

LESSON 5

What is “The Gospel” We’re Holding To?

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: 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, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time.

— 1 Corinthians 15:1-6

Introduction

As we are nearing the halfway point in our exploration of *Truth and Love in Action*, perhaps it’s time to examine the main reason we’re discussing this subject. We’re here because of the gospel message. The bible reveals who we are and illuminates our situation before God. The gospel provides our purpose and marching orders as we live in a world that has forgotten about God, the Creator and Sustainer.

What is the Gospel?

Just what *is* the gospel? We use the word rather loosely in our society today, and many seem to apply it to any happy message or even secular ‘good news’. There is only one truly *good news*, reserved for God’s most important message to mankind. It’s not the reason for creation nor why we were created, but it is closely related. It reveals how we can fulfill our true purpose and live with our Creator, as was always intended. It is the key to our spiritual survival.

Many have sought to change the gospel by diluting its simple message, complicating it, or completely thwarting its purpose for selfish human gain. Regardless, it is intended to be heard and accepted by all men, and it is the responsibility of all believers to spread this message to everyone we know God made us all very different. There is a tremendous variety of physical, mental, intellectual, and spiritual qualities that separate us. As such, we have different abilities, face different crises and challenges, see our environment differently, and have equipped ourselves with varying degrees of God’s resources.

Lost in Sin

We were made to be with God, our Father. Man’s philosophies notwithstanding, we are the central feature of His creation, made in His image and designed to have a loving relationship with Him. However, the bible clearly states that all of us have lost this relationship with God and therefore the primary purpose in life:

But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.

- **Isaiah 59:2**

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – everyone – to his own way; and the Lord had laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

- **Isaiah 53:6**

The bible is also very clear that man stands condemned before God due to his sin:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

– **Romans 3:23**

Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through Me.’

– **John 14:6**

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

– **Romans 6:23**

Sin is not just breaking God’s laws. It is destroying one’s relationship with God. It leaves a person alone and defenseless in an unforgiving world, exposed to the schemes of Satan and enslaved to sin. God knew this was the path for all men and so solved this problem even before it began. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the pronouncement that God has provided the one and only way for man to be freed from this “body of death” and the penalty of sin. The core message of this good news is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for our sins and rose from the dead to reconcile humanity to the Father. Scripture describes the clear and concise gospel message:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

— **John 3:16**

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: 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.

— **1 Corinthians 15:3-4**

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

— **Romans 1:16**

The Good News

The term "gospel" literally translates in English to "good news". The word is derived from the Greek *εὐαγγέλιον* (*euangélion*), which is related to our words “evangelize” (to preach) and “angel” (messenger). The gospel is the foundational statement from God that outlines His plan to reconcile mankind to Himself, restoring us to a proper relationship and allowing us to live with Him for eternity. It is not a formula. It’s not a methodology. It’s not a set of rules and regulations. It doesn’t involve a

program and does not require a creed or mantra. It's simply the most powerful and important statement ever made by God to mankind. It has no goals other than its simply stated intentions. It does not need any additions, subtractions, or adjustments. It does not require our commentary or approval. It doesn't even need our acceptance or acquiescence (although God will keep record of our response to it).

The story of the gospel doesn't just start with the human life of Jesus. The thread of the gospel is woven throughout the entire Bible, even from the beginning of Genesis. It began even before creation. Listen to the following scriptures:

All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

– **Revelation 13:8**

...but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you.

– **I Peter 1:19-20**

...who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began...

– **2 Timothy 1:9**

Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.

– **Ephesians 1:4**

It becomes clear that the idea of man's need for redemption from sin was long in the minds of the Father and Son, even before the world began. When God's mind first conceived of creation, man was its focus. So was the foreknowledge that the man He would create would fall into sin and selfishly reject God's rule. Why is this so? If we were created exactly as God intended, how can such a problem (or 'defect', if you will) be included in His design?

The simple answer is **free will**. Genesis 1:26 and 27 tell us that we were made in His image. We are obviously not made to physically resemble God (He is a spirit), but we share many of His spiritual qualities. We can think, reason, and act in a purposeful fashion. But the most important and powerful gift He has given us is free will. Free will allows us to make limitless choices in life, about nearly everything. Free will allows us to control our personal environment and steer our lives through each day. We are made to be curious, and free will allows us to satisfy that curiosity. It is why we are all different and have differing likes and dislikes.

Free will is one of the ways we are most like God. Of course, with such a great power as *choice* comes great responsibility. It allows us to choose good or evil, right or wrong, action or inaction, and acceptance or rejection. We were made this way so in love we could intentionally choose to accept a relationship with our Father and not be mindless automatons, which have no choice. Because of this beautiful and comfortable world in which we live, it becomes easy to direct all our actions toward serving our own pleasures rather than God. It is not intuitively natural to altruistically serve God and serve our fellow man, but that is exactly what is asked and required of us.

Any thinking being who exercises free will cannot perfectly control it and will eventually choose to act selfishly, leading to sin. Free will is so strong that God must use His most powerful tool (or quality) to rescue us from destruction – **grace**. If you consider it, we would not have needed God's grace if we had not been given free will. God's grace reveals His mercy and provides for the offer of salvation. All of these: exercising free will, accepting grace, accepting mercy, and accepting salvation, are left to the individual to choose...accept or reject. Adam and Eve didn't mindlessly play "eenie meenie miny moe" with God's command and somehow landed on "sin". They were enticed by their innate selfish nature and gave in. Remember:

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

- James 1:14-15

We should not judge them and bemoan their choice. All of us would have done the same thing eventually.

Five Stages Toward Restoration

So, when we look at the state of man's soul, we see 5 stages toward his restoration:

- **Recognition** of one's sinful state and separation from God.
- **Restitution** must be sought after by sinful man to solve the problem of sin; the consequence of this separation from a holy God by sin is both physical and spiritual death (the 'first' and 'second death'); man must desire to once again be restored to God and seek a pathway to do so.
- **Remedy:** the appearance of the person Jesus Christ - fully God and fully man, yet sinless; He died on the cross as an atoning sacrifice and was resurrected from the dead (putting an end to death's power) to return to the Father and reign in heaven.
- **Response:** our acceptance of this remedy in repentance and faith; Salvation is not earned through good works, but given through God's grace, a gift if we will accept.

This results in our reconciliation with God and eternal life with the Father and Son; those who believe are forgiven, adopted as children of God, and granted eternal life and peace in heaven

This is the pathway that God planned. Unfortunately, many people cannot fully subjugate their wills to such a simple plan. Feeling themselves to be as wise as God, they choose to change or complicate the straightforward gospel message for selfish gain, compromise, or *avoidable* ignorance.

False Human Interpretations of the True Gospel

Let's discuss some of the more common philosophies that create false human interpretations of the true gospel:

- **The Prosperity Gospel or "Health and Wealth" gospel:** This idea claims that faith in Jesus guarantees financial wealth, material success, and physical health. It reduces the gospel message into a transactional tool for worldly gain rather than spiritual reconciliation. There might be talk of salvation, but not without "gaining the whole world in the process. Faith and necessary financial giving become keys to open these doors to material wealth, physical healing, and worldly success and power. No treasures are ever stored in heaven, as the hearts of these believers were never there.
- **"Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" or moralistic behavioral modification** The belief that you earn God's favor or maintain your salvation strictly by being a "good person" and following certain rules, rather than relying entirely on Christ's sacrifice. Grace is not really in play. This common cultural distortion views God as a "cosmic therapist" or "spiritual manager" whose primary goal is to make people feel good, happy, and self-fulfilled. It frames Jesus as a moral teacher who simply helps people be "nice," minimizing the need for repentance from sin; one should "try harder to be a good person," focusing on behavioral modification rather than transformation by the grace of Jesus. Well, if this is all you really want, just go find a therapist.
- **Salvation Strictly by Works:** This misconception asserts that a person can earn their way to heaven or right-standing with God through good deeds, charity, or religious rituals. It directly conflicts with the biblical message that salvation is an unearned free gift of grace, received through faith in Jesus' sacrifice. You will never be able to do enough good to earn salvation, and you will never know peace.
- **The "Faith-Plus" (or Legalistic) Gospel:** The idea that faith in Jesus is not enough on its own, requiring believers to add strict religious creeds, codes, rituals, traditions, or specific denominational practices to become fully accepted by God; many Christian groups show a tendency to fall into this trap, even without realizing it. It will lead to Pharisaism and focus only on the self, not on the Son.
- **"Cheapened Grace" (a license to sin):** The opposite of moralism, this heresy suggests that because God's grace is free, believers can continue to live in sin without repentance or the need for any spiritual transformation; this false idea assumes that Jesus forgave sins once for all believers, letting them live however they want without pursuing holiness – they believe that salvation allows them to continue to live in sin without repentance and sanctification. In a sense, this is modern Gnosticism. There will be no "Peace and safety" ... just destruction.
- **Jesus as Merely a Good Man or Social Reformer:** Some popular philosophies strip Jesus of His divinity or view Him solely as a political revolutionary or social justice advocate; while His teachings heavily influenced culture and championed the oppressed, the gospel is reduced to a

political manifesto which ignores Jesus' claim that He came primarily to save humanity from sin and death. If this is your idea of Christianity, why not espouse *any* religion?

- **Watered-Down or Diluted Gospel:** To appeal to more people, some teachers omit or downplay difficult but essential biblical principles of *sin*, *repentance*, and *judgment*— the very things that explain why the gospel message of salvation is necessary. We can't bury our talent – that never works out well.
- **Replacing Redemption with Politics:** both politically liberal or conservative churches can fall into the trap of prioritizing political or social themes and activism over spiritual redemption. Read bible history - don't believe "God is always on our side!"
- **Lack of Evangelism:** Many congregations fail to equip their members to share the gospel outside the church walls, as if the gospel exists only for edification of the members; outreach is considered optional and even potentially harmful or disruptive in the community. The church becomes a spiritual monastery – safe, but dead and useless
- **The Self-Help (or "Me-First") Gospel:** Stripped of accountability for sin and the responsibility for evangelism, the bible becomes a collection of motivational speeches aimed at boosting self-esteem, personal happiness, and self-actualization. The goal is to make you "better", not save souls. What ever happened to God first?

We can't be naïve and fall for these interior reflections of God's power, corrupting the gospel and selling our souls for temporal happiness and pleasure. When we run out of "spiritual gas", perhaps we need to remember the source of our strength, power, and sustenance:

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

– Philippians 4:3

But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

– 2 Corinthians 12:9

Conclusion

The gospel is simple. The words are easy to understand, and the pathway is clear. It requires no advanced changes, improvements, or preparations on our part – just acceptance. We see in the gospel God's ultimate plan for mankind and the universe, eventually ushering in a new heaven and new earth – all designed for us in which to live with Jesus and the Father. It seems so easy, so logical, and so wonderful.

Yet, most men still gnash their teeth at the thought of controlling and channeling their free will to serve God... even though they are promised something far greater than anything they know in this life. Paul firmly states in I Corinthians 2:9: "*But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him...'*". I don't know about you, but I think I can imagine quite a lot! Just to know that an undeserving wretch like me has a place beyond comprehension

waiting for me in eternity with a loving God is more than enough to sustain a believer in this life. Ask yourself: Are you imagining heaven today? If such a place is prepared for you, are you preparing yourself to be there?

Memory Verse

But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

— 1 Corinthians 15:57

For Discussion

1. Can you think of other corruptions of the gospel that you have encountered?
2. What is it that makes people so distrustful of God's promises?
3. How do feel about the responsibility to use your free will in the right way?
4. What does it say about God that He planned for the sacrifice of His Son before the foundation of the world?
5. Does understanding the power of our free will better affect how you see other people, especially your Christian brothers and sisters?