

Living Faithfully in the Riches of God's Grace

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ...(Ephesians 3:8)

This morning we are going to approach things just a bit differently than we are accustomed to. With so many of our people out this week, I thought it best to put aside our study in Ephesians 2 and address with you another topic that has been both an issue that I have been working through as of late in my own Bible study time as well as one that we have been addressing on Sunday Evening as we have been discussing the matter of evangelism.

What is that topic? It is the matter of the gospel and most specifically, "what is the gospel?" The other day my family and I were at Silver Dollar City and we stayed for the evening music show; a show which was to include "gospel" music. When this part of the show came around, the songs they sang were anything but "the gospel." The first song sung said something to the effect that if you want to be happy, you have to give your heart away. With the exception of a verse and refrain of "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" – there was no mention of Jesus Christ, no mention of salvation; no mention of heaven or of hell. It was anything but "the gospel."

And this is the problem both Christians and non-Christians face today – so much of what is called the gospel is at best vague or cryptic in its meaning and at worst it is simply not the gospel in any shape, manner or form leaving people without any sense of response.

Beloved, if you and I are to be witnesses for Christ; if we are to tell others the gospel; the good news of Jesus Christ; then we had better be sure we know what we are talking about. Now, don't tune me out. When I say we had better know what we are talking about; this is not to say that the gospel is so complex that only a theologian can communicate it; rather, at issue is such a dumbed-down, water-downed presentation of the gospel that rather than being good news, it is actually "no news" at all.

In our evening services, I have given to the congregation a working definition of the "the gospel" that I present to you all once again. *"The gospel is the good news that God became man in Jesus Christ; that He lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died because of our sin on the cross in our place. Three days later, He rose from the dead, just as He said, proving that He is the Son of God and offering the gift of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life (salvation) to all who, by faith, repent of their sins and receive Jesus Christ as both Lord and Savior."* No verse of Scripture better sums up the message of the gospel than John 3:16, ***"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."*** This is the simple message that all need to hear.

I. Why Do We Need to Know the Gospel?

"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

Let us start with a question; a simple question. "Why do we need to know the gospel?" Apart from it being necessary for a person to be saved; why is it important for Christians to know and understand the gospel?

Let me ask you another question, "What would you think of a surgeon who just started making an incision in a patient without really knowing what he was doing?" You would probably wonder how that doctor even came to practice surgery. If he were to make one mistake, his patient could be disabled for life—or even killed. Yet, when it comes to sharing the gospel, many believers are as inept as an incompetent surgeon, even though people's eternal destinies hang in the balance. Let me ask you another question, "Are you guilty of being inept with the gospel?" We are to be diligent, study to show ourselves approved, ready proclaimers of the gospel!

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But what is the gospel? Can you share it? Can you articulate it in a given situation? Too often we are tempted to be lazy and say, "I will leave the gospel to the preachers and theologians to figure out. All I know is that I'm already saved and going to heaven!" Beloved, we all need to know the gospel for two very important reasons:

1. We need to be sure that we have heard and responded to the true gospel, lest we have a false hope concerning a salvation that we think we have.
2. Jesus told us to **"Go into all the world and preach the gospel..."** (Mark 16:15).

Such words are not addressed merely to pastors, teachers, evangelists, and missionaries; they are addressed to every follower of Jesus Christ! How dare we entertain ourselves before we entertain the realities of the gospel. We cannot be disengaged or disinterested in this subject, for it has eternal ramifications. This brings us to a question...

II. How Can We Distinguish False Gospels from the Real Thing?

The apostle Paul revealed the importance of understanding and guarding what one believes about the gospel when he told Timothy, **"Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you"** (1 Timothy 4:16). Believers are to be intentional; purposeful; intent, watching everything they do and even everything they say to see if it lines up with the Word of God. Anything less than this has the potential of leading you to a false sense of assurance and damning those you talk with to hell if you happen to tell them the wrong thing about God, Jesus Christ, sin and salvation.

To this end, Paul warns his fellow believers to stay away from false or counterfeit gospels. In Galatians 1:6-8 we find such a warning; **"6 I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; 7 which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!"** Paul uses the strongest of language to convey to his readers the importance of staying clear from false gospels. And yet, the church today is plagued with false gospels. But what is a false gospel? They generally fall into one of two categories.

A. The watered-down gospel

What are some of the characteristics of a watered-down gospel?

- It offers God's forgiveness, telling you that all you must do is believe, without any mention of repentance from sin and obedience to Christ. And, as we are so apt to say in this congregation, "Grace that does not affect one's behavior is not saving grace."
- It presents Jesus Christ as though He were some mere additive to make one's life a little better. And thus we are reminded that Jesus did not come to make bad people good or good people better; rather Jesus came to make dead people alive! The watered-down gospel fails to communicate this.
- It tells you about heaven, but leaves out the message of hell.

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B. The rule-laden or legalistic gospel

What are some of the characteristics of a legalistic gospel?

- It strips the true gospel of its simplicity and power. Rather than God doing it all; a person now has hoops to jump through.
- It comes laden with rules and regulations that we must keep to find forgiveness.
- It is so complex that no one can unravel it.

This brings us to the next question...

III. What Are the Essential Elements of the Gospel of Christ?

As noted before, Scripture reminds us to be *"accurately handling the word of truth"* (2 Timothy 2:15). We must be careful to accurately present the gospel. For that reason, we must be able to identify its key elements.

A. We all stand as sinners before a holy God.

"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (Romans 3:23).

A technical definition of the word "gospel" is "good news." Yet, just as a jeweler displays a beautiful ring or necklace against a dark velvet background to accentuate its beauty, so God first tells us the bad news to show just how good the good news of the gospel really is. What is the bad news? It is that we have all sinned—sometimes in ignorance, but more often than not knowingly and willingly. This is what Romans 3:23 declares, *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

Seeing our complete weakness, and our inability to do anything to alleviate our wretched condition, God did the ultimate for us. We see this expressed in Romans 5:6-8 --- *"6 For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. 8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."*

Because there was no other way to satisfy the righteous demands of God, because of our inability to improve ourselves (much less save ourselves), because we faced a future in hell because of our sin, God, in His great love, sent His own Son to come down from heaven and to die on the cross in our very place. So says our definition of the gospel, *He lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died because of our sin on the cross in our place.* The apostle Paul personalized this by saying these words in Galatians 2:20, *"...the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me."* Can you say those words with Paul?

B. Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6).

We know that God is perfect. We know that man is imperfect and sinful. The only way God could resolve this serious sin issue was to send His Son, Jesus, to take our place and to pay the price for our sins. But why Jesus? Because Jesus, who was both God and man, without sin or fault, was uniquely qualified to bridge the gap between sinful humanity and a holy God. We see this in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, *"18 Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, 19 namely, that God was in Christ reconciling*

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the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation."

In other words, the gospel is not about what you or I did to please or reach God; for on the contrary, we did everything to displease Him. Rather, the gospel is about how God reconciled Himself to us through Jesus Christ. Quite simply, Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father. Jesus Himself said, ***"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6).*** The apostle Peter echoed these words of Jesus in Acts 4:12 saying, ***"And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."*** And yes, even Paul has his version of this truth in 1 Timothy 2:5 saying, ***"For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus..."***

If we, as Christians, say that God can be reached through any other means than Christ alone, then we are guilty of misrepresenting the gospel! For on that cross, some 2000 years ago, all of our sin was poured upon Jesus Christ as He became the sin sacrifice for us. As it says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, ***"[God] made [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in [Jesus]."***

C. The cornerstone of the gospel is Christ's death and resurrection.

"Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit" (John 19:30).

One of the final statements made by Jesus on the cross was, ***"It is finished!"*** These words can be translated a number of ways, each given us a different aspect of what Jesus did:.

- "It is made an end of."
- "It is paid."
- "It is performed."
- "It is accomplished."

Now then, let us consider these one by one:

1. What was made an end of?

Our sin and the guilt that accompanied them (Hebrews 9:26)

2. What was paid?

The price of redemption – the blood of Christ (Ephesians 1:7)

3. What was performed?

The righteous requirements of demanded by God's law for sin (Romans 10:4)

4. What was accomplished?

The work that God had given Jesus to do (John 17:4)

5. What was finished?

Sin and Satan's stronghold on humanity (Colossians 2:14–15).

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This beloved, is the gospel expounded. Paul gives to us the gospel in a nutshell in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, ***“that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...”***

IV. A Simple Summation of the Gospel

If we were to put 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 for into our own words, so as to have our own explanation of the gospel, it might sound something like this: The gospel is the message of good news that although we are all separated from God because of our sin which results in an emptiness, an ever-present guilt, and a certain fear of death; yet because God loved us, in spite of our rebellion, He sent His own Son to die in our place, to prove His power over death by rising again on the third day, and thus bridging the gap between God and ourselves. I would encourage you to write out your own summation.

V. How Does One Enter into That Relationship with God?

Jesus is clear that a person must believe the message of salvation offered in the gospel in the words found in Matthew 11:28-30: ***28 “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 29 “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”*** Here we learn some important truths:

A. We must come to Him.

All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out (John 6:37).

Conversion is not some long, drawn-out process. It is immediate and instantaneous. You don't need to clean up your life before you come to Christ. You simply come with all of your problems, all of your sins, and all of your shortcomings and He will receive you as you are. Jesus will work on these areas of sin once you are saved; a process we call sanctification, of becoming more and more like Christ.

B. We must take up His yoke.

When Jesus spoke these words, the people easily got the picture. Animals (such as oxen) were often placed under yokes to work in the fields. In essence, Jesus is exhorting us to come under His direction for our lives. Many have their own plans for their lives, and they just ask the Lord to come along for the ride. But Jesus has no interest in this kind of arrangement. You either come on His terms or you don't come at all.

C. What are Jesus' terms?

There are three terms or expectations we need to come to grips with when confronted with the gospel.

1. We must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. (Acts 16:31)

To *believe* means “to take hold of something.” We must admit that we are helpless sinners in desperate need of a Savior. Have you done this?

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2. We must repent

Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

To *repent* means "to let go of something." We do this when we put our trust and faith in Jesus and turn the direction of our lives over to Him. That means turning away from our old, sinful lifestyles and being willing to change, or better yet, to be changed and become a different person; one who reflects Christ in what he does and says.

3. We must learn of Christ.

but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. (2 Peter 3:18)

As we walk and commune with Jesus Christ in our hearts and lives, and as we read and study His Word, we begin to see things the way Jesus does. We have new eyes because we have become a new creation. Remember that, for 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "**Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.**" How do you know if the gospel you believe is real? Just ask yourself, "Am I a new creature? Am I becoming more and more like Christ in my attitudes and in my actions?" A changing, Christ-centered life is the reality of the gospel.

Perhaps you already know everything I have spoken about this morning. If you do know the gospel and you believe it, then let me ask you this, when is the last time you shared it with someone else? God wants to use you to spread the gospel. Pray and ask the Lord to make Romans 10:14-15 a description of you. "**14 How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? 15 How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS!"**"

If you are uncertain as to whether or not you have ever properly responded to the gospel; then do not delay; call upon the name of the Lord and be saved, today; this moment. Ask Him to cause you to be born again, to the living hope of the gospel and to change you into a follower of Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria

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