

Finding Our One Thing: The Definition of the Gospel

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you have received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance. That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve...and last of all he appeared to me also...Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed” (1 Cor 15:1-5, 8, 11).

“At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Rom 5:6-11).

What is the gospel?¹ That sounds like a very easy question. It’s the kind of question every Christian should have a ready-made answer for. Something you can fit on a 3-by-5 card, or explain in 2 minutes or less to a co-worker, or a neighbor, or someone sitting next to us on the bus. But for many of us—including myself—the answer we give to that question is usually too much or too little.

¹ I am especially indebted to Dr. Timothy Keller for helping orient my understanding of this fundamental aspect of the gospel presented in this sermon. See his sermons “What is the Gospel?” (Sep 12, 2003: <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/what-is-the-gospel-4611/>), and “How the Gospel Changes Us” (Sep 13, 2003: <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/how-the-gospel-changes-us-4612/>), along with chapters 1-3 & 5 of his book *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Zondervan, 2012).

You see, “gospel” is a headline. Years before Jimmy Fallon took over *the Tonight Show*, Jay Leno sat in that chair; one of his best known and longest-running gags on the show was called “headlines.” He would ask his audience from all over the country to send in clips from newspapers where the headline seemed to give...well...the wrong impression. Do you remember any of them?

How about the one with evangelist Roger Hollis. Morning sermon “Preparing for Marriage;” evening sermon: “A Look at Hell”? Or maybe you recall this one: “Most doctors agree that breathing regularly is good for you.”

Do you see the problem? A good headline is one that avoids the twin problems of saying too much, or saying too little. Both lead to misunderstanding. Sometimes they just get it wrong. Remember this one from history: “Dewey Defeats Truman”?

But then, then you have those simple headlines that seem to just “say it all.”

-In 1969, with the whole country glued to their television sets, Neil Armstrong made history that signaled the new frontier of space, and that his trip would just be the first of many. So the *Evening Standard* offered this hopeful headline: “The first footstep.”

-But perhaps my favorite, a one word headline to signal elation after years of hard fighting pain and misery was the one on August 15, 1945, declaring the end of world War II. Sydney’s newspaper *The Sun* ran a headline with just one word: “Peace.” The Los Angeles Times chose two words: “Peace” and “Victory.” Never have such small words packed so big a punch. It just says it all, doesn’t it?

What happens when we think of “gospel” as our headline? A gospel of peace and victory?

BACKGROUND DEFINITION: THE HEADLINE THAT DEFINES IT ALL

The word “gospel” is not a Christian word. It’s a baptized word, to be sure; it takes on a new dimension when Jesus and his followers start using it, and pretty much everybody now thinks of “gospel” as a Christian word. But it was in Greek and Roman newspapers before Jesus came along. The word means “good news.” Which means two things: (1) it has to be good, and (2) it has to be news.

It is a headline message about rescue. It’s a message intended to bring hope. Just look at Psalm 40:9: “I have told the glad news of [your] deliverance in the great congregation!” You see, “gospel” was a message about a great event that brought deliverance and hope. And a messenger or herald was one who would announce the message to people eagerly anticipating the headline news of the day. Usually, the

headline would be about some event that changes your life forever. So much so, that “gospel” served as a lens through which you would now see everything in the world.

When a young soldier named Octavian decided to go to war against tribal leaders, he united what became known as the Roman Empire behind him. There was nothing like it in the history of the world. So they named him Augustus (meaning “the great one”). So great was this empire—its power, the scope of its plans, the borderless nature of its ambitions—that the announcement that Rome was coming to your village, that Caesar was coming to make your city part of his kingdom was called “gospel.” In 9 BC, years before Jesus was even born, a young Ephesian etched into stone a celebration tribute in honor of Caesar’s birthday. The inscription, which could be read by anyone entering the city, said that the same Providence that orders the whole of life picked this moment—the pinnacle of human existence, to send a savior for us and our posterity. His job: to end all wars, to establish peace throughout the land. So important was his coming, that his birthday could be considered the “beginning of everything” because it reframed how we saw the world: the world was bleak and headed downhill until Caesar appeared, and gave us a new look to the whole universe, becoming a blessing to all people.

Can you guess what the headline was? Here it is:

“The birthday of the god—Augustus—signaled the beginning of the good news (gospel) for the world because of him.”

Do you think anything was required of you to become a soldier in Caesar’s army? Of course there was. Was anything expected or demanded as a result of Casear’s rule? Absolutely. But none of those things are mentioned here. Because those things follow as a result, or flow out of the announcement. But the announcement—the headline—the gospel—is about what Caesar has done, and everything is better because of him.

Do you remember the movie *Gladiator* with Russell Crowe? There is a scene early on, where Caesar Marcus Aurelius calls for his prized general Maximus. They gaze over the battlefield.

Caesar says, “tell me again, Maximus, why are we here?”

“For the glory of the empire, Sire” replies Maximus. “5,000 of my men are out there in the freezing mud. 3,000 are cleaved and bloodied. 2,000 will never leave this place. I will not believe they fought and died for nothing. They fought for you and for Rome.”

Caesar then asks, “and what is Rome, Maximus?”

Maximus replies: “I have seen much of the rest of the world. It is brutal and cruel and dark. Rome is the light.”

What a beautiful and powerful motivation. What an inspiring view of the city and the empire for which he gives his life. But then Caesar replies: “Yet you have never been there.”²

What that scene is meant to capture is what was “the glory of Rome.” That men would scrape and fight, bloodied, and die for a vision, an idea that even they had never set their eyes on, but for which they would gladly give their lives. They believed in a story—a story to end all stories—that can be summarized with these words: “The birthday of the god—Augustus—signaled (or announced) the beginning of the good news (gospel) for the world because of him.”

Let me say that a little differently: “The beginning of the gospel is about Caesar, the god sent by Providence.” And when Mark wrote his gospel, meant to be read out loud (by a herald) to a mostly illiterate society, the very first verse could get you killed: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

The gospel is a headline—in fact it is THE headline. It shapes my identity.

A DECLARATION THAT BRINGS JOY ABOUT GOD’S WORK IN CHRIST

So what is the gospel? No two Bible writers say it the exact same way. And the gospel has depth and nuance, so any summary could be explored even further. But here is a helpful shorthand. Three essential aspects of the gospel:

First of all, the gospel is an announcement, a declaration. It’s not a list of rules or fatherly advice or helpful suggestions. It’s a statement about an event, meant to be plastered on every door in your house, meant to guide and direct every thought in your heart.

Second, it brings tremendous joy to the entire world. What did the angel tell the Shepherds in the field that night when the majestic host swirled around them, announcing the birth of the Messiah? “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for *all* people” (Luke 2:10). The good news is just that—good news—for the entire world!

Third, it’s about what God has done in Jesus Christ to fix what was broken and to rescue, restore, and reconcile all things through His Spirit. You know that sin did more than cut the phone line between me and God, right? Sin ripped a hole in the fabric of

² https://sfy.ru/transcript/gladiator_ts

the universe. Sin’s curse is seen in every man, in every woman, and even in creation itself. We are alienated from each other but that is because we are alienated from God! And our sin invokes the wrath of God. But thanks be unto God that we have a headline. It’s right there at the end of the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians. After rejoicing that the Thessalonian Christians “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven,” Paul gives us this headline: “Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” (1 Thess 1:10)! Paul talks about what they did; but the headline—the gospel—is what Jesus did—*Jesus*, who rescues us from the coming wrath. And he doesn’t just keep us from God’s wrath. He also restores our broken relationships with each other by repairing the breach between us and God! Once that relationship is fixed, the love that flows from God to us can flow from us to others. And not only that, God is at work breaking down every wall of partition, righting every wrong, reversing the curse, and reconciling all things His Spirit all because of the rescue mission of Jesus Christ. And how did he accomplish this? What great event is this rescue mission? Listen to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:

“Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you have received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance. That **Christ** died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that **he** was buried, that **he** was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that **he** appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve...and last of all **he** appeared to me also...Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed” (1 Cor 15:1-5, 8, 11).

Do you see what Paul does here? By emphasizing “he” at least 5 times, Paul says the gospel you believed and received is what Christ did for us. “This is what we preach,” says Paul, “and this is what you believed.” There are all sorts of deep connections you can make with that. Paul brings lots of these elements together—the love of God, the demonstration of the death of Christ, rescue from the coming wrath, reconciliation of the world, and boasting only in Christ—and states the gospel profoundly in Romans 5:6-11:

“At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we

be saved through his life! Now only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Rom 5:6-11).

We were powerless. We were still sinners. We were God’s enemies! By ourselves, without God, we are worse than we care to admit. But God demonstrates his own love, that he would die for even me. For us. For a broken world. To rescue, to redeem, to reconcile. God did what we could never do, for a people who never could have earned it, and never would have deserved it. This is the gospel! I can’t stress this enough. Get this right, and everything else will fall into place.

Let me show you what I mean.

Several years ago, Gary Keller did a study of highly successful people who produced extraordinary results. He wrote a book about it that was a New York Times best seller. He concluded that the key to the most rewarding lives, great careers, losing weight, strengthening your marriage or having a deeper faith seemed to boil down to this question: “What is your one thing?”³ I’m not a particular fan of self-help one-liners intended to follow a worldly definition of success. But his question seems right on target: “what is your one thing?”

WHAT THE GOSPEL IS NOT:

Every teaching of Scripture is rooted in the gospel. Every story, if read correctly, proclaims the gospel. Every verse either points to, anticipates, extends, or applies the gospel. But not everything in the Bible IS the gospel.

The gospel leads us to study the Bible and discover great Bible doctrines. But listing and knowing great Bible doctrines is NOT the gospel.

The gospel calls for a response. The gospel leads us to repent. It calls us to deny all idols, starting with ourselves. It compels us to be baptized. It commissions us to belong to the church, and to be active members of a local community of Christians called the local church. The gospel demands that we keep ourselves unspotted from the world. All of this can be called the demands of the gospel. But none of this IS the gospel.

I like to think of Christianity not as a “religion” so much, but as a “way of life.” Religion tends to conjure up images of Sunday rituals and attempts to appease God, while “way of life” seems to describe a general demeanor and habits that define a whole-life walk.

³ Gary Keller, *The One Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results* (Bard Press, 2013).

So, I like “way of life” better when talking about Christianity. But even this isn’t what “gospel” is. Because “way of life” involves our daily actions, our resolve, and our habits. The way of life that emanates from the gospel, the way of life that is demanded by the gospel is important, biblical, crucial. But it’s NOT the gospel.

The gospel is radically different. It’s about someone, not something. Every religion teaches about man chasing after God. The gospel says that God came chasing after us. I am not the primary agent; God is the primary agent. I am the problem. God is the solution. The gospel highlights not my worthiness, but my UNWORTHINESS. It highlights CHRIST’S worthiness, and then it talks about how in Christ, through His Spirit, by His power, the most amazing things begin to happen.

RESPONSE NATURALLY FLOWS

And when the gospel is preached, people can’t help but respond. Jean Valjean was a thief. Guilty of breaking and entering. But when the police arrived, the priest who owned the home had a decision to make. “He’s no thief,” says the priest, “I gave him those candlesticks.” He changed the story. A story that was about Jean Valjean’s crime became a story of immeasurable grace. Rescue from the coming wrath. And what did he do about it? Jean Valjean became a changed man.

When the crowd in Acts 2 heard the gospel preached, they cried out, “Men, brothers, what in the world should we do in response to this?” When the Ethiopian Eunuch wanted to know the gospel, Philip preached to him Jesus Christ. And when Philip heard the gospel, he said “look, there’s some water. I want to be baptized into Christ.” The gospel cries out for a response.

And the gospel calls for a new way of life. The gospel is rich, and deep. And we will explore it for several weeks. But for today, suffice it to say: the headline is Jesus Christ. In the gospel, God announces an event that changes everything forever. The headline is not my good deeds, my accomplishments, or even my response. I am not the solution. I am the problem. The headline is Jesus Christ, the antidote to the problem. And that—“Jesus Christ, who saves us from the coming wrath”—is the gospel.

Get the gospel right, and everything that follows will find its proper place. The cross has no equal, no equivalent, and needs no help. The gospel is what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, the gospel is something to be “received” and “believed.” Will you receive it?

In the New Testament, here is how people received it:

First, they acknowledged that nothing in my hands I bring, only to the cross I cling. When Simon Peter wanted to bring money, Peter said “let your money perish with you. You can’t buy the gift of God with money.” When the rich young ruler wanted to add a little Christian religion to his already full plate, Jesus demanded he give everything up so his hands would be free to embrace the gospel. To receive the gospel, you must recognize that you don’t have what it takes to save yourself. Only Jesus—only Jesus can fix the hole in our soul.

Second, they resolved to change direction. The gospel calls for a new way of life, and those who gladly received his word “repented” of living a life for themselves. They brought forth fruit worthy of repentance, declaring by their attitude and their decisions that they want Christ and Him alone. They adopted a new way of life, one that is in step with the gospel. One that seeks justice, righteousness, purity, and peace.

Third, they re-enacted death, burial, and resurrection through a ceremony we call baptism. I love baptism. It tells the story of the gospel. We see death. We see burial. We see resurrection. We don’t do anything in baptism. Something is done TO us. We make one good confession which is not about me, it’s about him. Do you see how baptism announces the gospel?

What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Nothing in my hands I bring, only to thy cross I cling. Do you believe the gospel? Come forward and tell us all that you do.