

# Four American Gospels

Matt. 19:16-30 // What is the Gospel // 3.12.23

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## **Community Guide Questions:**

- Which of the four gospels did you grow up with?
  - HINT: Which one evoked most emotions? – anxiety? anger? etc? —
- What are some positives from it that you are thankful for?
- What are some ways it may have limited your discipleship to Jesus?
- How would you summarize the Gospel?

- What do you think of when I say the word “Grill”
  - Barbecue
  - Front of a car
  - for teeth
- **Certain words make us think of different things because of our context or upbringing.**
  - If you grew up in a family that loved the 4th of July, you probably thought of a BBQ
  - If you grew up in a family that loved cars/engineer, you probably thought of the front of a car.
  - if you grew up in an urban setting with friends of different ethnicities, you probably thought of teeth
- Most people would not think “gospel” is one of those words but I would propose that it is.
  - Based on your upbringing or context, when you hear the word “Gospel” you think of different things.
  - If I asked 10 of you to give your definition of the gospel, I would get mostly, 10 different answers.
  - If you have been a christian for some time, this might be surprising to you.
- Over the next 9 weeks we will be answering the question: **What is the Gospel?**
  - We just finished a series going through Philippians learning about what it means to be “Partners in the Gospel”.
  - We cannot effectively partner in something we do not share the same background, assumptions, and understanding.
- One of the best ways to learn what something is, begins with learning what it isn’t.
- Today, we are going to compare and contrast between some of the most popular summaries of the gospel in the American church.
  - This compare and contrast model was used by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to push back on interpretations of Scripture that were off base: **“You have heard it said, but I say to you.”**
  - This morning is my best effort to do the same with what I believe are misinterpretations or caricatured versions of the gospel in our time.
- It is my conviction that much of what American Christians call “the gospel” is not wrong, but it’s not the gospel of Jesus. N.T. Wright:
  - ***The word ‘gospel’ come to denote something that in older theology would be called... an order of salvation. [For many] ‘The gospel’ is a description of how people get saved...in some people’s language, Christ takes our sin and we his righteousness; in other people’s language, Jesus becomes my personal savior; in other language, I admit my sin, believe that he died for me, and commit my life to him. In many church circles, if you hear something like that, people will say that ‘the gospel’ has been preached. ...I am perfectly comfortable with what people normally mean when they say ‘the gospel’. I just don’t think it is what Paul means. In other words, I am not denying that the usual meanings are things that people ought to say, to preach about, to believe. I simply wouldn’t use the word ‘gospel’ to denote those things.***<sup>1</sup>
- **DISCLAIMER:** Much of the content of this sermon was brought together by another pastor from Portland, I asked for his notes and permission to take from and edit them for this sermon.
  - He graciously gave me his notes and his blessing.
  - This is not my normal practice. Normally, I write my own messages with God for you because God has called me to speak a word to this church.
  - When I heard this sermon, I felt that it said something that we as a church need to hear and I think he did a better job I could have done on my own.

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<sup>1</sup> What Saint Paul Said. pg. (Loc 630f)

## I. Matthew 19:16-30

- A. We have to ask, “What does it mean to be “saved?” and this will make some of you nervous:
1. Does it mean, go to heaven when you die?
  2. Or have your sins justified?
  3. Or something else?
- B. In **v16**, the man asks Jesus, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”
1. This is the dream question! The question you secretly hope your neighbor or co-worker or grandchild will ask you; “What good thing must I do to get eternal life?”
  2. And based on many’s church experience, I know what Jesus is supposed to say:
    - a) **“Do? You don’t need to do anything. That’s religion. Works based righteousness. Not the gospel. I’m about to do it all for you on the cross. All you need to do is believe.”**
  3. Does Jesus say that? No. Jesus messes up our theology.
    - a) Jesus tells him to keep the ten commandments.
    - b) In **v20** the man says, **“All these I have kept. What do I still lack?”**
      - (1) Jesus doesn’t tell him he’s wrong.
      - (2) But He and Jesus are both aware there’s more to it than the ten commandments.
  4. Then Jesus tells him to sell all his possessions, and apprentice under him.
- C. What is going on here?
1. The man is not asking, **“How do I go to heaven when I die?”**
    - a) The Jews were waiting on pins & needles for the Messiah to arrive and bring in the long anticipated reign of God, a kingdom of peace, justice and love.
    - b) He’s asking, **“What must I do to make sure I’m a part of that kingdom?”**
  2. The phrase **“eternal life”** is notoriously difficult to translate into English.
    - a) We tend to think of it as meaning life forever and ever.
    - b) But a growing number of scholars argue a better translation is “the life of the age to come.” It is more qualitative than quantitative.
    - c) Why should we think this? Because of how Jesus defines it:
      - (1) The one time eternal life is defined in the NT and it’s by Jesus himself in **Jn. 17:3**:
      - (2) **This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and the one you have sent—Jesus Christ.**
      - (3) Jesus says that Eternal life is knowing God; not knowing *about* God.
- D. **“eternal life” (16) = “the kingdom of God” (23-24) = “salvation” (25)** are interchangeable.
1. This is so helpful because it explains why Jesus’ primary message was the kingdom
    - a) BUT Paul’s primary message is salvation.
    - b) AND the John’s primary message is eternal life.
  2. They are different ways of saying the same thing.
  3. Jesus’ summary of the gospel isn’t one-size-fits-all. There’s room to contextualize the gospel to Greco-Romans or secular Seattle.
- E. Still, Jesus answers the man’s question wildly different than I would expect...
1. Could Jesus’ be thinking of something different than us when he uses the word, “Gospel?”

• **With the rest of our time I’m going to do my best to articulate the four American gospels... all four of which, I would believe are a shrunken or misunderstood versions of the Jesus gospel.**

• **Two disclaimers before we dive in:**

• **1. This is going to feel more like a lecture than a sermon.**

• **2. This is going to feel like a bit like a critique, and I hate that...**

• **My heart is not, “All these people are wrong, we’re right.**

• **My heart is pastoral; I want to pastor you into a life of discipleship to Jesus, and it’s my experience that all four of these misunderstandings of the gospel, block people from following Jesus more deeply.**

- *My heart is not to criticize people you look up to or I look up to*
- *OR minimize your experience of following Jesus*
- *It's to help us see more than we did before.*
- *My agenda is not to call out other churches or preachers, it's to call you to follow Jesus.*
- *Please extend me charity & listen graciously.*
- *The four American gospels:*
  - *The John 3:16 gospel*
  - *The reformed gospel*
  - *The prosperity gospel*
  - *And the social gospel*

## II. "John 3:16 Gospel"

- A. This is my mentor, Dr. Gerry Breshears, term. It might be called the "Simple Gospel" or the "evangelical gospel".
- B. Popular level summary:
  1. You are a sinner going to hell
  2. God loves you
  3. Jesus died on the cross for your sins
  4. If you believe in him, you will go to heaven when you die
  5. Usually followed by some version of the sinner's prayer.
- C. **History**
  1. This version of the gospel rose to prominence after WW2 with the rise of what cultural analysts call "mass culture." It was an attempt to simplify the gospel into an appealing and accessible message for the masses.
- D. **Pros:**
  1. Personal conversion.
    - a) I take that for granted because I grew up in this gospel culture...
    - b) but those of you who were baptized as infants or grew up Catholic or Mainline know, there's often no moment of commitment to follow Jesus.
  2. Personal evangelism
    - a) Because it is simple it makes evangelism easy.
    - b) Programs like "Evangelism Explosion" teach people how to share this version of the gospel.
    - c) I've seen this as a growing weakness in my generation.
- E. **Cons:**
  1. Not the gospel Jesus himself preached; if you search for this formulation in the gospels or the NT, you simply won't find it.
  2. But the problem is less that it's wrong, more that it's shrunken.
    - a) Salvation for Jesus...
      - (1) It isn't about getting you out of hell but hell out of you.
      - (2) Isn't about getting you into heaven, but getting heaven into you.
      - (3) It's not about us going up there, but heaven coming down here.
      - (4) It's not just about a transaction, but a transformation.
      - (5) And not just about the transformation of the individual soul, but the entire world...
      - (6) Not just about going to church after you are "saved," but about being baptized into the family of God, with God as your father and other followers of Jesus as your brothers and sisters.
  3. There's no call to discipleship.
    - a) The satirical website The Babylon Bee once had an article entitled "***Bible Lacking Sinners Prayer Returned for Full Refund.***" In it, a fictional disgruntled customer says, "I searched that Bible through and through and couldn't find anything about a magic

prayer I could use to lead people to say in order to instantly get them into heaven and have them be forevermore secure in their eternal salvation no matter what their life looks like afterward.”

- b) When people in this vein ask, “Is \_\_\_\_\_ saved?” What they are really asking is, “Do they meet the minimum entrance requirements to get into heaven?”
  - (1) This view misunderstands salvation as a Frequent Flyer status, where you have to make sure you travel a certain number of miles a year to keep getting the benefits.
  - (2) Salvation is about knowing God, and being known by God. Through union with God, the healing of our soul.
  - (3) Not “sin management” and fire insurance.
- 4. Disconnected from the story of the Bible
  - a) The Bible is a grand story, you have to map an idea like “the forgiveness of sins” onto a larger story. Paul does that in his summary of the gospel in **1 Cor. 15:1-5**, one of his best gospel summaries:
    - (1) Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you, which you received, on which you have taken your stand and by which you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: 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...**
    - (a) Paul uses the phrase “**According to the scriptures**” twice. Why?
    - (b) It is Paul’s shorthand for the story of the OT in the scriptures. A story about the creation of Eden, humans designed to live in the kingdom with God, to rule, together in loving community... but who through sin were shut out of the Garden, and infected with a kind of spiritual disease.
  - b) The Greek word for sin literally means “to miss the mark.”
  - c) It begs the question: what’s the mark?
    - (1) Is the mark going to heaven when you die?
    - (2) OR becoming a person of love as a part of a new Jew + Gentile family?
- F. This is the version of the Gospel that I grew up with and I imagine, many of you did.
  - 1. Jesus used it to bring me into relationship with Himself, as he did for many of you.
  - 2. Please do not hear me invalidating your life with God. That’s not my intention.
    - a) My intention is to help you see where it falls short & invite you further up and further in.
    - b) I’m not telling you that there is less but that there is more.

### III. Reformed Gospel

- A. This label is not mine; it’s used by a number of Reformed, or Calvinist, preachers, denominations and church planting organizations.
- B. Popular level summary:
  - 1. God is a perfect, holy, just God of both love and wrath.
  - 2. You are morally guilty before him. God’s demands must be kept.
  - 3. You cannot possibly do it; but Jesus did it for you on the cross.
- C. This equates the preaching of the gospel with the preaching of a cluster of Reformed doctrines – specifically, justification.
  - 1. Albert Mohler Jr. – president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary – put it:
    - a) Justification by faith alone is not one doctrine among others. It is not merely one way of describing the gospel. It is the gospel.**
  - 2. Or John Piper, whose work I am very thankful for, in his book *God is the Gospel*:
    - a) I am thrilled to call justification the heart of the gospel.**
  - 3. Now, to clarify, justification is not a Reformed doctrine; it’s a NT doctrine, but it’s not used nearly as much in the NT as people think:

- a) 1 time by Jesus in all four gospels, in **Luke 18** about the Pharisee and the publican.
  - b) More by Paul, but only in two of his letters, **Galatians** and **Romans**. After that it's used once in Philippians and once in 1 Corinthians, but not at all in his other ten letters.
  - c) It's never used once by John or Peter or the other NT authors.
  - d) Which is pretty strange if it "is the gospel."
4. While justification is a NT word/teaching, the understanding of what justification means differs a little bit in different church traditions and at different times in church history.
- a) In the Reformed view, Jesus has earned merit on your behalf through living the sinless life you never could, and in the heavenly courtroom of a holy God, he has imputed that merit over onto you, dying in your place, so that you are now declared righteous – that's what the word justified means – in God's eyes, by sheer grace, unearned favor, not by works, or earning merit. Because of Jesus' death, it's "just as if you never sinned."
  - b) There's a more toxic version of this that comes from the hyper-masculine fringe of the Reformed church, that comes off a bit like, "You're so evil and God is so mad at you that he had to kill Jesus."
    - (1) This is more pagan than Christian, because it presents God as an angry tyrant in the sky, but he has a nice side, and so he killed his son instead of you.
    - (2) This is not the serious Christian view that you see in the best of the Reformed tradition, but there's enough of it that we must remember that John 3:16 is very clear that God loved (not hated) the world by giving his one and only son.

**D. Pros:**

- 1. Emphasis on the cross.
  - a) In Paul's writings, the cross becomes shorthand for the whole. For Paul, the cross doesn't just mean Jesus' death, but all of his life and teaching, work, resurrection and exaltation.
  - b) The Cross was Jesus coronation.
- 2. Sin and moral guilt
  - a) The Reformed tradition has a sophisticated view of moral guilt, which our generation is sorely lacking.
  - b) It also has a means to deal with that guilt. Which our generation is also sorely lacking in the honor/shame culture of social media.
- 3. God's wrath
  - a) Is all over Scripture; and it rightly sees God's wrath as an expression of his love, not his anger.
    - (1) the fierceness of a parent toward a wayward child, emotionally offended, yet deeply invested in their good.
  - b) This is a much-needed counterbalance to the liberal redefinition of God's love as a kind of lazy tolerance that is okay with whatever as long as people are basically nice...

**E. Cons:**

- 1. Like the John 3:16 Gospel, the problem is less that it's wrong, and more that it's too small.
- 2. Hard to find in Jesus' preaching. He used the word justification one time.
  - a) He simply didn't go around beating up on self-effort.
  - b) Can you imagine Jesus ending the Sermon on the Mount with his famous climax:
    - (1) ***"Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man... but everyone who hears these words and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man...."***
    - (2) ***... But don't worry, I'm about to do it all for you, and you don't need to actually do anything because that's works based righteousness and it's dangerous."***
  - c) It's unimaginable that Jesus would ever say something like that.
- 3. Lack of Discipleship
  - a) This reading of justification defines "works" in Paul's writings as self-effort in general, and then self-effort = earning, which is a massive problem.

- (1) This doesn't make sense because Jesus tells us to do things, constantly. The NT is full of commands. Even demands upon our moral and social lives.
- (2) Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning.<sup>2</sup>**
  - (a) Don't confuse
  - b) The danger with this version is it can sabotage discipleship, because following Jesus is something you do, and if you're constantly told, **"It's not about what we do it's about what God has done for us..."** you can end up with a very passive version of Christianity.
    - (1) Sadly, this has the potential to produce christians who consume Jesus' merit without following their master.

## IV. Prosperity Gospel

- A. Also called "health and wealth" or "word of faith"
  - 1. Wikipedia defines it as:
    - a) ***A religious belief among some Protestant Christians that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for them... The atonement... is interpreted to include the alleviation of sickness and poverty, which are viewed as curses to be broken by faith. This is believed to be achieved through donations of money, visualization, and positive confession.***
  - 2. The popular version sounds something like this:
    - a) God loves you and is for you. You're his child.
    - b) Through his death and resurrection he won the victory.
    - c) His victory is your inheritance by faith. Victory over sickness. Over poverty. Over failure. The best is yet to come.
  - 3. Dr. Kate Bowler from Duke is the leading scholar in the world on the prosperity gospel. In her book ***Blessed*** she has four markers of the prosperity gospel:
    - a) Faith (belief)
    - b) Health
    - c) Wealth
    - d) (and) Victory
  - 4. She separates it into two camps: **hard prosperity** and **soft prosperity**.
    - a) **Hard prosperity** is the original version; more heretical and therefore more fringe:
      - (1) It uses language like the law of the tithe, and there's usually a very blatant, "Give God a hundred dollars in faith and you'll get back a thousand..." kind of thing, most of which is a flagrant con from televangelists and con artists in the name of Jesus.
      - (2) **Hard prosperity** was mostly discredited through the televangelist scandals of the 80's, such as the Bakers and others. But is still around in some circles.
    - b) In its place has come **soft prosperity**, which is...
      - (1) Less heretical, if at all.
      - (2) It's more therapeutic. More focused on principles for emotional and relational health and success.
      - (3) More mainstream in its culture; lots of celebrities are involved.
      - (4) Studies show that 17% of Americans identify with the prosperity gospel.
  - 5. And those who preach it often gain fabulous wealth: **Costi Hinn**, in his memoir ***God, Greed, and the Prosperity Gospel***, about growing up working for his uncle, Benni Hinn, said:
    - a) ***Growing up in the Hinn family empire was like belonging to some hybrid of the royal family and the mafia. Our lifestyle was lavish, our loyalty was enforced, and our version of the gospel was big business. Though Jesus Christ was still a part of our gospel, he was more of a magic genie than the King of Kings. Rubbing him the right way—by giving money and having enough faith—would unlock your spiritual***

<sup>2</sup> Willard, Dallas. *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (p. 61). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

***inheritance. God's goal was not his glory but our gain. His grace was not to set us free from sin but to make us rich. The abundant life he offered wasn't eternal, it was now. We lived the prosperity gospel.***<sup>3</sup>

- B. **Pros:**... Let me attempt a gracious interpretation of what's good about it:
1. It's emphasis on a loving God who is for you, even through hardship... beautiful and true
  2. It's faith that God can do miracles. Which, he can and does.
  3. Its holistic view of human flourishing: prosperity churches have often been quick to start a wide array of social services; they've also been on the forefront of multiethnic church...
- C. **Cons:**
1. Again, it's simply not the gospel Jesus preached and not even close to the life Jesus lived. Jesus was effectively homeless.
  2. It sets people up for disillusionment.
    - a) What do you think if Paul and the apostles and the millions of Christian martyrs heard this version of the gospel?
    - b) It is a crisis of faith waiting to happen, because it's a fantasy, not reality.  
**(1) Jesus called us to take up our cross, not our Tesla.**
  3. This gospel is often guilty of baptizing the worst of American culture, namely materialism, and in doing so, leading people to greater bondage, not freedom.

## V. Social Gospel

- A. Also known as the liberation gospel.
1. This gospel sits inside an essentially soft-Marxist worldview that sees all of human history as a struggle for power between oppressed and oppressor.
  2. It views most relationships through the grid of power dynamics.
- B. It sounds something like this:
1. Jesus was a political revolutionary who came to liberate the poor and marginalized from the hierarchy of oppression.
  2. He was killed as a threat to the status quo of Empire.
  3. But he inaugurated a kingdom of peace and justice and equality.
  4. America is the latest iteration in a long line of Empires.
  5. Jesus is on the march now, as he was then, to stand up against those who abuse power, and liberate those on the margins, such as the poor, the immigrant and refugee, the LGBTQ community, and many more...
  6. The church's role is essentially an activist role to move America toward a progressive and socialist political model.
- C. **Pros:** Charitable first:
1. It uses the language of the kingdom
    - a) This version understands that the kingdom isn't about us going to heaven, but heaven coming to us.
    - b) It understands that you can't separate the preaching of the gospel from the demonstration of the gospel.
      - (1) Jesus said we will be known by our love for one another.
      - (2) Jesus invited the world to critique us not on our doctrinal sophistication but by our love for one another.
  2. It has a sophisticated view not only of individual sin but institutional/communal sin.
    - a) Sin impacts not just individuals, but families, cities, ethnicities, and generations.
  3. Emphasis on the dignity of all people.
  4. Its courage to call out racism, sexism, classism, militarism, even in the church.
  5. It's a great reminder of how Jesus radically subverted the world's models of power.
    - a) It allows us to critique our nations and politics

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/october/benny-hinn-costi-uncle-prosperity-preaching-testimony.html>



D. **Cons:** BUT there are all sorts of massive problems with this gospel:

1. Jesus' message was not primarily political.
    - a) Why didn't he go to Rome? Why stay, for the most part, up in Galilee?
    - b) Why does his approach toward politics seem to be one of intentional indifference? He simply refused to engage in the political activism of his day.
  2. Jesus was not a progressive, by the current moral definition of that word.
  3. It's compromise with theological liberalism...
    - a) You can trace the liberation gospel back to the early 1900's in NY; where there was a growing schism in the church between conservatives who emphasized the individual sin, like the evangelical and reformed churches, and liberals from mainline churches who emphasized the institutional sin.
    - b) A pastor named Walter Rauschenbusch coined the phrase social gospel, at his church in Hell's Kitchen, in a noble attempt to call out the way many Christians in his city had just accepted social evils such as child labor.
      - (1) But sadly, he also denied the atonement and the Bible as scripture.
    - c) The church died and in the 70s and became a gay nightclub.
    - d) That's not uncommon: almost all churches that have gone liberal have died.**
  4. The social gospel leaves a track record of burnout; because, left unchecked, it can become a kind of salvation by works... as the Reformed crew would warn.
  5. But again: the main problem is equating discipleship with political activism.
- Lecture over. Thank you for your patience.
  - Which of the four gospels do you find yourself believing at times?
    - Likely, the one made you the most emotional – whether you were feeling anxiety or anger...
  - My best guess is that most of our church grew up with the John 3:16 or Reformed gospels:
  - Some are moving toward the prosperity or social gospels because of the pros.
    - **BUT the answer to one distortion of the gospel isn't another distortion of the gospel; it's rediscovering Jesus' gospel.**
  - Every generation has to do the work to disentangle the gospel from its cultural influence.
  
  - At DMGC, we want to be partners in the Gospel of Jesus, all of us living and breathing the same Biblical Gospel. So when we hear Gospel, we all think of the same thing. The same "grill."
    - **We must do this because all of us...**
      - religious or not,
      - serious followers of Jesus or nominal believers
    - **... base our lives on some kind of a gospel some good news that we believe holds in it the power to fulfill our deepest desires for a meaningful human life.**
      - It could be the gospel of Jesus,
      - or the gospel of upward mobility,
      - or career success,
      - or the career success of your kids.
      - or the gospel of the Left,
      - or the Right
      - or sexual identity, etc.
  - Who or what are you looking to for salvation?
    - **The gospel you live in is the gospel you live out.**
  
  - We want to be fully united in our shared understanding of THE Gospel
    - Over the next 9 weeks, we are going to flesh out our understanding of the Gospel from Acts 2 the paradigmatic teaching of the Gospel.
    - As we go through it,

- ... most of you will discover is that your understanding of the Gospel are not wrong but will be helpfully reframed and filled out.
- For those of you questioning christianity or with family, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, who are questioning christianity. Who feel like they have already tried Jesus...
  - My prayer is that you will discover that you are rejecting a caricature, not the good news of Jesus taught in the Bible.
- So what is the Gospel? We'll take most of the next 9 weeks to answer that question...
- BUT I'll give a preview:
  - **The gospel is the news/announcement that God's reign has returned in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord and Messiah, in fulfillment of Israel's Scriptures.**
  - **We respond to it with repentance, faith/allegiance, and discipleship;**
  - **It produces salvation, forgiveness, and the gift of the Holy Spirit all experienced in the life of a new community, the church.**
- Today is the perfect day to start this series because we are celebrating the how Jesus told us to commemorate following Him.
  - Somewhere along the way, we replaced Baptism, as with the sinners prayer as a symbol of our marker of following Jesus.
  - Prayer is a great places to start, but Baptism is meant to be the marker.
    - Like a wedding to a marriage; baptism is to following Jesus.