

Back to the Basics

Various passages

March 25, 2018

Introduction:

Vince Lombardi was the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers who led the Packers to win the first two Super Bowls. It is said that he would deliver the same speech every year to his team at the beginning of the pre-season. As his team gathered around him, he would hold a football up so all the players could see it and said, "Gentlemen, this is a football." Then he would walk over to the blackboard, draw a large rectangle and say, "This is a football field. At the end of each field is a goal line. If you carry the football across the goal line, you'll score six points."

That's quite a speech to give to a group of professional football players! But Vince Lombardi knew that sometimes you need to go back to the basics. People need to be reminded of the fundamentals, the basic elements of what it is you're doing. Well, what's true in football is also true in the church. Sometimes you need to go back to the basics. We can get caught up and confused about all kinds of things as Christians, whether it be doctrinal questions concerning baptism, God's sovereignty, or the problem of evil, or over church matters, like building programs and staff changes and worship styles. Now all those things are important to discuss and think through, but they aren't the basics and sadly it's very easy for us to forget the basics.

So this morning, in the spirit of Vince Lombardi, I say to you, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is the gospel." There's nothing more basic and fundamental to who we are as Christians than the message of the gospel. But it's easy for us to forget it or misunderstand it or neglect it and so it's necessary for us to be instructed repeatedly on what the gospel is. As we strive to fulfill the Great Commission in our community and be salt and light to those God has placed in the everyday pathways of our lives, we need to clearly understand and articulate the gospel. So this morning we're taking a break from our sermon series in the book of Romans so I can go over with you the basics of what the good news of the gospel is.

Now I think the easiest way to recall the basic elements of the gospel is to remember just four simple words. I look at these words as pegs upon which hangs other thoughts, sort of like a coat rack where you can hang a few different coats upon each peg. Each word peg holds a few ideas, but if you can remember just the four pegs, they can help you hold all of your thoughts together. Those four pegs are: **God, sin, Christ, faith**. I want everyone here at Grace Fellowship to know those four words when thinking about the gospel: God, sin, Christ, and faith.

This morning I want to unpack each of those four words and talk about what they mean when it comes to explaining the gospel. In any gospel presentation, all four of these elements need to be touched on: you need to be certain the person you're witnessing to rightly knows who God is, recognizes they've sinned against him, understand who and what Jesus did for them on the cross, and that they need to respond in faith. So with that let's begin by talking first about God.

1. God

Obviously if the person is an atheist and has no belief in God whatsoever, or is an agnostic and really doesn't know if there is a God and doesn't care to find out, this is going to be an important starting point! If there isn't a God, then any talk about sin and Jesus and salvation is completely irrelevant. So before you talk about who God is, you need to establish that the person you're witnessing to believes there's a God to begin with. Now I'm not going to get into apologetic approaches on how to do that since that falls outside of the focus on my message today, but sufficient to say, one must believe God exists before you can get very far down the road of proclaiming the gospel to them.

But assuming they do, maybe because they had some church background in the past or have just adopted a shared cultural assumption about God's existence, the next task you have is ascertaining whether they understand God correctly. I say this because you can no longer assume when someone claims, "I believe in God," that they're accurate in their understanding of what he is like. Between pop culture and prosperity preachers, God has been domesticated, made safe, benign, and more like a cosmic butler or genie there to help you and grant you your wishes provided you call on him in the proper way. For the most part, we've lost any sense of God as holy, almighty, sovereign, authoritative, righteous. So it's important that people see God as he has revealed himself in Scripture and not as the self-help caricatures many people believe in.

In particular, three aspects of God are important to highlight. The first is that God is our Creator. Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," which is a way of saying God created all things, whether they be the vast array of planets, stars and galaxies in the universe or the multitude of life on earth. That of course includes us, which means we're created beings and therefore have an obligation to our Creator. It means God has a right to expect worship, honor, and obedience from us.

That then brings us to the second aspect of God: his holiness. God demands this of us his creatures, "Be holy as I am holy." We're to be without sin. We're to obey God every day and in every way. We're to be set apart from sin, to live righteously, gladly and willingly obeying his commands and laws. We who are creatures created in the image of our Creator are to reflect in us his moral perfections: in all things we are to be loving, kind, gentle, truthful, forgiving, and just. God expects from those he created righteous obedience to him.

Third, it should be understood that God is just. He'll treat us justly for our obedience or lack thereof. As a parent, sadly I'm not always just. When I catch the tail end of a fight my kids were having and have to punish them, I no doubt don't get it right every time. I don't always know who started it or who's telling the truth and so sometimes I may discipline one of my daughters who didn't deserve it. But God doesn't have that problem. He's sovereign over all things. He has perfect knowledge not only of my words and actions but the thoughts and motivations of my heart. He is just in any

punishment he brings us because he knows perfectly what we've done and therefore what we deserve. He never gets it wrong: he never punishes the wrong person and never lets the guilty get away with their crime.

So the basis of the gospel message is God. If you don't believe he exists or if you do acknowledge his existence but don't recognize him as the Creator, as holy and as just, then the rest of the gospel message won't make much sense. Before you can speak of anything else, you need to be certain the individual you're speaking to has rightly understood who God is. So with the nature of God established, we can turn how from focusing on God our holy Creator to us as his creatures, and that brings us to the second of the four gospel pegs I want you to know and that's...

2. Sin

Our problem as creatures is that we haven't fulfilled our obligation to our Creator. God says, "Be holy as I am holy" and we've been anything but holy. Jesus broke down the entire law of God into two commandments, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind and love your neighbor as yourself," and we've failed miserably at both of them. God tells us do not murder or commit adultery or steal or bear false witness or covet other people's possessions and in response we lie and lust, cheat and steal, hate and envy. And this isn't just true of a select number of really bad people: it's the reality for everyone. The Bible says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." All of us. No exceptions. We have consistently, willingly, and repeatedly broken God's law, transgressed his commands, and violated his Word.

But our problem goes even deeper than simply disobeying God's commands. Look at Romans 1 with me for a moment. It's on pg. 939 of the pew Bibles. This is where the apostle Paul lays out the gospel for the believers in Rome. I want you to follow along as I read v. 18-23 of the first chapter of Romans.

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."

Now I'm not going to unpack that whole paragraph, but I want to call your attention to the fact that Paul says God has revealed himself in creation to mankind. We're to ascertain through creation that he exists and is powerful. And we see this has been the case across the world: there aren't primitive tribes of atheists, right? No matter how technologically backwards they might be, people all across the world have had

a shared believe in the existence of a god or gods to whom they owe an obligation, be it worship or material sacrifice. But in spite of this clear revelation of his existence, what does Paul say people do with it in v. 21? *“For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him...”* They reject him. They don't give him honor nor do they thank him.

What I'm trying to show you is that sin is far more personal than simply disobeying a set of laws. My girls don't always obey my instructions and I don't like that very much. They violate my rules and that's a bad thing, but what would be far worse to me would for one of them not just disobey a rule but say, “I don't respect you. I don't love you. I hate you and I want nothing to do with you.” That's goes far beyond just violating a rule and that's what Paul is getting at here in Romans 1. They aren't breaking a commandment: none have been given. But what they are doing is far worse: they know God and refuse to honor him or worship him. They're saying to God, “I don't care about you. I don't want to love you, honor you, serve you, worship you, or have anything to do with you.” Do you see how serious this is? Sin isn't just a violation of some rules: at its core it's a rejection of God himself. It's spitting in the face of your Creator saying, “Keep your hands off my life. Get away from me. I want nothing to do with you.”

So how do you think a holy and just God is going to respond to his creatures who not only disobey his word but in essence tell him, “I hate you. I don't want anything to do with you. Leave me alone”? Well the apostle Paul already told us in Romans 1:18. He said, *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...”* Wrath. Judgment. Punishment. Later in Romans Paul says this, *“The wages of sin is death...”* Death is our just punishment, spiritual death in hell for all eternity. To all who say to God, “I don't love you, leave me alone,” God will grant them their desire. He will cast them from his presence into the fires of hell forever.

Now I know the “good news” of the gospel doesn't start off as good news, but you can't tell people the good news of a Savior until you tell them the bad news of what they need to be saved from. People need to be aware that through their sin, they are under the wrath of a holy God who will punish them for their rejection of him. So with that understanding in place, you are ready to give them the truly good news about what Jesus Christ has done for them. So the third peg of the gospel concerns...

3. Christ

In what is arguably the most well-known verse of the Bible, John 3:16, it says, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* In spite of the fact that we were sinners who had rejected him and rebelled against him, God still loved us. He knew what our sins had earned us: death and hell. So God in an act of unimaginable mercy took it upon himself to rescue sinners from his wrath by sending his Son, Jesus, to suffer his wrath in our place. God has to be just: he can't just over look sin or sweep it under the rug. Sin must be punished, but God also allows for another to take the

punishment in our place. He was teaching this by example throughout the OT, as the Israelite would offer animals as sacrifices in their place for their sins. So by sending his Son, God was offering the greatest sacrifice, his Son, who would atone for not just one person's sin but for the sins of all who would believe in him.

One of the places where the work of Jesus as our Savior is most clearly laid out in 2 Corinthians 5:21. Please turn in your Bibles there with me for a moment (on pg. 966 of the pew Bibles). The apostle Paul is writing to the church in the city of Corinth and he describes for us the two ways that Jesus serves as our substitute in order to reconcile us with God. So in 2 Corinthians 5:21 it says this about Jesus, "*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*"

So Jesus does two things for us: first, though he himself was without sin, God "made him to be sin." When Jesus suffered and died on the cross, God was taking our sins and laying it upon Jesus's shoulder. Our guilt was being removed from us and transferred to Jesus, such that God looked upon Jesus as if he had done the sinning instead of us. As a result, for anyone who trusts in him, the wrath of God that Paul warned about in Romans 1 is no longer a threat. God has been just to punish our sin already. Jesus took it upon himself, dying as our substitute.

But more than that, he also gives us his righteousness. He lived the righteous life we should have lived. When God said, "Be holy as I am holy," the expectation was for us to live a righteous life of perfect obedience. None of us have, but Jesus did. He obeyed God perfectly and so when we turn to him God considers Jesus' righteous life to be as if we lived it.

I like to use the analogy of a checking account. Our sin puts us in the negatives. We're overdrawn. Jesus on the cross pays our debt. He takes our debt of sin and stamps it with the words, "Paid in full." Our checking account statement no longer shows a negative number. But we need more than just no debt. We need positive righteousness. It's not enough that our checking balance is at zero. We in essence are to have a million dollars in it: that's the life of obedience and righteousness God demands of us. So Jesus gives that to us as well. His righteous life is credited to our account. He both pays our negative debt of sin as well as gives us the positive righteousness God requires.

So then, Christ is the solution to our sin problem. Christ lives the righteous life we should have lived and dies the death we should have died. Then three days later he rises from the dead and promises the same resurrected life in eternity to all who would believe in him. So in any explanation of the gospel, you need to talk about Christ. It's only through him that our sins have been atoned for. Only he has lived the righteous life we owe God. We need to set up the problem of sin and then explain how Christ is God's merciful solution.

But there's one more peg we need to highlight. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are of no benefit to you unless you respond to it in faith. So our fourth and final gospel peg is...

4. Faith

Going back to John 3:16 for a moment, it says that "*God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" The Bible repeatedly tells us we need to believe in Jesus, or that we need to place our faith in Jesus. In Ephesians 2 Paul says it is "*by grace you have been saved, through faith.*" Faith is necessary to gain the benefits of Christ's life and death. It isn't until we place our faith in Christ that we enjoy the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life.

So what is faith? Well, first it's important to clarify what it is not. Faith is not simply acknowledging something to be true. There are plenty of people who, if asked about their religious beliefs in a survey will say, "Yes, I believe in God," in that they believe God exists. Now while it is of course important to believe that God exists, it is far more than that.

Think of it like this: One of our members, Matthew Grady, is a doctor. In particular, he's an anesthesiologist, which is the fancy medical term for the guy who knocks you out with sleeping gas before you go into surgery. Now I believe that to be true. I believe for his job Matt goes into Covenant and Allen hospital and spends his time putting patients under so they can be blissfully unconscious while they have an operation. But if tomorrow I need to go in for surgery and I find out that Matt is going to be my anesthesiologist, then we're going to find out if I have faith in him. Faith means more than simply saying you believe something to be true: faith means you're entrusting something to that truth, in this case, my life. I'm trusting that when Matt puts that mask over my mouth, I'm not going to be taking a permanent nap. Saying you believe someone is one thing, but it takes faith to entrust them with something valuable.

So it is with Jesus. To put our faith in Jesus isn't just simply acknowledging that he lived and died 2000 years ago; it's entrusting our very lives to him. It's saying, "I believe you're who you claimed to be and I'm entrusting to you my soul." It's giving to Jesus the steering wheel of the car that is our life and trusting that he will lead and guide us to our eternal home.

Now there are two sides to the coin that is faith. The first side is repentance. The word repentance means to make an about-face, a 180, to turn away from something. When it comes to the gospel, it means turning away from sin. Faith means you see the sinful choices of your life and say, "Enough! I don't want to keep sinning like I've been doing all these years. I don't want to keep making a mess of my life. I want to stop living for myself and my self-centered passions." So the first thing a person needs to do in response to the gospel is repent of his or her sin.

But the flip side is that in turning away from sin, you need to turn to Jesus in faith. It means you need to believe the truth about who he is – that he was the Son of God who lived a sinless life and was subsequently crucified for us as God reckoned our sin to be Christ's sin, and then rose from the dead three days later and who sits enthroned in heaven. Faith is more than simply believing those truths, but it is not less than that. Believing those things to be true, faith means coming to Jesus with your life and saying, "Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to Thee." It's saying to Jesus, "I've been fooling myself thinking I'm the Lord of my life. That's gotten me only misery and sorrow. I believe you are the Lord, my rightful Lord, and now I want to live for you in grateful response to the mercy and grace you've shown to me on the cross. Help me to grow in my knowledge, love, and obedience to you from this day forward."

Conclusion

So there you have it: the gospel that we have been called to believe and proclaim. God is our Creator who made us and demands us to live holy righteous lives. Yet we have not done what God demands of us: we've sinned, and God must justly punish us for our sin. But God so loved us he sent his Son to live the sinless life we should have lived and who died on the cross as our substitute to satisfy the wrath of God for our sins. And so God calls all men everywhere to faith, to repent of their sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ so they can be saved. All that can be summed up into four words – what are they again? God, sin, Christ, and faith.

So then I say to all of you who have believed this, go and proclaim it. Be *Salt & Light* to those God has placed in your life. Be intentional about reaching out to them, engaging in conversations with them, and as the Lord leads you, proclaim the gospel to them. Teach them about God. Show them their sin. Tell them about what Christ did for them on the cross. Invite them to turn to Jesus in repentance and faith. This is the message Christ has entrusted to us, the only message that has the power of God to save the souls of men. So let us not be slack or fearful or ashamed of the gospel, but let's boldly proclaim it to a lost and hurting world. Let's pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2018.