

The Gospel

Ascent

Fall Session, Lesson 1

Welcome/Overview of Ascent

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The Gospel

"So for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."

Romans 1:15-16

Introduction

As a church that is committed to helping people take the next step toward Jesus, we must be equally committed to the faithful proclamation of the message that has been given to us by God to make that step possible. That message is the gospel.

The gospel has been characterized in Scripture as "glorious" (1 Timothy 1:11), "the word of truth" (Col. 1:5), and "the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16). Paul exclaimed, "woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16). He said (twice) of anyone who preached a message different from the true gospel, "he is to be eternally condemned" (Galatians 1:8-9). Obviously, this subject is of maximum importance for any church that wishes God's blessing on its outreach to its community and the world.

Like a beautiful song, the gospel includes both music and lyrics. The "music" of the gospel has to do with the heart attitudes and transformed lives of the people who have been reconciled to God through it. Crucial ideas such as the unity of the church, the servant spirit of Christ-followers, and holy living can all be considered part of the music of the gospel, and when these are present, they prepare the way for listeners to pay attention to the words. As important as it is, the music is not the focus of this document.

Instead, we are attempting to answer a significant question about the "lyrics" of the gospel – "What should we communicate to people who need to become followers of Christ?" We know that the truth sets people free (John 8:32), and that God's word is truth (John 17:17). But what elements of God's word must be grasped in order for people to experience the goodness and love of God and be reconciled to their holy Creator?

A. The Big Picture

It is essential to start at the right place in understanding and communicating the gospel. We must begin with a radical commitment to uphold God's honor first and foremost. God is the hero in the gospel story. His glory is also its primary focus. The gospel is about God's gracious work designed to bring about His glory through the love-inspired salvation of sinners. It is not primarily about that salvation - rather, salvation is the means by which the goal of God's activity is accomplished. The following simple sentence provides an easy way to understand the good news, and it will govern the way we communicate the gospel message.

***We are saved from the wrath of God, by the grace of God,
through the love of God, for the glory of God.***

These basic truths will keep us on track as we share the gospel story, allowing us to see the gospel message and its saving power as God sees it, and communicate it in such a way that He gets all the glory.

B. The Story of the Gospel

Before focusing on the specific concepts that must be communicated to the person who needs the gospel, it is wise to understand the whole story. What is God trying to accomplish, and where does the good news of Christ fit into His plan for the universe?

Scripture affirms in a variety of ways that the universe was created to declare the glory of God. This naturally includes humanity, the highest part of that creation, created in God's image to bring glory to Him. As stewards of the rest of creation, Adam and Eve played a significant role in God's plan to display His glory through that which He had made.

The fall of man, brought about by Satan's prideful attempt to intercept God's glory and take it for himself, upset the created order and marred the image of God in mankind. The innocence of Adam and Eve was replaced by a self-centered nature that refused to recognize God's authority. Those who had been the objects of His love became the objects of His wrath, for His holiness could not take sin lightly. The rupture between God and Man had consequences for all of creation – while still displaying His handiwork and bringing Him glory, it yearns to be restored to its pre-Fall role in His plan.

But God was not caught unaware and unprepared by the rebellion. Before the universe existed, He had initiated His plan to roll back and undo the curse of sin. Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, planned all along to deal with the rebellion of His creatures by entering into their world, displaying His love, living their life, teaching them His truth, and finally taking upon Himself the consequences of their sin when He died on the cross. There He willingly experienced the wrath of His Father for the sin of mankind. His death and resurrection opened the way for rebellious human beings to come back into relationship with their Creator. Those who follow Christ are reconciled to God, and find their way once again to the role for which they were created. God treated Jesus as if He were them, so that he could treat them as if they were Jesus. They stand before God in a righteousness not earned by their works, but one given to them as a gift by Christ.

Jesus established a kingdom that will never end, a kingdom made up of repentant sinners who receive new identities through Christ. His Kingdom invaded the world through His incarnation, death and resurrection, and will be ultimately revealed at His return. Entry into His Kingdom comes not through the personal effort of the individual, but through repentance of sin and trust in Christ. It is a gift to be received, not a wage to be earned. Those who receive this gift become living examples of the goodness and grace of God, and are uniquely qualified to bring Him the glory that He deserves throughout time and throughout eternity.

C. The Gospel Conversation

What follows is not meant to be an exhaustive list of all that might be communicated to someone who needs Christ. It is rather a bare minimum, meant to be fleshed out with scriptural illustrations or personal information that makes it understandable and accessible to the listener.

1. Garden: God created the universe to display His greatness, and mankind played a central role in that plan.

A beautiful painting speaks not only about its object - it also reveals truth about the painter, whose masterful skill brought it into existence. In the same way, God's creation was intended to reveal truth about Him, such as His power, His beauty and His goodness. Mankind, uniquely made in His image, was placed by God in a role of responsibility in that creation. The ability to fulfill that role was dependent upon a right relationship with their Creator.

Romans 1:20 "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse."

Genesis 1:26-27 "Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

2. Fall: Human pride led to rebellion and ruptured relationship with God, as sin made mankind the object of the holy God's justifiable wrath.

Pride destroyed the harmonious relationship between God and man. Independence and hard-heartedness caused a stubborn, self-centered rebellion that continues to this day. Like human judges who must take action against the guilty criminals they see in their courtrooms, a holy God must take action against sin. His wrath is a proper and understandable response, but one which has terrible consequences for the guilty people who stand in His court.

Ephesians 2:1-2 "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest."

3. Cross: Through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God expressed His love for mankind and satisfied His wrath against sin, accomplishing a rescue mission to restore His creation to its intended purpose.

While His holiness required God to judge sin, His love moved Him to save sinners. By coming to earth in the person of Jesus Christ, God Himself took human form in order to stand as a substitute for sinful man. When He died on the cross, Jesus took upon Himself the wrath of God, the innocent paying the debt of the guilty. With that debt paid, the way is open for sinners to be reconciled to their loving and holy God, and restored to their role in His plan to reveal His greatness.

Romans 5:6-11 "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation."

4. Response: By changing our minds about our sinful pride and choosing to become followers of Christ, we are restored to a right relationship with God and our role in His plan.

Awareness of the above points is not enough – Satan knows these are true, but that knowledge does nothing for him. We must change our minds (repent) concerning our prideful independence, and become Christ-followers (trust), in order for the benefits of His death on the cross to be applied to us. When that happens, we receive forgiveness for our sins, reconciliation with our God, and find our place in His plan to reveal His greatness to the world.

Luke 9:23-25 "And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?"

Ephesians 2:8-10 "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."

D. Traps to avoid

It is our desire to stay focused on the clear story of the gospel, and avoid the incomplete or off-center versions that have sadly found their way into modern understanding of the good news. Pay close attention to the following descriptions, and be careful to avoid falling into these common traps.

The sin-less / wrath-less gospel

In an effort to be positive, some presentations of the gospel downplay the significance of sin and the wrath of God that it provokes. But the good news of the gospel is more likely to be seen as “good” when it is understood in the context of the bad news of God’s inevitable judgment of sin. All human beings are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1), and rightful objects of the wrath of God (Eph. 2:3). Any tendency to avoid these sobering topics serves only to minimize the loving grace of God that finds a way, in the sacrifice of Christ, to justify the guilty and extend grace to those who deserve judgment. In fact, sin and wrath should be clearly explained, as they are in Scripture, so the hearer understands that he is unable to save himself, and that if left to himself, he is lost.

The cross-less gospel

Christ’s life is so attractive that it can be tempting to point people to His miracles and His love, presenting Him primarily as a perfect man whose powerful life qualified Him to be our leader, while downplaying or avoiding the more sobering fact that He died an awful death on the cross. But He made it clear that He came to die (John 10:18), willingly laying down His life as a sacrifice. 1 John 4:10 says that God sent Him to be the propitiation (atoning sacrifice) for our sins, taking the judgment we deserve. As the place where God’s love and justice meet, the cross is central to Biblical Christianity, and must be equally central to our proclamation of the gospel.

The repentance-free gospel

Probably the most common mistake in gospel presentations involves the absence of a call to repentance. This results in tens of thousands (possibly millions) of people who have been told that they or their loved ones are destined for heaven because they prayed a prayer or walked an aisle (see below), even though their lives show no fruit of repentance (Matt. 3:8). It must be remembered that Christ’s first sermon called on people to repent (Matt 4:17), and Paul praised the Thessalonians because their conversion was both a “turning to” God and a “turning from” idols (1 Thess. 1:9). At its core, the true conversion experience includes a change of mind (the meaning of the word “repentance), and a renunciation of the life characterized by independence, pride and self-centeredness. The true convert acknowledges the offense of his sins, and turns from them to Christ, eagerly embracing the life of dependence on God and growth in Christ-likeness.

The commitment-free gospel

The popularity of the altar-call approach to evangelism has sometimes led to an impression that “walking the aisle” to respond to an invitation leads automatically to new life in Christ. While meeting with a counselor or talking

with a friend, someone “asks Jesus into his heart” or “accepts Christ as his personal savior.” While there is little doubt that these phrases have been used by God to draw people to Himself, it must be recognized that they are foreign to scripture. In far too many cases, these kinds of “conversions” fail to bring lasting transformation in the life of the individual. Studies of major evangelistic crusades reveal that up to 90% of the people who responded to this kind of appeal ultimately return to their pre-decision lifestyle, many of them with a tragically false sense of assurance that they have done what is required of them, and are destined for heaven.

The most common call Christ made to His listeners was to follow Him (Matt 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 16:24, etc.) He made no secret of the fact that the decision to follow would be tested, and perseverance in the commitment was required. Rather than ask people “Are you a Christian?” or “Have you accepted Jesus?” we would do well to use the Master’s term, and ask “Are you following Christ?” This terminology allows a deeper level of reflection, and makes it clear that saving faith includes a commitment that stands the test of time and leads to a transformed life (James 2:20), without which serious questions should be asked about the individual’s spiritual state (2 Cor. 13:5).

The man-centered gospel

Some gospel presentations focus almost exclusively on the personal benefits that will come to the person who finds favor with God. The Prosperity Gospel, the most extreme and popular version of the man-centered gospel, guarantees good health and financial prosperity to its adherents by putting God in the role of servant of the saved, obliged to give us that which we want. The man-centered gospel assumes that God exists for man’s good, while Scripture makes clear that man exists for God’s glory. By reversing these crucial roles, the man-centered gospel draws millions to an attractive but ultimately incomplete or even false picture of the Christian life.

People who respond to a man-centered call to “fulfill themselves in Christ” are often surprised later to hear calls to deny themselves (Matt. 16:24). Their assumption that they would find nothing but pleasure and satisfaction in God’s family clashes with the call to crucify their flesh and its desires (Galatians 5:24). They often turn away from their decision when they find that the true Christian life is not what they signed up for.

There are definitely benefits that come to the Christ-follower, some in the future and some in the present, and Scripture makes it clear that all of mankind needs what God offers in the gospel. But we do well to make it clear that ultimately, the gospel is for God’s good, not ours. He is forming a people who reveal how loving, how holy, and how merciful He is (Ephesians 3:10). Because the gospel

is focused on Him, not us, our presentations of that gospel should be God-centered, not man-centered.

Summary

We believe that everyone is born in sin, yet still the objects of the love of God, standing in need of the saving grace of God found only through faith in Jesus Christ. We're also aware that God's grace has been tied by Him to the gospel story He has entrusted to us. We want to show ourselves worthy of that trust, both in our willingness to live out the gospel through the "music" of our lives, and in our commitment to share the "lyrics" of the gospel in a way that is complete, clear, and focused on the glory of God.