

THE GOSPEL: THE KEY TO CHANGE

By Timothy Keller

The Greek term “gospel” (*ev-angelion*) distinguished the Christian message from that of other religions. An ‘*ev-angel*’ was news of a great historical event, such as a victory in war or the ascension of a new king, that changed the listeners’ condition and required a response from the listener. So the gospel is news of what God has done to reach us. It is not advice about what we must do to reach God. What is this news?

God has entered the world in Jesus Christ to achieve a salvation that we could not achieve for ourselves which now 1) converts and transforms individuals, forming them into a new humanity, and eventually 2) will renew the whole world and all creation. This is the ‘good news’—the gospel. And it is good news in three important ways.

1. The gospel is the good news of gracious acceptance. Jesus lived the life we should live. He also paid the penalty we owe for the rebellious life we do live. He did this in our place (Isaiah 53:4-10; 2 Cor 5:21; Mark 10:45). We are not reconciled to God through our efforts and record, as in all other religions, but through *his* efforts and record. Christians who trust in Christ for their acceptance with God, rather than in their own moral character, commitment, or performance, are *simul iustus et peccator*- simultaneously sinful yet accepted. We are more flawed and sinful than we ever dared believe, yet we are more loved and accepted than we ever dared hope at the same time.

Without this unique understanding of grace-salvation, religions have to paint God as either a demanding, holy God who is placated by back-breaking moral effort, or as what C.S. Lewis calls ‘a senile, old benevolence’ who tolerates everyone no matter how they live. The problem is that if I think I have a relationship with God because I am living morally according to his standards, it does not move me to the depths to think of my salvation. I earned it. There is no joy, amazement, or tears. I am not galvanized and transformed from the inside. On the other hand, if I think I have a relationship with God because the Divine just embraces us all, no matter what how we live— that also does not move me to the depths. I simply have the attitude of Voltaire, who, on his deathbed famously said, “Of course God forgives—that’s his job.” Any effort to take away the idea of Christ’s *substitutionary atonement* and replace it with a moralism (i.e., being moral, working for others, imitating Jesus) robs the gospel of its power to change us from the inside out.

The gospel is, therefore, radically different from religion. Religion operates on the principle: “I obey, therefore I am accepted”. The gospel operates on the principle: “I am accepted through Christ, therefore I obey.” So the gospel differs from both religion and irreligion. Not only can you seek to be your own ‘lord and savior’ by breaking the law of God (i.e., through irreligion), you can also do so by *keeping* the law in order to earn your salvation (i.e., through religion). A lack of deep belief in the gospel is the main cause of spiritual deadness, fear, and pride in Christians, because our hearts continue to act on the basis “I obey, therefore, I am accepted.” If we fail to forgive others--that is not simply a lack of obedience, but a failure to believe we are saved by grace, too. If we lie in order to cover up a mistake--that is not simply a lack of obedience, but a failure to find our acceptance in God rather than in human approval. So we do not ‘get saved’ by believing the gospel and then ‘grow’ by trying hard to live according to Biblical principles. Believing the gospel is not only the way to meet God, but also the way to grow into him.

2. The gospel is the good news of changed lives. Paul says to Christians, *'your life is hid with Christ in God'* (Col 3:3), and in numerous places he says that we are now *'in Him.'* This means, on the one hand, that the Father accepts us in Christ and treats us as if we had done all that Jesus has done (cf. Col 3:2a). But this also means Christ's life comes into us by the Spirit and shapes us into a new kind of person. The gospel is not just a truth *about* us that we affirm with our minds, it is also a reality we must experience in our hearts and souls. For example, in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 Paul wants the people to give an offering to the poor. He says, "I don't want to order you. I don't want this offering to simply be the response to my demand."

He doesn't put pressure directly on the will (saying 'I'm an apostle and this is your duty to me!') nor pressure directly on the emotions (telling them stories about how much the poor are suffering and how much more they have than the sufferers). Instead, Paul vividly and unforgettably says, *"You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich"* (2 Cor 8:9). When he says *'you know the grace'*—he uses a powerful image, bringing Jesus' salvation into the realm of money and wealth and poverty. He moves them by a 'spiritual recollection' of the gospel.

Paul is saying, 'Think on his costly grace. Think on that grace until you are changed into generous people by the gospel in your hearts.' So the solution to stinginess is a re-orientation to the generosity of Christ in the gospel, where he poured out his wealth for you. Now you don't have to worry about money—the cross proves God's care for you and gives you security. Now you don't have to envy any one else's money. Jesus' love and salvation confers on you a remarkable status—one that money cannot give you.

Paul does the same thing in Ephesians 5:25ff, where he urges husbands to be faithful to their wives. What is the point? What makes you a sexually faithful spouse, a generous-not avaricious- person, a good parent and/or child is *not* just redoubled effort to follow the example of Christ. Rather, it is deepening your understanding of the salvation of Christ and living out of the changes that understanding makes in your heart—the seat of your mind, will, and emotions. Faith in the gospel re-structures our motivations, our self-understanding and identity, and our view of the world. Behavioral compliance to rules without heart-change will be superficial and fleeting. The gospel changes your heart.

3. The gospel is the good news of the new world coming. The plot-line of the Bible is this:

- 1) God created the world,
- 2) The world and humanity fell into sin and decay,
- 3) But God sends his Son to redeem the world and create a new humanity, and
- 4) Eventually the whole world will be renewed. Death, decay, injustice, and suffering will be all removed.

The gospel then is not just about individual happiness and fulfillment. It is not just a wonderful plan for 'my life' but a wonderful plan for the world. It is about the coming of God's kingdom to renew everything. Gospel-centered churches do not only urge individuals to be converted, but also to seek peace and justice in our cities and in our world.

Christ wins our salvation through losing, achieves power through weakness and service, and comes to wealth via giving all away. Those who receive his salvation are not the strong and accomplished but those who admit that they are weak and lost. This pattern creates an 'alternate kingdom' or 'city' (Matt.5:14-16). in which there is a complete reversal of the values of the world with regard to power, recognition, status, and wealth. When we understand that we are saved by sheer grace through Christ, we stop seeking salvation in these things. The reversal of the cross, therefore, liberates us from bondage to the power of material things and worldly status in our lives. The gospel, therefore, creates a people with a whole alternate way of being human. Racial and class superiority, accrual of money and power at the expense of others, yearning for popularity and recognition--all these things are marks of living in the world, and are the opposite of the mindset of the kingdom (Luke 6:20-26).

Conclusion

All of the above are important 'perspectives' on the gospel. The first stresses the *doctrinal* content of the gospel. The gospel is the news that Jesus Christ died and rose for our salvation in history. The second stresses the *personal* individual impact of the gospel. The gospel is a transforming grace that changes our hearts and inmost motives. The third stresses the *social* impact of the gospel. The gospel brings a new 'order' in which believers no longer are controlled by material goods or worldly status and have solidarity with others across customary social barriers.

These three 'perspectives' are all Biblical and should be kept together. There is a tendency for Christians and churches to focus on just one of these perspectives and ignore the others. However they are inseparable and inter-dependent on one another.

If, for example, you stressed the social perspective to the exclusion of others, you might call loudly for social justice, but your ministry will not convert people and give them the changed lives they need to persevere in humbly serving the needs of the poor. If you stress the doctrinal perspective to the exclusion of the experiential and social, you might have a ministry that is doctrinally accurate but it will not produce changed lives, so why should anyone believe your doctrine? If you over-stress the personal perspective, you might 'psychologize' the gospel so that it is presented as strictly a way for an individual to overcome his or her guilt and unhappiness. But it will not get the person out of him or herself—which is what you need most to be happy. We were built by God for service. All three perspectives are necessary.

This full approach to the gospel creates a church that does not fit neatly into the traditional 'conservative/sectarian' nor 'liberal/mainline' categories. The gospel is *the* dynamic for all heart-change, life-change, and social-change. Change won't happen through 'trying harder' but only through encountering with the radical grace of God.