

What is the Gospel?

Various passages

August 21, 2016

Introduction:

This morning we're going to take a break from our regular sermon series that has been going through the book of Judges and instead we'll be devoting our time to answering the question, "What is the gospel?" How would you answer that question? Or to ask it in a slightly different way, "What's the main message of Christianity?" If you were given five minutes to answer that question, what would you say? Or to approach it in another manner, if someone asked you, "What do I need to do in order to become a Christian?" how would you reply? The questions may sound different, but they are all essentially asking the same thing. The gospel is the main message of Christianity and it is what someone needs to understand and believe in order to be saved.

I've asked these three questions numerous times over the years at various churches as part of the membership process. I want to see if people who are interested in joining our church can articulate the gospel clearly and succinctly. That's very important to me as a pastor for two reasons: first, it gives me valuable insight into what they believe about how someone is saved, including, and most importantly, what they themselves are relying on when it comes to salvation. A person may consider themselves to be a Christian yet in answering the question demonstrate they're relying on something other than Christ, such as their own good works. Second, it helps me assess whether they can effectively be on mission to proclaim the gospel to the lost. If we're going to make disciples of all nations, then we need to be certain we're proclaiming the right message and not resorting to a partial gospel message or overused clichés.

Sadly, far more often than not, those to whom I ask these questions give less-than-ideal answers. Either they don't even know where to begin or they resort to vague clichés like "I'd tell the person they need to accept Jesus into their heart" or they touch on a couple of key elements of the gospel but leave other elements out. Rare is the person who can clearly articulate the gospel in its fullness. So I've learned over the years that I cannot assume a clear understanding of the gospel from anyone, even those who have been attending a church for years.

As a result, I'd don't want to assume any of you understand the gospel clearly 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. I decided that it would be good for us to have a periodic refresher on what the gospel is, so twice a year I devote a sermon solely to the topic of "What is the gospel?" If we're going to be salt and light to our community, if we're going to be missionaries here in the Cedar Valley, if we're going to fulfill the Great Commission, then the most fundamental basic duty we have is to be able to understand and communicate the gospel. So this sermon has application for each of us: for some it will be a review of what you already know and for others it will be, I hope, helpful coaching for you in understanding and communicating the gospel.

I have found the easiest way to help people think about and remember the gospel is to give you four pegs to hang your thoughts upon. When communicating the gospel, there are four words that summarize it well: **God, Sin, Christ, and Faith**. If you can remember these four words, and use them as an outline of what you need to tell others, you can be clear on the gospel. That's not asking too much is it? We can all remember four words, right? By keeping in mind just four little words - **God, sin, Christ and faith** - and knowing how to unpack each of them, you can avoid using confusing clichés or communicating a truncated or incomplete gospel. So this morning, let's go through each of them and unpack them together, beginning first 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 is 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. Not that these are the only two things you need to know about God - because the fact that he is our Creator and is all-powerful and is kind and merciful are all important as well - but the following two characteristics are essential for people to understand if the gospel is to make any sense.

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.

We cannot assume people have a correct understanding of God, so we need to start there when we proclaim the gospel. We have to be certain those whom we're speaking with are 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 we don't start with the righteous character of God, the rest of the elements of the gospel won't make much sense, so when proclaiming the gospel, don't assume the person you are speaking with views God the same way you do. Perhaps at one time we could have made that assumption with the general populous, but no longer. You need to be explicit in explaining God's holiness and his righteous judgment against sin.

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 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 a Mother Theresa or Billy Graham, but since you still did more good than bad 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 under 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. The gospel must always start with the bad news of our sin and God's judgment towards it.

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. If I kill a man and have to die by electric chair for my crime, I can't have a dog or cat take my place. But another person who was innocent of the crime theoretically could since justice would still be served, provided the judge allowed it. 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 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 against our sin is satisfied by Christ because his wrath was poured out upon Jesus on the cross, and Christ satisfies the righteous requirement of God's Law by obeying it perfectly for us though his sinless life.

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 Jesus is 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. Jesus is our Savior and we need to communicate how Jesus was able to save us from God's wrath for our sins. Simply saying, "Jesus died for you," while true, doesn't explain much. Why did Jesus have to die? What did his death accomplish? Being clear that Jesus died to suffer God's wrath for our sins should be part and parcel of every explanation of the gospel.

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 frequently gets left out when I ask people to explain the gospel to me. 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 talk about Jesus' death and resurrection 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. Jesus' redemptive work on the cross is not automatically applied: it has to be received by faith.

Or if we do call people to respond to Christ, we cloud things with Christian jargon like, "You need to ask Jesus into your heart" or "Pray to receive Christ." Look, 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. Those phrases just aren't helpful. What we need to call people 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 call to repentance and 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 we all know what it is to “believe” in something, it’s would also be 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 Abraham Lincoln was the sixteenth 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 Abraham Lincoln as a historical reality. 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 closer to the idea of trust. For example, it’s one thing to say you believe I’m a good driver. It is entirely another thing to give me the keys to your car and let me take it for a spin. Biblical belief involves trust. To believe in God is to entrust to God something of value to you, namely your life, your soul. 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. 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: get this down flat: **God, sin, Christ, and faith**. Don’t forget it, don’t be unclear on it, don’t assume it, and don’t substitute clichés for it. Teach it to your children, proclaim it to the unbelievers you know, and preach it to yourself. 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 a Christian. If there’s anything we ought to know, it’s the basic truths of the gospel.

These are truths we need to grasp and articulate if we hope to be win others to Christ and be salt and light to our community. 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 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.** I want every member of Grace Fellowship to have this memorized; it's only four simple words but they are invaluable mnemonic pegs to help you remember the key elements of the gospel. As we consider our evangelistic conversations with unbelievers, we need to ask ourselves, "Did I speak of God's holiness and justice? Did I address the fact that we are sinners who deserve death and hell for our deeds? What did I say about Christ? Did I explain why he had to die and how his death saves us by serving as our substitute on the cross? Did my gospel summary say anything about the need to respond in faith, of repenting of sin and believing in Christ?" If any of those four elements are missing, 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 sins on the cross and he lived the righteous life you should have lived. All that is necessary for your salvation has been accomplished 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 turn from sin and trust fully in him as your Lord and Savior, so you can experience forgiveness and peace and be with him for all eternity. That's the good news of the gospel and it's for anyone who would believe.

So with that, please bow your heads with me 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.