

The Gospel

By Todd Pruitt

What good does it do to me to tell me that the type of religion presented in the Bible is a very fine type of religion and that the thing for me to do is just to start practicing that type of religion now?...I will tell you, my friend. It does me not one tiniest little bit of good...What I need first of all is not exhortation, but a gospel, not directions for saving myself but knowledge of how God has saved me. Have you any good news? That is the question that I ask of you. I know your exhortations will not help me. But if anything has been done to save me, will you not tell me the facts?

J. Gresham Machen

What exactly is the gospel? One pastor I know of asks all those coming for membership in his church to explain the Gospel in less than 30 seconds. To his disappointment, he has found that many confessing Christians are unable to articulate the very heart of Christianity. Some think that the gospel is any “God talk.” In other words, any conversation or sermon that mentions God or quotes Scripture is “the gospel.” I have heard pastors praised for “really preaching the gospel” when the death of Christ for sinners was never even mentioned. It seems that “gospel” has come to be a generic word describing any talk of God or mention of the Bible however general it may be. The Scriptures however are quite clear about the gospel:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved...For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures (I Cor 15:1-2a, 3-4).

The gospel is this: Christ died for sinners and rose again in victory over death. It is the centerpiece of the Bible, the fount of hope for the sinner, and the right preoccupation of the believer. The gospel is not just another word for discipleship or Christian ethics, although rightly believed will surely give birth to Christ-likeness. The Gospel is not something we do. It is something we believe. The message of the Gospel is, “God did all that was needed for your salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ. Now stop working for it, humble yourself and believe.” This is hard for self-justifying sinners to receive.

The Gospel is Jesus hanging dead on a Roman cross in our place. The Gospel is Jesus paying the wages of sin so that we would not have to. We are called simply to believe. This is the offense of grace: it affirms our utter incompetence to behave our way into God’s favor. Speaking of salvation Paul wrote, “So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Rom 9:16). The Gospel is the announcement that all working for salvation must cease and that humble faith in the Savior who died in the place of sinners must prevail.

Scripture has harsh words for any who would distort the gospel. In his frustration with the Galatian’s willingness to believe “another gospel” Paul writes,

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.
- Galatians 1:6-9

Paul repeats himself in order that there will be no confusion: distorting the content of the gospel of Christ is a grave matter with eternal consequences. This is a strong reminder that Christianity is not a matter of sentiment or good intentions. It is a religion of revealed truth where the content of doctrine is of monumental importance. J.I Packer has written,

Modern man, skeptical and indifferent as he is to dogmatic pronouncements about the supernatural order, may find it hard to take seriously the idea that one's eternal welfare may depend on what one believes; but the apostles were sure that it was so. Theological error was to them a grim reality, as was the spiritual shipwreck which comes in its wake (Fundamentalism..., 43).

Any language that confuses the Gospel, the doing and dying of Christ, with human action is a distortion of the Gospel. That said, right belief in the gospel will result in grateful, Christ-honoring, and neighbor-loving action. Therefore, the Gospel goes far beyond the borders of an invitation to receive Christ. The Gospel is the controlling motif for how Christians are to live. We forgive because in Christ we have been forgiven. We exercise mercy because through Christ God has been merciful to us. So, while it is true that the Gospel is about what God has done it comes to color and shape all that His people do.

How are we to expect the gospel to be kept alive in the world if we do not hand it on to the next generation as the former generation handed it down to us. Oh, shall it ever be said a century hence, "The people of 1880 never thought of us of 1980, they let the gospel go: they allowed the doctrines to be denied one after another"?

- Charles Spurgeon