you have done, where you have been, or how many mistakes you’ve made. He loves you and is turned in your direction, looking for you.

The gospel itself refers to the proclamation that Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is the one, true, and only Lord of the world.

Good news! God is becoming King and he is doing it through Jesus! And therefore, phew!, God’s justice, God’s peace, God’s world is going to be renewed. And in the middle of that, of course, it’s good news for you and me. But that’s the derivative from, or the corollary of the good news which is a message about Jesus that has a second-order effect on me and you and us. But the gospel is not itself about you are this sort of a person and this can happen to you. That’s the result of the gospel rather than the gospel itself. . . . Salvation is the result of the gospel, not the center of the gospel itself.

The gospel is the proclamation of Jesus, in [two] senses. It is the proclamation announced by Jesus—the arrival of God’s realm of possibility (his “kingdom”) in the midst of human structures of possibility. But it is also the proclamation about Jesus—the good news that in dying and rising, Jesus has made the kingdom he proclaimed available to us.

As a Christian, I am simply trying to orient myself around living a particular kind of way, the kind of way that Jesus taught is possible. And I think that the way of Jesus is the best possible way to live.... Over time when you purposefully try to live the way of Jesus, you start noticing something deeper going on. You begin realizing the reason this is the best way to live is that it is rooted in profound truths about how the world is. You find yourself living more and more in tune with ultimate reality. You are more and more in sync with how the universe is at its deepest levels....The first Christians announced this way of Jesus as “the good news.”

My understanding of Jesus’ message is that he teaches us to live in the reality of God now—here and today. It’s almost as if Jesus just keeps saying, “Change your life. Live this way.”

As Gilbert notes in his response to those answers,

If you had never heard of Christianity, what would you think after [hearing] those few [statements]? You’d obviously know that Christians intend to be communicating some message that is good. But beyond that, it’s just a jumble. Is the good news simply that God loves me, and that I need to start thinking more positively? Is it that Jesus is a really good example who can teach me to live a loving and compassionate life? It might have something to do with sin and forgiveness. Apparently some Christians think this good news has something to do with Jesus’ death. Others apparently don’t.

We need to learn the basics of the gospel so that we can give an extended explanation or a short explanation (3 minutes or less). If the gospel is the source of eternal life and joy (and it is), the one thing we cannot afford to do is be unclear about what it is. Close may count in horseshoes and hand grenades, but it does not count in the gospel. To be “almost” saved is to be eternally lost.

So this morning I want to consider with you what the gospel is. Not every time you have a gospel conversation will you be able to tell everything about the gospel, but we need to be equipped to share whatever part of the gospel is appropriate at the needed time. So I want to ask and answer this question this morning —

HOW CAN WE BE MORE EFFECTIVE IN COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL?

BY KNOWING THE GOSPEL.

I want to explain the gospel three ways: the basics of the gospel — (1) what are the components of the gospel? and then (2) the gospel in 3 minutes (or maybe five) — if you only have a brief time, what can you say about the gospel that will help someone come to know Christ? And then, (3) the gospel in one sentence.

1. The Gospel in Six Words

- **GRACE** — The basic meaning of grace is “undeserved or unmerited gift.”
 - ✓ *Salvation is a free gift. Rom. 6:23.* Just as we don’t pay for gifts, so we don’t pay for forgiveness. It was tried in the NT (Simon, Acts 8:14-22). And it is still tried today. A few years ago, Warren Buffett pledged to give over \$30 billion (\$1.5 billion annually) to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. At the press conference making the announcement of his gift, he said, “There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way.” I’m afraid that he’s wrong on both counts. There is only one way to get salvation, and giving away money isn’t that one way. Heaven and salvation are *free*. They’re a gift. Period.
 - ✓ We can’t pay for salvation because *salvation is not earned or deserved. Eph. 2:8-9.* Most of us believe we are meritorious — we deserve all good things that we receive (and we really should receive more). But we are undeserving — notice vv. 1-3 of Ephesians 2.
 - If we deserved or could earn our salvation, we would boast.
 - But there is only One who is worthy of boasting, because there is only One who is supreme.
 - ✓ *The gospel is something received.* You **are saved (1 Cor. 15:2-3)** — i.e., someone saves you; you do not save yourself. Salvation is a gift and gifts are always expressions of grace. We do not earn gifts and we do not earn or merit salvation.

A few years ago, Paul Smitala of Sheboygan, Wisconsin had to repair an old clothes dryer that “came with the house.” He tipped it over to see if the dryer needed a new bell, and “coins started flowing from the bottom faster than a nickel slot machine,” said Smitala. “I lifted it up and could hear the rattling. I knew there was a lot more in there.” There sure was: 3767 coins of all denominations totaling \$214.19 tumbled out. Smitala, who thinks the machine is at least 30 years old, can’t figure how the coins got there, since there were no significant openings in the dryer. But he said his wife and two children will put the money to good use: they’re saving for a trip to Disneyland.

- ✓ That family received an unmerited, undeserved gift. That is exactly what the gospel is — free. And we must start with that truth if we will understand the gospel clearly.

- **MAN** — Man must be saved by grace because he is a sinner, as *for our sins* (1 Cor. 15:3) means. We are sinners by birth and by choice (Rom. 5:12). Our sin permeates our entire being so that nothing about us is untouched by our sin. Ephesians says we were *children of wrath* (Eph. 2:1-3).
 - ✓ The basic truth about mankind is that we are sinners who cannot save ourselves.
 - ✓ There is no such thing as “kind of sinful but mostly okay,” though most view it that way. We tend to think of sin only as “missing the mark,” which focuses on the activity of sin. So, if the quantity of our sin decreases, we think we are making progress and are acceptable. There are three problems with that:
 1. Sometimes we sin by doing what God has commanded us not to do (which is how we usually think about sin). But we also sin by not doing what we should do (Js. 4:17 — “to the one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin”). Have you ever been in the grocery store and seen someone from a distance and thought, “If she sees me and we start talking, it will be at least 30 minutes (that I don’t have)...” and then you quickly turn and go down another aisle to avoid her? Yes, we all have done that. And that, friends, is sin that is worthy of our condemnation. We didn’t do what was good and right.
 2. An even greater problem of our sin is not the actions that we do or don’t do, but the thoughts and motives behind the actions — even if our outward sins may not be horrible (“I’m not a murderer”), yet our motives and desires are terrible (we may not kill, but our thoughts are murderous; **Mt. 5:21-22** = saying, “You idiot,” to another driver is the same motive as murder!) And even more than that, we miss the mark of God’s standard because we are inwardly rebellious against God and do not want His sovereignty in our lives.
 3. But the greatest problem with thinking we’re “mostly ok” is that it forgets that the standard of God is perfection (**Mt. 5:48** — remember that verse!) and once perfection has been sullied, we can never be perfect again.
 - ✓ We tend to think of sin as a balance scale proposition; there *are* balance scales, but we are always completely unrighteous on our own; God always finds self-righteous people to be completely deficient and empty (Rev. 6:5; Amos 7:7-8).
 - ✓ No man is self-reliant or independent. No man can make himself right before God (**Mt. 5:3-6** is excellent text to explain the need for grace in salvation).
 - ✓ Twenty years ago, actress Sophia Loren said, “I’m not a practican, but I pray. I read the Bible. It’s the most beautiful book ever written. I should go to heaven, otherwise it’s not nice. I haven’t done anything wrong. My conscience is very clean. My soul is as white as those orchids over there, and I should go straight, straight to heaven.” [in *USA Today*, 2/4/99.]
 - ✓ Man is a sinner who cannot save himself. Everyone who thinks he can save himself will be forever condemned by God. And that’s the next key topic of the gospel.

- **God** —

- ✓ *God is loving and merciful.* It is often said that “God is love.” That is absolutely true (1 Jn. 4:8). The most well-known verse in the Bible affirms the truth that God is love (Jn. 3:16). How merciful and compassionate is God’s love that He would send Christ to pay for our sin debt!
- One of the most astounding truths in the universe is the magnificent love of God — He is a Father who gives infinitely better gifts than any earthly Father (**Mt. 7:11**).

“It is staggering that God should love sinners; yet it is true. God loves creatures who have become unlovely and (one would have thought) unlovable. There was nothing whatever in the objects of His love to call it forth; nothing in man could attract or prompt it. Love among men is awakened by something in the beloved, but the love of God is free, spontaneous, unevoked, uncaused. God loves men because He has chosen to love them...” [Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 112.]

- God even loves the *unrighteous* —
 - *Psa. 81:13 “Oh that My people would listen to Me, That Israel would walk in My ways!*
 - *Ezek. 18:32 “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,” declares the Lord GOD. “Therefore, repent and live.”*
 - *Luke 13:34 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it!”*
 - *Matt. 5:44-45 “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”*
- But even though God is love, that does not mean He loves all people equally. He loves all of mankind, but He does not love all of mankind with the same kind of love. He loves His *children* (Mt. 7:11) with a particularly special love; but that love is not shared with those who are not His children (Rom. 9:1ff, esp. vv. 14-15 — not everyone receives compassion).
- That leads to the next truth...
- ✓ God is also just, which means that sin will not be left unpunished.
 - Many believe that because God is love He overlooks sin and won’t punish it. The caricature is that He’s the loveable, hard-of-hearing and seeing, and slightly forgetful grandfather. He’s not. Because He is just, no sin can be left unpunished.
 - *Rom. 6:23 For the wages of sin is death. Cf. also Rom. 3:9, 11-12.*
 - *Ex. 34:6-7b Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished...”*

- *Matt. 3:12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."*
- *Matt. 13:41-42 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*
- No debt from any sin will be left unpaid. God will send many to Hell to "pay" for their sins. But the debt will never be satisfied, so no matter how long they are in hell, they will never be able to atone for their sin. Hell will never exhaust the debt of sin, because the sin we sin is against an infinite God. That makes our sin infinite in nature, and we are incapable of paying such a debt.
- ✓ Sin leaves all men condemned by God (as **for our sins** implies). God will judge all sin. He *never* overlooks sin. Sin has created an insurmountable barrier between us and God.
- ✓ "God's holiness is such that it pours out wrath on sin. God's love is such that it provides the One to receive that wrath." [R. Newman, *Bringing the Gospel Home*, 111.] And that's where we go next...
- **CHRIST** — three aspects of Christ are noted in 1 Cor. 15:3-4 —
 - 1) **he died** (as substitute; there was nothing in Him that provoked God's righteous wrath)
 - 2) **he was buried** — His death was real and "typical" of man (He died a real death)
 - 3) **He was raised** and remains resurrected (unlike Lazarus and others). Christ's life and death were historical events — *real* events by a *real* individual to accomplish a *real* purpose.
- ✓ Two essential things to remember about Christ —
 - Who He is — *Jesus Christ is the infinite God-Man*. Yes, He is a teacher. But He is also one with the Father who deserves the same kind of worship as the Father (**Jn. 1:1-4, 14-15; 5:23; 1 Jn. 2:22-23; 5:5, 20**).
 - What He did — *Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty of our sins* (**Mk. 10:45; 2 Cor. 5:20f**). He absorbed the wrath of God that was rightly prepared for us.
 - Christ is not a great example only; He is a crucified and resurrected Savior. From the incarnation forward He will always be the infinite God-Man. He never shed His manhood and never will cease to be resurrected.

- **FAITH** — The gospel must be believed to be appropriated (we do not believe in universalism). Specifically, we must believe in the gift of grace, our sinfulness, God's justice and wrath, and Christ's righteousness for us. If any of those are rejected you do not have a biblical gospel.
 - ✓ *Faith is not intellectual assent.* Saving faith is not believing in the existence of Christ or even in a set of facts about Him. Certainly the Pharisees believed in Christ's existence and that wasn't enough to save them, and the demons also believed in His reality, but they also are condemned (Jn. 2:18-19). Yet this is exactly what many believe — "I'm a Christian; I believe in God..." That is not saving faith.
 - ✓ *Faith is believing and trusting in Christ alone for your salvation.* God's hypothetical question, "Why should I let you into my heaven?" is often asked. If we are believing in Christ, the only right answer is, "You shouldn't. On my own, I have nothing to commend me. But I believe that Christ absorbed Your wrath against my sin and I trust that is enough. You should only let me into heaven and only have fellowship with me because Christ died in my place and imputed to me His righteousness."
 - ✓ The key here is that it is faith in Christ *alone* that will save us. Many will say they have faith in Christ (in my last two interactions with Mormons, they were quite insistent that they also believed in Christ alone); but is *only* He enough to save them and is He worthy of all their worship and gratitude (Jn. 5:23)? The Reformers were so adamant about this truth that Martin Luther translated Rom. 3:28, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith *alone* apart from the works of the Law." Cf. Rom. 4:5.
 - ✓ Faith in Christ says, "I no longer claim any kind of righteousness of my own; I set aside all self-righteous pride and trust that Christ is sufficient for me in everything."
 - ✓ Here is the magnificent truth — when we believe in Christ as the One who paid for our sins, then God is two seemingly contradictory things — He is just (in punishing sin) and He is the justifier (the One who declares sinners to be righteous), **Rom. 3:26**.
 - ✓ Faith also looks to Christ as the One who can change us: faith trusts that God will remove the penalty of God's wrath against us, but it also trusts that God will free us from the life-dominating power and control of sin over us, so that we can do things that please God (Rom. 6:12-14; 8:2, 4).
 - ✓ Prior to Christ, we could only sin; but faith in Christ means that we believe that God, through Christ, empowers and enables us to live and do righteous things that honor and glorify the Lord. We believed that He works the greatest reclamation and restoration project in the history of the world — the restoration of man to do righteous deeds (deeds that are not done *for* salvation, but *because of* salvation).

- **HOPE** — The object of the gospel is God. In other words, sin separated us from God and the gospel is designed to restore us to God. The gospel is about getting us to God.
 - ✓ A marriage is not about wedding cake (despite what my daughters thought), photographers, or a vacation. It's about getting a wife!
 - ✓ Salvation and the gospel is not about the benefits, like a forgiven "clean slate" (so we can keep sinning) or even Heaven; it's about the person of God. If you are not interested in God (if you can imagine Heaven without God and Christ), then you don't believe the gospel. The cross/gospel is about getting us to God (cf. Jn. 14:1-3).
 - ✓ In Matthew 1:23 the angel told Joseph about the child that Mary was carrying, "'They shall call His name Immanuel,' which translated means, 'God with us.'" God sent Christ to restore us to Himself. Our fellowship with God was destroyed in the Garden of Eden and Christ's coming was all about restoring that fellowship. The gospel is to bring us to God. That's biblical hope (1 Jn. 3:2-3).

"If we believe all these things [propitiation, redemption, forgiveness, imputation, sanctification, liberation, healing, heaven] have happened to us, but do not embrace them for the sake of getting to God, they have not happened to us. Christ did not die to forgive sinners who go on treasuring anything above seeing and savoring God. And people who would be happy in heaven if Christ were not there, will not be there. The gospel is not a way to get people to heaven; it is a way to get people to God. It's a way of overcoming every obstacle to everlasting joy in God. If we don't want God above all things, we have not been converted by the gospel....The ultimate good of the gospel is seeing and savoring the beauty and value of God. God's wrath and our sin obstruct that vision and that pleasure. You can't see and savor God as supremely satisfying while you are in full rebellion against Him and He is full of wrath against you. The removal of this wrath and this rebellion is what the gospel is for." [Piper, *God is the Gospel*, pp. 47, 56.]

- That's the gospel — grace, man, God, Christ, faith, hope.
- But you don't need to take that much time to communicate the gospel...

2. The Gospel in Three Minutes

- If you are an unbeliever, this is what you need; if you are a believer, this is not only what you need (today and everyday), but also what you proclaim:
 1. *God is gracious and merciful toward mankind.* He has made us to live with Him and for Him and He provides the means by which we can do that.
 2. *Man has rebelled against God.* We do not want to live for Him or live by His rules. We want to live for self, not God. Frankly, we want nothing to do with Him. And worst of all, in this condition, we can do nothing righteous or good. All the so-called good we do is in praise of ourselves and not God and is just more condemnation to us. The only thing one can do in this situation is sin. And there is no human escape from the consequences (judgment) against sin.
 3. God is a gracious God but that does not mean that He stops being holy and just — and when He sees people living in sin, He not only can, but *God must condemn and punish that sin.* That sin is eternal separation from a happy relationship with Him and eternity in the most horrible kind of misery that we can know — Hell. In Hell there will be nothing good of any kind, no compassion, no kindness, no friendship, no light, no health, no freedom from any kind of pain or sorrow. And worst of all, we will be separated from the one we were created to know.
 4. In His grace, *God sent the second member of the Trinity* to earth to take on manhood in addition to His deity. And as the perfect God-Man, Jesus Christ died for sins. He didn't die for His sins, but He died for the sins of those who would come to believe in Him.
 5. That means that *if anyone believes that Christ died for him*, He can be liberated from the penalty of sin (escaping God's judgment) and the power of sin (being enabled to do righteousness). The way that we are saved is by belief, trust, and faith that God provided and Jesus Christ did what we could not do ourselves. It is a declaration that we no longer want our sin and we do want Jesus Christ.
 6. And the object of all this, again, is *to get us back to God.* It is to restore us to fellowship with Him — so that we can be enjoyed by Him and so that we can enjoy Him.
 7. If you are not a believer in Christ, will you declare this day that you do not want your sin and that you do want Christ?
- If you are a believer in Christ, will you tell this truth to others so that they can be liberated from their sins?

3. The Gospel in One Sentence

- The key word in the gospel is *substitution* (2 Cor. 5:20-21).
- So here is the gospel in its simplest form: *Our sin is imputed to Christ and Christ's righteousness is imputed to us so that we can enjoy God forever.*

CONCLUSION: What is the benefit of the gospel? Listen to one story, told by John Piper:

Tokichi Ishii was hanged for murder in Tokyo in 1918.

He had been sent to prison more than twenty times and was known for being as cruel as a tiger. On one occasion, after attacking a prison official, he was gagged and bound and his body suspended in such a way that his toes barely reached the ground. But he stubbornly refused to say he was sorry for what he had done.

Just before being sentenced to death, Tokichi was sent a New Testament by two Christian missionaries, Miss West and Miss McDonald. After a visit from Miss West, he began to read the story of Jesus's trial and execution. His attention was riveted by the sentence, "And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'" (Luke 23:34). This sentence transformed his life.

I stopped: I was stabbed to the heart, as if by a five-inch nail. What did the verse reveal to me? Shall I call it the love of the heart of Christ? Shall I call it His compassion? I do not know what to call it. I only know that with an unspeakably grateful heart I believed.

Here is an example of the power of God's word to awaken well-grounded faith, even if the believer does not know how to describe what has happened. In the context of Jesus's life, one sentence ("Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do") was a true and compelling lightning bolt of divine beauty. It was enough. Faith was born. And the foundation was solid.

Tokichi was sentenced to death and accepted it as "the fair, impartial judgment of God." Now the word that brought him to faith also sustained his faith in an amazing way.

Our power to help people is not in ourselves; it is in the message we carry. God has designed to use us in the proclamation of the gospel. Know that gospel, and as God gives opportunities, will you share that gospel? Our only hope is the simple gospel in six short, powerful words: Grace, Man, God, Christ, Faith, Hope.