

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

INTRODUCTION

The Apostle Paul, considered among the most significant figures in world history¹, in the introductory portion of his letter to believers in Rome, wrote, “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some *spiritual gift* to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith (Romans 1:11-12).” What is the “spiritual gift” that Paul so eagerly desired to impart? He answers this question several verses later: “That is why I am so eager to preach *the gospel* also to you who are at Rome. I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Romans 1:15-16).”

Paul refers to the Gospel as the *power* of God, the spiritual gift that both strengthens and encourages. The term *gospel* (in Greek, *evangelion*) means *good news*; it is an ancient term that referred to news of a great historical event (such as victory in war or the ascension of a new king) that changed the listeners' condition or status, and required a response from the listener.² The Bible consistently asserts and assures us of this—that the Gospel of Jesus Christ changes the condition and status of all who believe to a degree that shapes their practical living.

Thus, while all other religions focus on some set of rules or teachings as central to reaching spiritual fulfillment, Christianity focuses on the Gospel as its power. What is the Gospel of Jesus Christ? The *good news* of the Gospel is that God made a way through Jesus Christ His own Son (John 3:16) for His people to have access and intimacy with Him. It is this assurance of access, the living presence of God in the life of a believer, that shapes and transforms all of life.

THE “BAD” NEWS

In order to comprehend this good news, however, we must first comprehend the bad news, and the bad news can be articulated as follows: “We are more sinful than we ever dared imagine.” What is sin? The Bible teaches us that sin is what separates us from God. Sin is any form of rebellion against God by virtue of placing *any* desire, value, belief, relationship, or earthly possession as more important than God (thus, in any moment, captivating one's life, apart from what God desires of His people). Sin is rebellion; sin is betrayal. Because of our sin, the consequences have been disastrous; there is brokenness in *every* facet of life: physically, spiritually, psychologically, emotionally, relationally, sexually, and environmentally.

Well, why can't God just let it go? If you've ever suffered from even the slightest form of betrayal in your life, you know it is impossible to just let it go. Whenever someone wrongs you, even in the slightest way, there is a form of debt that builds up. This is why our souls desire justice when we are wronged; knowing that those who have wronged us are experiencing justice helps to “pay off” the debt, so to speak. If that is the case for finite human beings such as us, then how much more would that be the case for an infinite, just, and righteous God? If even a single sin can be overlooked, then that means it is possible for evil to triumph over righteousness; thus, there is a cosmic *need* for God to be holy, just, and righteous. This is why sin *must* be punished: the justice and holiness of God, two of the many attributes of God that make Him beautiful and good.

¹ Steven Skiena and Charles B. Ward, *Time Magazine*, “Who's Biggest? The 100 Most Significant Figures in History,” December 10, 2013.

² Timothy Keller, “The Meaning of the Gospel,” among other references.

THE “GOOD” NEWS

We are more sinful than we ever dared imagine. A cosmic war has been waged throughout the history of mankind against God. However, God, because of His unfailing love, made a way. In the Gospel According to Luke, at the birth of Jesus Christ, the angels declared, “Glory to God in the highest, and *on earth peace* to men on whom his favor rests (Luke 2:14).” The cosmic war between God and His people is over: Jesus Christ, our Savior and King, has come; this is the Gospel of the Kingdom. With His life and death, we can experience the grace and peace of God. Jesus lived the life that we should live, and died the death that we should die.³ God’s grace is greater than we could ever dare dream. Apart from Jesus, we have no righteousness to stand on; apart from Jesus, we must pay our sin debt down on our own (and we can’t). However, as the famous hymnist wrote, “My life is hid with Christ on high.” Our lives can be hidden in the righteous *person* of Christ through the amazing *work* of Christ; the Holy Spirit applies the Gospel to us in a legal (we are declared righteous) and functional (we can grow as God’s children) manner.

As a result, planting the Gospel into the deepest core of our motivations and desires will transform our lives and worldviews as we mature as believers. We connect with the *person* of Jesus as we connect with the *work* of Jesus on the cross by faith alone. Christianity, thus, is not a religion; rather, at its core is a living relationship with God through the person and work of Jesus. Consider the truths of the Gospel; validate them. The Gospel of Jesus Christ restores an intimate relationship with God in the broken lives we live; it changes *everything*.

TWO WORLDVIEWS: TWO WAYS OF LIFE

The *religious* proclaim that the world must return to a life of moral conformity and restraint, and that what’s wrong with the world is that it has veered too far to the left. The *irreligious* proclaim that the world must progress toward self-discovery, open-mindedness, and the pursuit of individual desires and self-perceived needs; thus, what’s wrong with the world is that religion and morality are too restraining and narrow-minded—bound by traditional and societal views on sex, wealth, and power. Although the lifestyles resulting from the two worldviews may seem like polar opposites, the deep-rooted motivations and beliefs driving the two are all too similar.

The religious believe that a life of moral conformity and restraint will ultimately separate the “good” from the “bad”. As a result, religious people use their “goodness” as a primary means of gaining a sense of worth and purpose, comparing themselves with those who failed in their attempts at being “good”. They don’t apply the “bad” news deep enough, nor specifically enough—into their own core motivations and desires, and thus, rob themselves of the greater extent of the “good” news (and joy) offered in Jesus. Meanwhile, the irreligious believe that a life of self-discovery is one’s ultimate measure of worth, thus, use their open-mindedness, progressive lifestyles, accomplishments, success, titles, conquests, or salaries, as the primary means for defining identity and self-worth. Their own version of self-reliance blinds them from the same “bad” and “good” news that can save them.

Both lifestyles lead to fatigue because their deep-rooted motivation is to use these outward measures as a means to prove that “I am worthy, or “I am better.” Both groups trample over others to feel better about themselves. In essence, both worldviews are *works*-based, and both worldviews demand perfection or punishment, driving fear and insecurity. Both are inherently self-righteous, and both avoid the notion of our soul’s continuous need for Jesus. Usually, they act as two sides of the same coin, and leaning on one end of the spectrum often flips you into the other. Lives of moral

³ Phrases such as this one, and subsequent phrases used, can be attributed to Jack Miller or Timothy Keller. It has been quoted and used by various writers and preachers over decades.

conformity, and a life of individualistic pursuits, therefore, are similar under the skin, and certainly less than spiritually satisfying.

A life centered on the Gospel, however, is utterly different than the two paradigms previously described. On one hand, the Gospel points to the truth that we are more sinful than we ever dared imagine. In other words, our efforts to be “good” or “successful” alone will never be enough to arrive at a sense of worth, no matter how convincing they sound. Our brokenness is too deep. Often times, the solutions we pose, although they provide temporary happiness, lead to greater brokenness. Guy de Maupassant, a renowned 19th century French author, once wrote, “I have coveted everything, and taken pleasure in nothing.”

The religious only repent of their sins, because they never see the oft-masked pride that drives their outward goodness. The irreligious, on the other hand, don’t feel the need to repent at all, and are constantly trying to satisfy an insatiable spiritual hunger. Christians, however, repent of both their sins *and* their goodness, because they realize that both their bad *and* good deeds are ways of avoiding Jesus as their Savior; no series of good deeds, open-mindedness, or accomplishments can save them, nor give them a lasting sense of worth. This truth completely blows away the religious worldview, but also blows away the irreligious worldview. The Gospel-centered life is *not*, therefore, a midway point between these two worldviews; it is a radical “third” way of viewing and living life, altogether.

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE: A THIRD WAY

If you take one look at the Gospel accounts in the Bible, both the life *and* death of Jesus Christ stand out. Jesus Christ is the most perfect Person who ever lived; He obeyed God in everything, but then willingly sacrificed Himself on the cross for what? A cause? An ideology? No. The Gospel accounts, the most reliable, official, documented record of Jesus’ life and death, reveal that Jesus suffered and died because of His deep love for those who look to Him *alone* as Savior and Lord. The Apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5:21, explains, “God made Him {Jesus} who had no sin to be sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” In other words, Jesus lived the perfect life (He had no sin) so that His righteousness could be transferred to sinners; He died on the cross to pay the cosmic sin debt owed to God (taking our sinfulness on Himself, thus, becoming sin).

This transfer of guilt and righteousness reflects a union with Jesus that is applied by God’s Holy Spirit—a total transfer of our weaknesses and “lostness”—with Christ’s sonship. The Apostle Peter wrote, “But you are a chosen people, a *royal priesthood*, a *holy nation*, a *people belonging* to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but *now* you are the people *of God*; once you had not received mercy, but *now* you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10).” In other words, in Jesus, we have a new calling, a new citizenship; we are God’s people, His children. This addresses our deepest longing to be forgiven, or acceptable, or loved. The Gospel is “good news” because our highest longings are fulfilled, at last, by the only One who could fulfill those longings in the first place. Trusting this, living in line with it, is the bedrock of new life as a Christian.

Believing that you have to live a good or “successful” life to earn God’s favor will wear you out in bitterness, self-righteousness, guilt, and self-reliance. However, the Gospel is “good news” because, although we are more sinful than our good deeds and accomplishments present us to be, God loves us to the extent that He would send His own Son to pay for our sins. This means that, in Jesus, we are reconciled with God forever. Our lifelong desire to find worth in relational intimacy, wealth, our accomplishments, and in the acceptance of others can find its rest in Jesus. Through the cross of Christ, we can be assured that we are loved by God, and as a result, we have true intimacy,

abundant wealth, eternal significance, and ultimate status *in* Him. We don't obey *in order* to be loved; rather, we obey *because* we are loved.

When we place our trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Gospel becomes central to our core motivations; it is a transforming power (Romans 1:17), shaping *everything* we do. Christians reflect on the Gospel as the core motivation behind living as treasured children of God, out of our love for Jesus Christ. Christians obey, not just because God is a *saving* King, but also because He is a *loving* King. The assurance of His love is palpably present in the cross of Jesus Christ. Instead of being driven by a neurotic desire to be loved, Christians are empowered by the grateful joy of being known and loved by God.

WHAT IT MEANS TO "APPLY" THE GOSPEL

The Gospel transforms everything. The transformation is inward and outward, and it happens through *repentance*. The famous theologian Martin Luther wrote in the first of his history-renowned *95 Theses*, "The entire life of believers [is] to be one of repentance." In repentance, the Gospel shapes our core motivations (inward) *and* behavior (outward), since all of our spiritual struggles stem from a failure to apply the Gospel.

For example, the Gospel can shape our motivations and efforts to earn acceptance from others:

Religious (moralistic, "churchy", or legalistic) people depend heavily on how acceptable they are within their primary communities. If acceptance is a core motivation, they focus heavily on how well they measure up to their community's standards, laws, stated and unstated rules, and perhaps, how successful they are, as ways to prove their worth. As a result, religious people can suffer burnout, will judge others against moral-ethical failures (self-righteousness), and are prone to jealousy; this can easily rob them of the joy of being *in* Christ.

Secular (irreligious, de-churched or un-churched, hedonistic) people, however, also depend heavily on how acceptable they are within *their* primary communities. As a result, they are no strangers to the risks and potential fallouts of working to measure up to society's standards, and are just as susceptible to burnout, failure, jealousy, judgment, and self-loathing.

For both religious and irreligious, the acceptance of others—whether in the form of public affirmation, sexual appeal, a salary increase, or a promotion, can become the primary means of identity and self-worth. Unfortunately, the desire for approval can be a primary source of burden, work, and restlessness as well. This is why we are often slaves to our communities and work environments: we are constantly working to build our reputations to gain acceptance. However, the Gospel teaches us that when Jesus Christ was on the cross, the King of the universe labored unto death, sacrificing His own cosmic acceptance before His Father. Jesus Christ was forsaken by God (Matthew 27:46) to pay the sin debt we owed, so that we could be made acceptable to God. His last words on the cross, "It is finished (John 19:30)," literally means, "The debt is paid in full."

If religion is the frail human attempt to earn God's favor through self-effort, the Gospel shows us the main reason why we can *really* rest in Jesus: the cosmic sin debt is *paid*, and our worth is assured in Him. We no longer strive to obey God in order to *earn* His acceptance; rather, we are accepted by God in the worth *and* work of Jesus Christ alone. As a response to God's grace, we obey. Any other reason to serve God would be self-centered and manipulative, at best. The Gospel, in essence, restores a *genuine* relationship with Him.

Resting in the finished work of Christ on the cross sets you free from the enslaving power of work; it does not mean you must leave your earthly job or abandon a life of obedience to God. However, it *does* mean that your accomplishments at work, and your good deeds, no longer define you as a means to feel acceptable. You no longer find your righteousness in your accomplishments or good works. This has lasting outward consequences; you can *actually* rest! You can be freed of anxiety. You care less about your reputation because your *real* self is “hidden” with Christ. You can have the courage to be truthful and honest about yourself; this marks the death of your ego. You can genuinely care for others in the workplace because they are no longer manipulated tools to help you gain popularity or promotions.

The Gospel makes you incredibly attractive to people who do not know Jesus, and refreshing to people who do. Imagine your life with the fullness of humility and boldness that comes from the Gospel; it will make you a confident person, but not obnoxious. It will also make you sacrificial, and not self-seeking. The Gospel will compel you to live a life of moral conviction without feeling the need to judge those who do not live like you; this marks the end of snobbishness, and makes you incredibly inclusive and compassionate. The more you center life around the Gospel, the more you will reconsider your approach to money, your suffering, difficult people and difficult situations, illnesses and death, our environment, your relationships, love and sex, self-control, your neighborhood, and the church: *everything*.

THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

The coming of Jesus marked the “good news” of the Kingdom of God. The miracles of Jesus in the Bible were mere examples of the type of renewal of the natural, physical order that will one day be fully realized when Jesus returns. As the Gospel becomes more central in our lives, we will desire the same type of restoration in others, and in the world, by seeking renewal and redemption in the marketplace, our families, our relationships, our sex lives, in our neighborhoods, and in our city. What Jesus will do in totality will be advanced through His church in every life lived with integrity for the glory of God, and through every redeeming effort to create, build, reconcile, and heal. The church is more than just a gathering of Christians for worship; God’s people represent the active work of God’s Kingdom on earth until Jesus returns to restore the world in fullness.

SUMMARY

Planting the Gospel into the deepest core of our motivations and desires will transform our lives and worldviews as we mature in faith in the character and work of Jesus Christ. The easiest way to be robbed of the joy of knowing Christ (being known by Him, being “hid” with Him) is to veer into legalism or hedonism—both non-Christians *and* believers are prone to this. A Gospel-centered life moves away from legalism because it is shaped by two foundational truths: (1) We are more sinful than we could ever dare imagine (thus, we cannot help, heal, or save ourselves), and (2) God’s grace is greater (in Christ) than we could ever dare dream. Jesus Christ came to serve as the substitutionary atonement for our sins—He took the place of, paid the sin debt for, and transferred His righteousness and Sonship to those who believe. The Gospel points to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of all that we deeply long for; seeking those things apart from Him, therefore, is unreasonable and disastrous. In fact, every spiritual problem is, at the least, tied to a failure of trusting, and living aligned with, the truths of the Gospel. This is why the Apostle Paul says, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2).” Repentance is the process by which we reorient our core motivations and actions around the person and work of Jesus Christ. This brings glory and honor to God and renews our lives. The church, then, stands as the redeeming presence of God in the world.