

Riverside Reflections – Week 3 – What is the Gospel?

The things we will discuss today are not meant to be abstract concepts, they are truths meant to be lived out. What we are going to learn are some basics about the gospel itself. The gospel message is the good news of salvation, the word of truth offered to mankind by grace through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ; most especially the message of the cross. Some things that are related to the gospel, such as regeneration, repentance and faith, gospel counterfeits, how the Trinity is involved in salvation, and many other things we could discuss are beyond the scope of this single lesson. Today we are going to concern ourselves primarily with what the content of the saving gospel message is, and how it is accomplished.

We naturally think that the gospel starts with people, but the Bible reveals that the Gospel starts with God. Those that don't know God place people first and believe that individual insight into our own selves is more important than God. This leads to pluralism, in other words, choose your own path and it is okay, because the frame of reference is people centered instead of God centered. This is against the Biblical Christian faith, as revealed by Jesus Christ, who said that there was only one way to be justified before God, and that was through Him (John 14:6). Peter said that Jesus was the only way men might be saved (Acts 4:12). Paul told Timothy that there was only one mediator between God and man, that being Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5).

We either believe what Jesus said about Himself and the kingdom of God, and its exclusivity, or we have to invent some other way, which inevitably leads to pluralism (many paths), universalism (all people are saved), pantheism (all is God), or panentheism (everything has God in it). All these things are invalidated by the testimony of the Bible, which Jesus validated as the words of God (recall session 2, "*A Biblical Foundation*"). So, it is either Jesus or something else, you cannot have both, although many claim a Jesus that is not the Jesus of the Bible.

Jesus said He was God. This is why the Jewish leaders were trying to kill Him in the first place, because He was asserting that He was the Son of God. To the Jewish mind of the day it was clear that Jesus was saying He was equal with God (John 5:18, 10:24-33). Jesus said to them that if they did not believe He was who He said He was that they would die in their sins, i.e., they were not going to heaven, but would be damned (John 8:24).

Think of it this way: all roads do indeed lead to God, but only one road leads to God justifying you, and all the other roads lead to God judging you. If you are in Christ God has already judged your sins, He punished Jesus in your place, but if not, then you will be punished for your own sins with your own soul, and you cannot pay for sins against God.

What are the basic facts of the Gospel? – 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 gives us the gospel in a nutshell – Christ died for our sins, was buried, and He rose again on the third day. We see that it was Jesus, the Messiah, who is the Christ, the Son of God, and the perfect One, who had to die for our sins. We'll develop the significance of that in a moment. We also see that the resurrection is central to the gospel message (cf. Acts 17:31 / Romans 8:34-39 / 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 / 2 Timothy 2:8-11 / 1 Peter 1:3-9, etc.). Paul goes on to develop this in the rest of the chapter (cf. our sermon *Where are your Easter Eggs?*)

How does God accomplish the Gospel? – 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 – The ministry and message of reconciliation. We see the main thing about the gospel here, *imputation* (see also Isaiah 53) – both sin to Christ and righteousness to us. Everybody has a sin problem (Romans 3:23) and we’re given the responsibility to proclaim the cure. That’s the main reason we are left on earth after we are born again, because fellowship with God, fellowship with each other, and triumph over sin will all be complete in heaven. There is one thing we do here that we cannot do in heaven and that is the ministry of reconciliation.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin – this means that God the Father punished Jesus as if He were the sinner, not that He was now actually a sinner. Jesus was our substitute. We see a type of this in Leviticus 16; Jesus became the “scapegoat”. The scapegoat wasn’t guilty, but the priest symbolically laid all the sins of the people on the scapegoat and sent him away. Jesus was without sin, but sin was credited to His account as if He had personally committed it, and then God punished Him, though the fact is He never committed any of it. Christ was made sin in the sense that our sins were accounted to Him. God treated Him as if He was guilty but He wasn’t. You were guilty, but God poured His wrath on the innocent Christ who was in our place as our substitute (Isaiah 53:10). The passage in Isaiah 53:6-7 is directly applied to Christ by Philip in Acts 8:32 (cf. John 1:29).

So that in him we might become the righteousness of God – this means God accredits the righteousness of Christ to our account. God rewards us as if we are the righteous, not that we are actually righteous. We see imputed righteousness also in Luke 22:37 (what was written about ME) where Jesus connects Isaiah 53 (see vs.11) with Himself (cf. Jeremiah 23:6).

Why do both Jesus’ Life and Death matter? – Matthew 3:13-15 – in order for sinful human beings to have eternal life, the guilt and penalty of sin must be removed. Jesus does this not only by dying the death we justly deserve but by living the life we should have lived. If Jesus simply needed to impute the righteousness of God from His essence, there would have been no need for him to live for 33 years. However, in order to become a perfect high priest and lamb without blemish, Jesus not only had to die for us but He had to live for us. It is clear that the Scriptures speak of God’s people not only being justified by His death (Romans 3:25, 4:25, 5:9) but also as being saved by His life or obedience (Romans 5:10, 19). On the cross, God treated Jesus as if He lived your life so He could treat you as if you lived His life. That’s the Gospel.

Hebrews 4:14-15, 5:7-10 – this does not mean that Jesus was merely sinless in His essence as the second Person in the Trinity, but that He overcame temptations as a man. He revered and obeyed God. It says He was *made* perfect. Now if only His essence were needed for our righteousness there would be no need for Jesus to be made perfect since He already was. What this is speaking of is the same thing Jesus meant when speaking to John the Baptist. He was made perfect as a man (fulfilling all righteousness) so that He could become the source of salvation. Jesus was not lacking in any godly quality, but in the full experience of having lived a perfect human life. Jesus obeyed the Father in everything without sin (John 8:29). The lifelong perfect obedience of Jesus (Hebrews 5:8, 7:26-28) provides the basis for eternal salvation (Hebrews 2:10-18, 10:14).

Matthew 5:17 – Jesus did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it. Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves (Romans 3:20). Romans 8:3-4 – the problem is not with the Law, but

that it was weakened by the flesh and therefore could not do what it intended (i.e. do this and live, Deuteronomy 8:1, etc.). Jesus came in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin but without that weakness so that the righteous requirement of the Law might be met (fulfilled) in us.

What is justification? – it is being declared righteous before God based on the merits of Christ – Luke 18:9-14 – Often overlooked is the fact that when the Pharisee prayed he was thanking God. He was not saying how great he was by himself. He knew he was not able to do good works on his own, but felt that this infused righteousness he worked with justified him. God does indeed develop righteousness in everyone to whom He imputes righteousness, but we never achieve perfection in this life (Philippians 3:4-19). Works are the fruit, not the root of justification (Ephesians 2:10). This is the great danger, the teaching that the *imparted* righteousness whereby we can indeed do good works is the grounds of our justification, instead of the *imputed* righteousness of Christ to our account.

For some to justify means to *make* righteous rather than to *declare* righteous (cf. our sermon *A Nail Pierces the Darkness*). The Roman Catholic Church talks of grace and being saved by the merits of Christ alone. However, they teach that we receive the grace of God, and the merits of Christ, and are made righteous based on our participating in the sacraments of the church. Yet the Bible is clear that the gospel which saves the soul (1 Corinthians 15:1-4) does not include sacraments such as water baptism (1 Corinthians 1:17).

Also the Roman Catholic version of Communion (Eucharist) is turned into a righteous act on the part of the participant in which they maintain or continue their saving relationship with God. They believe that the real physical presence of Jesus is in the bread and wine and that it is the continuing sacrifice of Christ over and over to assist the participant in the continued removal of personal sin. The Bible is clear that this cannot be the case (Hebrews 9:24-28). The Bible clearly teaches that we receive the grace of God by faith alone, and not faith in any work, including a sacrament (John 5:24 / Romans 3:20-24 / Galatians 2:16 / Ephesians 2:8-9).

The difference is the difference between a saving faith that relies on an external atonement for sin and a misplaced faith that relies in an internal abatement of sin. We should be thankful that we have been given a measure of freedom from the power of sin in this life, but we must be careful to never equate this with our righteous standing before God.

What are we saved from? – Colossians 1:13-14 – Looking at Romans from 1:18-3:23 we see that salvation is from the wrath of God (cf. Isaiah 53:10-12 / Galatians 3:13 / 1 Peter 2:24). Jesus Christ is the answer to sin, and His death appeases the wrath of God. Many other things presented as “gospel” do not require God to become incarnate, live a sinless life, die on a cross and rise again. Is it necessary for Christ to have been crucified? That is one good criterion for understanding if a message is about the true gospel. Some add Christ into the mix but their messages are just like they would be without Him, motivational talks, moral exhortations, feel good seminars. If you took out the biblical references or even added them it wouldn’t make any difference to the content of the teaching.

What kind of savior do we really need? The bible defines that need. We are saved from God by God. The Law had to be fulfilled by humanity. Only God could save us; only a human being

should save us. God can't die, so the Son of God entered into humanity so that He could die and pay for our sins. Until that broken Law was fulfilled by humanity we were still dead in our sins. We needed a new federal head, a second Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45 / Romans 5:12-19). To redeem a people He had to be fully God, so as to give the atonement an infinite value, and He had to be fully man to perfectly satisfy the requirements of God's Law, thus becoming an acceptable substitute for sinners (1 Timothy 2:5 – the *man* Christ Jesus) . It is not how many bad things you have done, not how many sins you have committed, but actually how bad sin itself really is. God's glory was demonstrated at the cross by showing that God's Law really did require a penalty for transgressions against it (Romans 3:25-26).

The missing ingredient in many gospels or gospel presentations is the fact that we are bound by sin, dead in sin, and slaves to sin. Salvation is from sin and to the Savior. The great problem of humanity is sin, not a lack of knowledge, not a lack of power, but a lack of purity. No amount of power and no amount of knowledge can erase that. Only the blood of Christ can wash away my sin, nothing but the blood of Jesus can make me whole again. The only way we can have peace with God is if our sins are forgiven, and in Christ they are (Romans 5:1).

Some use the world's methods of marketing to "sell" the gospel, being more concerned with numbers than with presenting the true gospel. Some water it down so there is no call for repentance from sin. This may produce large numbers of "converts," but very few genuine believers. The message isn't healing, helping needs or even simply that Jesus is the Messiah; it is the cross and the resurrection. We do not change it, modify it, grow it, shrink it or do anything to make it better. Our task is simply to take it the way it has been given to us and to believe in its power to affect lives. The fact that so many try to make the gospel into something else shows the nature of it as a stumbling block (1 Corinthians 1:18-24, 2 Corinthians 2:14-16).

What is saving faith? – Some say faith saving faith is nothing more than believing in certain facts. Biblically, however, there is a difference between receiving the gospel and the facts of the gospel. Faith in Him is what saves, not just believing His promises or accepting facts about Him. Even demons know and accept the facts but they are not saved (James 2:19). Scripture often uses the word obedience as a synonym for faith (cf. John 3:36 / Acts 6:7 / Hebrews 5:9). Christ tells us how to receive, by repenting and believing the gospel, and this is not just an intellectual assent. It is easy to get people to like Jesus but it is not enough to make people have good feelings about Jesus, Christ said they must deny themselves (Matthew 16:24-26 / Mark 8:34-37 / Luke 9:23-25 / John 12:24-26 – cf. our sermon *Believe Means Follow*). Repentance and faith are the essentials (Acts 20:21).

Here are a few of the many verses and texts in the NT that show the dynamics and functional aspects of the gospel. Matthew 26:28 / Mark 10:45 / Luke 18:9-14 / John 1:29, 3:14-16 / Acts 13:38 / Romans 3:21-26, 4:1-5, 5:6-11 10:1-17 / 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 / 2 Corinthians 5:21 / Galatians 1:3-5, 2:16, 4:4-5 / Ephesians 1:7, 2:8-10 / Philippians 3:8-9 / Colossians 1:14, 2:13-14 / 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 / 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 / 1 Timothy 1:15-17 / 2 Timothy 1:8-10, 2:8-10 / Titus 2:11-14, 3:3-7 / Hebrews 2:9-18, 9:24-28 / James 1:18 / 1 Peter 1:2-3, 2:24, 3:18 / 2 Peter 1:1 / 1 John 2:2, 3:5, 4:9-10.