

One Generation Away

Various passages

March 20, 2016

Introduction:

One generation. That's all it takes for us to drop the ball and lose the message of the gospel. One generation to fail to pass on the gospel to their children. One generation to be confused and muddled about the gospel so that they aren't able to articulate it to unbelievers. One generation to replace precious truths with pious platitudes and jumbled jargon. One generation to turn the gospel into a man-centered self-help program so you can become a better you. One generation away.

I have been placed in the timeline of the history of the world with my birth taking place in the last part of the 20th century and Lord willing, should I live an average lifespan, I'll die sometime in the middle of the 21st century. There's nothing I can do about the numerous generations that came before me, nor can I have much of an impact on those generations far in the future who, should the Lord tarry, will live in the 22nd century and beyond. But I am responsible to those living right now in the first half of the 21st century. I'm responsible to proclaim the gospel to them, to teach those who are my contemporaries what the good news of the kingdom of God is.

But what is the gospel? Do you know what it is? Could you explain it to someone in under a minute or two? I don't want to assume everyone understands or can articulate the gospel correctly. We can use the word "gospel" as a Christian buzz word without really understanding what it means or how to unpack its meaning for others. I used to assume anyone who was a Christian could articulate the gospel – after all, that's what they needed to believe in order to be saved! But then many years ago when I started asking people to explain the gospel as part of the membership process I was often surprised to discover how many Christians either resorted to saying vague, unhelpful things like, "You need to ask Jesus into your heart," or they articulated a partial gospel message that left out essential elements of what the biblical gospel is.

I'd don't want to assume you understand the gospel nor do I want to presume you can articulate it well so this morning's message is going to be all about helping you to know how to explain the gospel. Part of our purpose here at Grace Fellowship is that we exist to glorify God through worship, discipleship, service, and mission. In regards to mission, we're called to go out into the harvest field that is our community and reap the harvest and the tool we use is the gospel. But if our tool is dull due to misunderstanding or if we're using the wrong tool entirely, we won't get the job done. We'll be ineffective. Since we're all called to be missionaries, we need to make sure we have this right. We need to understand and be able to articulate the gospel, lest we fail at our mission and not pass on the gospel to the next generation. So this morning's message is important: not just for you but for the next generation who will come after you.

When I think of the gospel, I think of it in four parts which I summarize in four words: **God, Sin, Christ** and **Faith**. As I've said many times before then preaching on "What is the

Gospel?" I'd like you to think of these four words as coat pegs on which you hang your thoughts upon. When proclaiming the gospel, you need to touch on each of those four areas of God, Sin, Christ, and Faith and unpack what each of them means. Should you leave any of these four elements out, then you're likely communicating a truncated or incomplete gospel, which really isn't the gospel at all. So let's work through each of these four elements of the gospel, beginning with the person and character of **God**.

1. God

When proclaiming the gospel, people must first have an accurate understanding of God. The issue of sin, the person of Christ, and the need for faith all rest upon the fact that first God exists and second, that he's the kind of God the Bible describes. So whenever you witness to people you need to begin with God, and there are two characteristics of God in particular you need to highlight that are essential to any gospel presentation.

First it needs to be communicated that God is a holy God. This means God is set apart from sin and is utterly righteous. Everything about God - his character, his thoughts, and his actions - is righteous and pure in every way. God does not sin and cannot stand to have sin in his presence. As a result, if we're to have a relationship with God, then we also need to be holy. God's holiness sets the standard for how we're to be if we hope to be pleasing to him. In Lev. 19:2, a command repeated often in the NT, God demands of his people, "*You shall be holy, for I am holy.*" Just as God is set apart from sin and is without sin, so also should we be without sin.

Furthermore, not only is God holy but he also is our judge. Romans 14:10 says that "*we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.*" Every one of us is going to face God after we die and he will judge us against the standard of his holiness. If we've never committed a sin and lived our lives in perfect obedience to God, then we will be rewarded with eternal life. If not, if we've sinned in any way, even if it was only one little lie, then God will judge us for our sins because he cannot let sin into his presence. And God's judgment against sin is eternal separation from him in hell.

It is important we're clear on this point because there are many extremely inaccurate understandings of God prevalent in our culture today. There are some who have a diminished view of God's judgment, insisting that God is a loving God who would never send people to hell. Instead, they believe everyone goes to heaven because God is like a loving grandparent who would never punish anyone. Or if they're willing to grant that God will judge sin, they imagine that provided your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds, you'll die and go to heaven, while hell is reserved only for those really, really bad people like Hitler or Stalin.

Even more subtle is the diminished view of God's holiness that comes in places we'd least expect it. Walk into almost any Christian bookstore and you'll find books telling you how you can have "Your Best Life Now" and how you can "Become a Better You" by simply applying easy-to-grasp principles God has given to help you be happy, healthy, and successful. In those books, God isn't presented as holy, just

helpful. Or you might pick up the once popular novel *The Shack* where God in the form of "Papa" tells the main character Mack, "I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It's not my purpose to punish it; it's my joy to cure it" (120). This is a far cry from the God whom Isaiah saw in all of his holiness and declared, "*Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips!*"

We cannot assume people have a correct understanding of God, so we need to start there when we proclaim the gospel. We need to be clear that God is a holy, righteous God who demands that we be holy. And should we fall short of that expectation, God will judge us for our sins by sending us to hell. If that is misunderstood, nothing else about the gospel can be properly understood or believed.

So we begin with **God**, but then we next turn our attention to ourselves and our **sin**.

2. Sin

We've all sinned, every one of us. Some of us in large ways that have caused great destruction to ourselves and others and sometimes in small ways that nobody knows about. But no matter how you slice it, we've fallen short of the standard God laid out for us, that we're to be holy as he is holy. None of us come even remotely close to loving God perfectly with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Even the deeds we think are good really aren't because they're tainted with sinful self-centered desires and motivations. As a result, the prophet Isaiah said, "*All our righteous deeds are like filthy rags.*" Our sins of pride and self-centeredness so taint all we do that even in our very best moments, we still fall short of God's holy standard. As a result, Scripture says that "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*"

When explaining the gospel, you need to make sure people understand this. This is especially important because many people operate on the assumption that their sin isn't really all that bad or is at least mitigated by the good things they've done. Sometimes people imagine God to be like a teacher at school and our lives are like a big test we need to take. In order to pass the test of life, we think we need get at least 60% of questions right. We think that as long as we have more good deeds than bad deeds, then we'll pass and will get to heaven. Now it might be nice if we have a whole lot more good deeds than bad deeds - just like it is better to have an 80% or a 90% on a test than a 60%, but either way you still pass. Sure maybe you're not at the top of the class like Mother Theresa or Billy Graham, but you still did more good than bad and so God will let you squeak on by.

But the problem with that thinking is that God doesn't operate on school standards. His grading scale is summed up in the passage in Lev. 19 that I read before, "*Be holy as I am holy.*" To be holy is to be without sin. So living a life that's 80% or 90% or even 99% good is not enough. In order to pass the test, God says we need to be 100% righteous all of the time without any sin whatsoever. Unfortunately, none of us have made the grade. As a result, every human being deserves death, and not just physical death but eternal death in hell. We all stand under the righteous verdict of

God as being guilty of sin and therefore worthy only of his wrath poured out upon us in judgment.

Admittedly, that's a pretty bleak picture. But until we grasp the desperate situation our sin has put us in, we're never going to seek a Savior. Only those who realize they're drowning will try to grab a life preserver. Until those whom you proclaim the gospel to understand the gravity of their sin and recognize the impending wrath of a holy God, they won't seek a savior because they won't believe they're in any danger. As a result, the good news of the gospel must first begin with the bad news that we are sinners in thought, word, and deed who have offended a holy, righteous God who will judge and punish us for our sin.

Those first two points are for the most part bad news, but now let's get to the good news. While God is a holy God who demands we also be holy and while we have all fallen short of that standard and deserve hell because of our sins, God has sent us his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. So the third element that must be present in every gospel message concerns **Christ**.

3. Christ

Jesus is the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, who existed eternally with God the Father before creation, although it was not until these last times that Jesus was revealed to us through the incarnation. As the apostle John states it, *"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."* (John 1:1, 14)

And why did the Son of God take on human flesh and become a man? It was so he could do two things for us that we could not do for ourselves. First, Jesus lived the perfect, sinless life we should have lived. We owe God a sinless life. Jesus lives that life for us. He provides the perfect obedience we owe.

Second, because he lived a perfect, sinless life, he didn't need to suffer the wrath of God for sin. But he could suffer as an innocent sacrifice for someone else. That's what Jesus does for us by shedding his blood on the cross. He dies, though he is innocent, while we go free, though we are guilty. And since Jesus is not only a man but also the eternal God, his death is of infinite value so that he can die and atone not just for the sin of one man but for the sins of infinite men.

So Jesus saves us both by his life and by his death. First, he lives the perfect holy life we ought to have lived and he dies the death we ought to have died. As a result, God's justice wrath against our sin is satisfied by pouring it out upon Jesus on the cross, and Jesus satisfies the righteous requirement of God's Law by obeying it perfectly for us.

Of course, the death of Jesus on the cross to die for our sins is not the end of the story. Three days after Jesus died on the cross God raised Jesus from the dead. And not only did God raise him from the dead but Jesus ascended into heaven and

now sits at God's right hand in glory, as God the Father has been pleased to make Jesus Lord over all. Thus when the Apostle Paul summarized the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15, he includes both Jesus death and resurrection saying, "*Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand... For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...*" (v. 1,3).

So then, when proclaiming the gospel, we absolutely have to tell people about who Christ is and what he did for us because he is the solution to the problem posed by the effect of our sin on a holy, righteous God. The fact that he's God, that he lived a life without sin, died on the cross in our place, incurring God's wrath for us, and was resurrected from the dead are all essential elements to the message of the gospel. We can't merely mention Jesus without also laying out what he did and why he had to do it. We need to communicate how it was that Jesus was able to save us from God's wrath for our sins.

But there is one more element of the gospel we need to cover. Although Jesus died to satisfy God's wrath against sin, the only way to receive that gracious sacrificial gift of God is through faith. So the last element of the gospel we need to consider this morning is that of **faith**.

4. Faith

This is the part of the gospel message that, strangely enough, I often have found people leave out. Usually Christians can articulate the idea of Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross, but then never mention what a person must do as a result of it. To simply say, "Jesus died for you" without indicating how one must respond in order to gain the benefits of Christ's redeeming work is to imply that Jesus saves everyone, regardless of what they do. Or if we do call people to respond, we muddle things with Christian jargon like, "You need to ask Jesus into your heart" or we say they need to "Pray to receive Christ." Nowhere does the Bible talk about responding to the gospel in such a manner. We need to stop using vague and unbiblical "Christianese" lingo and use terminology that is biblical. What people need to do is to respond to Christ in faith or another way of saying it is they need to believe in Jesus. The call to faith and to believe is used hundreds of times throughout Scripture and should be used by us when we proclaim the gospel. The Bible doesn't say "Ask Jesus into your heart" and you will be saved; it says, "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.*" Paul says in Ephesians 2, "For by grace you have been saved, through faith" not because you prayed the "sinner's prayer" or walked down the aisle at a Billy Graham crusade. A clear and consistent call to faith in Christ is the final, necessary element to the gospel proclamation.

Now the terms "faith" and "believe" are essentially synonymous and are used interchangeably throughout Scripture. But rather than simply assuming that we all

know what it is to “believe” in something, it’s wise to make sure we elaborate on what this means when talking with people so as to avoid any misunderstanding.

Often times we use the word “believe” in the sense of “giving mental assent to some factual truth.” For example, you might say, “I believe George Washington was the first President of the United States.” When you say you “believe” that, you’re saying you recognize that fact to be true. But “believing” or “having faith” in Scripture means far more than that. Lots of people will say they “believe” in God much the same way they believe in George Washington, which basically means they believe in the fact that he exists. But even demons have that kind of belief. James 2:19 says even demons believe certain factual truths about God, but that doesn’t help them.

Real biblical belief is close to the idea of trust. For example, my daughter Savannah recently turned 16 and now can drive. I know you can all believe that to be true, but it’s another thing entirely another thing entire to sit in the passenger seat and let her drive you around! Biblical belief involves trust. To believe in God is to entrust to God something of value to you, namely your life. When God calls people through the message of the gospel to believe in Christ, he’s not merely asking for people to give mental assent to facts about Jesus, although recognizing certain facts about Jesus are important. He’s calling them to entrust themselves to him with their lives. It’s a call to stop trusting in their own works or the false idols of the world to provide salvation and entrust their lives to Christ by turning away from those things and living instead for him. To use the driving analogy, it means giving Jesus the car keys of your life and allowing him to get behind the wheel.

So when proclaiming the gospel, you need to call people to faith in Christ. It means you need to call them to repent of - or turn away from – sin, and turn to Christ in faith. Telling people about Christ without inviting them to respond in faith to Christ falls short of a true gospel presentation. In order for the benefits of Christ’s life and death to be reckoned to us, we need to receive it by faith.

Conclusion

So let me wrap this all up by addressing two different groups of people. First, to all you who are Christians: don’t lose the gospel. Don’t forget about it, don’t be unclear on it, don’t assume it, don’t substitute clichés for it. Teach it to you children, proclaim it to the unbelievers you know, and most importantly, preach it to yourself. I believe Tim Keller has said the gospel isn’t the ABC of the Christian life; it’s the A to Z of the Christian life. The gospel is the bedrock of our faith, both in terms of how we become a Christians as well as how we continue to live our lives as Christians. We are always one generation away from losing the gospel, either by forgetting it or by being confusing about it. These are truths we need to grasp and articulate if we hope to be win others to Christ and be effective laborers in God’s harvest field. Every one of us has a responsibility to go and proclaim the gospel to those whom God has placed in our lives. It is not the job only of the pastor or of the elders of the church; it’s the responsibility of each and every one of us and we cannot proclaim the gospel if we are unclear on it.

So I plead with each of you: use these four words to help you remember what needs to be communicated when you proclaim the gospel: **God, sin, Christ, and faith**. You should know those flat out; it's only four simple words but they can serve of mnemonic pegs to help you remember what you need to talk about. If any of those are missing as you strive to proclaim the gospel, then your gospel is incomplete. Each and every one of us needs to understand this clearly in our heads so we can proclaim it clearly with our mouths. There is no more important thing for us to guard closely and proclaim rightly than the gospel, both for ourselves and for the next generation that will follow us.

Second, if you're not a Christian then I hope this message has been good news for you. God offers you pardon for your sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus took the punishment you deserved for your sin on the cross and he lived the righteous life you should have lived. All that is necessary for your salvation has been done by Christ. God's holy wrath against your sin has been fully satisfied in Christ and now he simply calls you to come in faith and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. God wants to restore the relationship that has been broken by sin by having you come to him in faith, so you can experience forgiveness and peace, and so you can know him know and be with him for all eternity. That's the good news of the gospel and it's for anyone who would believe.

Please bow your heads with me now as I close our time with a word of prayer.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2016.