

Introduction to: What is the Gospel?

by Jay Wegter

When you think about the gospel, consider that this is the major work that God is doing in the world right now. The gospel is the power of God according to Romans 1:16-17. God is putting forth His power in making new creatures, gospel power is a miracle that's happening hour by hour on our planet. For by means of His might exerted in the gospel, God is making sons out of elect sinners (2 Cor 5:17; Eph 1:19-23).

If we're going to be the men that God wants us to be, we need to be fluent in the gospel. Fluent is a word we use for capacity and aptitude in the articulation of language. That's the exact opposite of an awkward, flustered silence we've all experienced when one is searching for the words to communicate something. The gospel is a kind of language that requires fluency as well—to be able to communicate it with power, clarity and love.

Here are some of the reasons why we need to be gospel-centered and gospel-fluent:

1. The gospel is the means by which we are being transformed into the likeness and image of Christ (Rom 8:28-30ff.).
2. The gospel is the message of reconciliation; therefore, every Christian is an ambassador of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-21).
3. The gospel of Christ Jesus is the fullest revelation of God—the gospel of Christ is a saving, knowledge-giving revelation of God (2 Cor 4:6; Heb 1:1-3).
4. The gospel is the source of spiritual life in the body of Christ. The gospel is about shared life--about having life in Christ in common in His body (1 Jn 1:1-7).
5. The gospel exalts and exhibits Christ most perfectly, so the gospel is the hub—all the other doctrines are 'spokes' that radiate from that hub (1 Cor 2:2).

The gospel is so central to God's revealed message, we could consider it our canon within the canon. It's critical we understand this, for we will never outgrow our need for the gospel. We think about how the gospel first comes to the sinner; it is necessarily a very withering experience to understand for the first time that there is nothing you can do to commend yourself to God. In fact, John Calvin said, "The sinner's first response to the gospel is one of rage," [at the thought that everything in you calls for eternal condemnation, and that only the blood of a crucified Savior can bring favor with God.] There's nothing a sinner can do to save himself. This also caused the great divines to say that discovering one's own inability is actually advantageous and salutary to being saved. For through that Spirit-engendered discovery of one's spiritual impotence the sinner is brought face to face with his moral bankruptcy.

Only the Holy Spirit can bring the sinner to the end of himself so that all of his self-hope is dashed upon the rocks of the Law. Only then, through the Spirit's effectual call, will a person fall at the feet of Christ and be able to pray that prayer, "Lord have mercy upon me the sinner. I am ruined eternally apart from your pity and compassion." This fact concerning human inability has caused a number of great divines to say, the hardest prayer in the world is, "Lord have mercy upon me, a sinner." In other words, no one will call upon the Lord out of absolute desperation but a person who has been convicted and prepared by the work of the Holy Spirit. No wonder Jesus said, "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me" (Jn 6:45b).

The manifestation of God in Christ is really what the gospel is about. We find out in the gospel, and by believing the gospel, who God is, what he requires of us, and that the only possible way that requirement can be met is by the redemptive work of our suffering Substitute. We cannot meet that requirement ourselves (Phil 3:9). We think about the sinner under conviction. Remember, the sinner has lived his whole life with unwavering loyalty to self, he has zealously guarded the 'kingdom of his soul' so that nothing should invade the inner world of self and set up its throne there.

To the sinner who has not been convicted or regenerated, the whole thought of God invading the inner man and ruling there is an offensive thought. It's disgusting to the sinner. In fact, he regards it as essential to self-preservation to keep God out of his heart. When David is confessing his sin in Psalm 51, he speaks about the fact that God desires truth (that is the knowledge of Himself) in the inward man. But the sinner, at all costs, wants to keep God out of 'private world' of his heart affections. In light of this, think about how mighty the work of the new birth really is in conquering the sinner's resistance (Titus 3:5ff.).

What a powerful, powerful work that is to purge away in an instant from the heart of the sinner his hostility and enmity toward God (Col 1:21-23). In Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1:15-23, the apostle indicates that the amount of power, the magnitude of divine might needed, to raise Christ from the dead was also exercised in your new birth! That's true of every single sinner. The magnitude of this miracle in saving a sinner is massive: ". . . and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. *These are* in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Eph 1:19-21).

This is why John MacArthur wrote the book "Hard to Believe." The cost to God, to make a Christ-follower (that cost being the cross of Christ) is linked to the cost to believer of following Christ. The death of Christ, and our co-death with Him is necessary to produce the mindset of a true disciple (2 Cor 5:14-15). The world today imagines that belief is simply mental ascent or agreeing with a few facts, as opposed to having your

entire nature changed by God. The thought of God's rightful dominion over the whole man continues to be repellant and repulsive to the sinner until he is convicted, called, and quickened by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:28-30).

An immense aspect of the good news of the gospel is not only that there is a Savior who can take your sin away and bear that sin up to the cross, but also the good news of the gospel is that it comes bringing the power and the ability to meet its demands. In other words, the gospel comes bringing the ability to repent—that is God's power in 'resurrecting' a spiritually dead sinner from the 'tomb' of his depravity (Acts 5:31; 11:18). The gospel comes bringing the gift of faith to the helpless for all those who are God's elect (Jn 1:12-13; Jn 6:37-45, 65; Eph 2:8-9; Phil 1:29). What a powerful truth, no sinner has ever been able to qualify himself for divine favor and acceptance by God. The good news of the gospel is that Christ is our eligibility and qualification for endless installments of grace from God (Eph 2:4-7). But, in order to bring a sinner to that point so as to see his utter dependence, there must be a moral *bankrupting* of the sinner until he finally understands he has no merit or ability to commend himself to God, or even the ability to cooperate with God.

A number of great biblical teachers of the past have described this conviction by the Holy Spirit as occurring in four stages:

1. The sinner comes to know that there is a righteous holy God who is Creator, Ruler, and Judge to whom he is accountable.
2. The sinner comes to know that God requires of him complete obedience and conformity to the moral law of God—and that these commandments comprise God's moral government over every creature.
3. The sinner comes to know that he has habitually broken God's laws and he has real legal guilt before God and is exposed to eternal condemnation.
4. The sinner comes to know that there is nothing he can do to work off his guilt or reverse the desperateness of his dilemma. Only divine mercy can spare him.

Only if the Holy Spirit has taken someone through all four stages will that person be shown Christ's willingness to save them now. In addition, the former divines (such as George Whitfield of the Great Awakening) were excellent at including in their gospel sermons each of the following three points: *ruin by the fall; redemption in Christ; and regeneration by the Spirit*. The third point which focuses upon the Spirit's work, tends to be neglected today. Therefore, there is a great need to recover, and to begin again to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation.

What about living by the gospel once we are saved? Not only is the gospel our entry into the Christian life, and into the body of Christ, the gospel is also our daily food. We turn to the gospel in order to see the richness of Christ's love for us, His

acceptance of us, our adoption in Him, the fact that we are united with Him. But, we ought to remember that the gospel has to be something we feed upon regularly—why? It is because we tend to easily forget it because it is so counterintuitive. Consider the reasoning that we have to deal with every day is, ‘how is it possible that my eternal blessedness, my being the object of God’s infinite love, and the removal of my guilt depends upon the work of Another who suffered agony and humiliation? How is it that my status before God is not carried by me?’

The most requested chapel message at The Master’s University was a message titled, “How to preach the gospel to yourself” by Jerry Bridges. Its popularity outperformed all the other chapel messages because it was something the students desperately needed to hear. In other words, at this highly rated Bible college, the students were hungry to learn the following: *what does the gospel have to do with my daily walk, my fellowship with God, my understanding of how to bring peace to my conscience? How am I to receive His love and assurance? What is the proper way to deal with what remains of my sin? How is the gospel connected to my progressive sanctification? What does the gospel have to do with all of that?*

People pretend to have everything in order—they look fine and peaceful on the outside, but on the inside many Christians are wrestling with thoughts such as: *What do I have to do to please God? What satisfies God? What is necessary for His perfect favor? Why would He want to live with me forever when I am so seriously flawed? How can I gain the overwhelming confidence each day that I’m His beloved child? How can I learn to rely on Christ instead of myself? For, I have fitful starts and stops, and a very disillusioned sense of self in terms of my spotty performance and frequent failures as a Christian.*

These are daily issues. Even Martin Luther admitted that Christians are daily ‘beat up’ by their shortcomings—and that they need to keep looking back at the righteousness that justifies them which is found in Christ (2 Cor 5:21). Luther bids us to consider that the righteousness that we need to pursue in our obedience for progress in our sanctification is a different righteousness than the righteousness that justifies us. The righteousness that justifies us is found in Christ alone—it is an ‘alien righteousness’. In Luther’s fabulous commentary on Galatians, he does a masterful job of distinguishing between justifying righteousness and sanctifying righteousness, and why Christians must be able to distinguish between the two.

In our daily study and feeding upon the gospel, it is important to investigate some of the biblical words for salvation. Scripture has at least 10 different words for salvation. John MacArthur said, “The reason there are so many different words for salvation in the Bible is because each of these words is designed to address a certain facet of our ruin by reason of sin.” Here are some of the terms and metaphors that describe Salvation: **Purchase** - Salvation is a purchase. In fact, the word redemption is drawn from economics. Redemption means a price paid to purchase someone out of

slavery. And in our case, it we were purchased out of the slave market of sin. Christ redeemed us from our sin, redeemed us from the curse of the law (Gal 3:13). The price of our redemption was His shed blood. Being redeemed by Him means that we have been set free from our slavery to sin, to guilt, to self, and to Satan. **Justification** - Justification is a verdict about us. It is a legal pronouncement in which God declares the sinner to be just in His sight. The justified person's sin is removed, and that person is declared right with God's righteousness—and right in the sight of God's law. The term justification is a forensic term taken from the law courts. **Reconciliation** – Reconciliation is a return to friendship and favor after an offense that produced alienation. The work of Christ applied to us has the effect upon a believing sinner of restoring fellowship and friendship with God (2 Cor 5:18-21).

Salvation is a purchase (redemption), a verdict (justification) and a reconciliation (restored fellowship). It is also the satisfying of God's justice and wrath by the propitiation that Christ offered in his death. Christ's atoning work quenches God's wrath; it is a pacifying of God's justice against us as sinners who sinned against Him our whole lives (Rom 3:24-26). The biblical proof that God is satisfied with Christ's work, and that He has grace for the believing sinner is that he has raised Christ from the dead (Rom 4:25). The Father has fully accepted Christ's sacrifice on behalf of all who believe.

When we think about being a gospel-centered Christian, it is absolutely essential to think in terms of Christ's finished work because many professing believers are not really living grace-based lives. They spend a tremendous amount of their time defending against a sense of judgment. In other words, they are not feeding their consciences on the gospel but instead upon the dry husks of carnal reasoning. For example, they reason: *I am OK with God because I have not done that sin for two weeks. Or, I am OK because I am doing better than the hypocritical 'Christians' around me. Or, I will let my present trouble be a kind of payment for my moral failures.* A lot of the words they speak to themselves involve listening to themselves all the time instead of preaching the gospel to themselves. They spend a massive amount of emotional energy justifying themselves, attempting to defend themselves against a sense of recrimination, guilt and disqualification. This is not the best way to handle falling short. We must turn again to the gospel—turn to Christ. Otherwise, we will be trying to bribe our conscience with something less than the blood of Christ. Carnal ways of managing guilt are not gospel-centered nor honoring to God, nor can a carnal approach supply the power needed for obedience.

Gospel-related questions which are useful for a disciple and a disciple-maker:

1. How would I know if I'm living a 'grace-based' Christian life? In part, the answer is that the gospel will be central in your walk, worship, witness, worldview, and spiritual warfare—and in doing the will of God. For, the gospel enables us to be

centered upon the work of God, and upon the wonder of God in the giving of Christ. The gospel is to be very central in our thought life, it is how we bring balance to the spreadsheet of conscience. Luther warned that if the law crawls up to reign as 'king' in the conscience, there will be bondage. The gospel must reign as king in the conscience, for when the gospel reigns as king in the conscience, Christ reigns as King in the conscience (*Galatians Commentary*).

2. How does the gospel translate into gospel living? In other words, what believing thoughts about the gospel are necessary for it to translate into grace-based living?
3. How does the guilt exchange which Christ accomplished at Calvary actually translate into living an exchange life? This is what Paul talked about in Gal. 2:20, "For I've been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." Christ is living his life through me, by Christ's Spirit, He is expressing his personality, His virtues, and His love and power through me. What does that look like, and how does that take place?
4. How is Christ's death my death to sin and self? How is it that Christ's death was necessary to put to death the tyranny of my sin, self-life, and self-love?
5. How is the gospel vital to my sanctification, what role does it play so that I'm actually being conformed to the image of Christ?
6. How is the big "I," the self-absorbed "me," replaced by Christ? Note now this is very close to what is taught in Romans chapter six on co-crucifixion. Paul says that he lives by faith in the Son of God who loved him and was willing to be betrayed on his behalf (Gal. 2:20)
7. How does the Holy Spirit actualize our identification with Christ? We are in union with him—the true believer possesses a very radical, oneness, an organic union with Christ. His life is shared by us now. And how does the Holy Spirit actualize that shared life so the power the believer needs to obey, and to walk in worship is available? How does our union with Christ provide the power one needs to proclaim the gospel and to put sin to death, . . . how does the Holy Spirit bring that enablement into your life so you can experience it?
8. How does the Holy Spirit use the Word of God to do that?
9. Our culture, through advertisement, entertainment, politics, and the academy, is all about the enhancement of self, the augmentation of self, the satisfaction of self, and the promotion of self. How does the gospel deliver us from this self-seeking so that we truly are seeking first the Lord and his Kingdom (Mt 6:33), seeking first to know the Lord (Hos 6:3), and seeking to please Him as our ambition (2 Cor 5:9)? How does the gospel reverse all of this so that we are no longer controlled by our culture's values?