

What the Gospel Is

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

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Praise waits for Thee in Zion, Lord, to Thee vows paid shall be for Thou the hearer art of prayer, all flesh shall come to Thee. Let us worship God.

Now if you weren't here last Sunday evening I did something which I'm not accustomed to doing and that is I gave the congregation homework. And I have some of the answers here and others of you can give it to me as you leave. (laughter) You will not be allowed to leave until you give me the assignment. And the assignment was, and I want to put these here to I don't forget them - the assignment was to write down in fifty words or less the answer to the question, "What is the Gospel?" It's been a fascinating project. Some of you have been corresponding with me in the course of this week. I've been thrilled to bits by your enthusiasm. It is such an important question. If we get this question wrong we won't get into heaven — life and death, heaven and hell hang in the balance of this question. I loved to see you quoting your favorite texts of Scripture and citing some of the great Gospel hymns and songs that have more or less done the homework for you because many of those Gospel hymns tell the old, old story in fifty words or less.

I want you to know that Ligon did his assignment. He has left early for General Assembly. I didn't let him go until he had done his homework. And I've asked him — as you can imagine it was superlative and definitive. I think he'd spent a good bit of time on it, and I asked him if he would publish it in *First Epistle* this week. Now I need your answers before you read his. Jim Packer says "One of the most urgent tasks facing the evangelical church today is the recovery of the Gospel."

Hard to believe isn't it, that the most urgent task facing the evangelical church today is the recovery of the Gospel. Now that's partly why this summer, over these next few weeks, we're going to look at this series together which I've called "The Gospel-Centered Life." Last week we spent some time looking at what the Gospel isn't and tonight I want us to try and address what is the Gospel. And I'm going to do that from 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and I'm picking up the reading at verse 16 and reading through to the first 2 verses of chapter 6 - 2 Corinthians 5 and beginning at verse 16. Before we do so, let's look to God in prayer.

Father, we know that what we are about to do together is so very important. This isn't just an exercise in mental assessment, but rather it is an exercise in life and death itself. There is nothing in all the world more important than the Gospel, and we pray now for a peculiar sense of Your presence as we focus our minds and hearts and affections. We pray for Your blessing as we read this Scripture. We thank You for it and may the truth of it be written upon every heart here tonight. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.

This is God's Word:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

Working together with Him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Now I want to focus my thoughts this evening in addressing this question, "What is the Gospel?" on this passage of Scripture and focusing in particular on verse 21. And I want to make four statements. And in doing so I'm not saying that this is all that there is to the Gospel. The Gospel is multi-faceted and not every text of Scripture says everything we need to know and understand about the Gospel. But in this particular text that we have before us tonight, four fundamental truths emerge.

Firstly, that the Gospel addresses and answers the greatest and most fundamental problem of all, and that problem is sin. Secondly, that the Gospel is fundamentally about the Father's love for us. Thirdly, the Gospel centers on the life and especially the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. And fourthly, the Gospel brings about a fundamental change of status, initiating a life that at every stage is dependent on the Gospel. Now those are the four statements that I want us to explore.

I. The Gospel addresses and answers the problem of sin.

First of all, the Gospel addresses and answers the greatest and most fundamental problem of all, and that is the problem of sin. You see it in verse 19 — “trespasses.” Not counting their trespasses against them. You see it again in verse 21 — “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Our fundamental problem is a lack of righteousness.

Our fundamental problem is sin and transgression. Man's fundamental problem is not health, important as that may be. Man's fundamental problem is not poverty or inequality or wealth distribution or injustice, as important as all of those issues are. Our fundamental problem is not unhappiness. Unhappiness is the result of another more fundamental problem. Man's fundamental problem is not the environment. It is not, and don't misunderstand me, it is not the oil pouring into the Gulf tonight, devastating and horrendous as that is upon the environment. But that's not the most fundamental problem of all. That is but a sign of a world that is out of joint because of sin. Because of Adam's fall and transgression.

Sin is the fundamental problem. Falling short of God's glory is the fundamental problem. Missing the mark is the fundamental problem. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. There is none righteous, there is none righteous, no, not one.” That's the fundamental problem, that we lack that righteousness, that integrity to come and face our sovereign Lord and God. Sin is the problem. Jesus said whoever commits sin is a slave to sin.

And the problem here in this particular text is addressed along a very particular line of thought. Now sometimes, in the apostle Paul for example, he might employ the language of the law courts and see that fundamental problem in terms of the use of a word like justification, that we need to find ourselves in a right standing, in a right relationship legally with God. That is our problem. We need to be justified. We need to be in a right standing with God. Sometimes Paul uses the language of the temple. You come to the temple because you are unclean. You come to the temple because you have to bring a sacrifice, because blood has to be shed, an animal has to be killed. God needs to be propitiated. Atonement needs to be offered.

Sometimes Paul, in addressing this problem, uses not the language of the law courts and not the language of the temple, but the language of the marketplace, that we are debtors and we need that debt to be paid and redemption needs to be offered — the redemption price needs to be paid.

But here in this particular text the metaphor is taken from the language and the society of human relationships, societal relationships. And the fundamental problem is here as Paul addresses it, is that we have been alienated from God. We need to be reconciled to God over and over.

In these verses 16 through 21 of 2 Corinthians 5, Paul uses this word reconciliation. Paul has a ministry of reconciliation. He issues the imperative — “Be reconciled to God” because sin has alienated us from God. That's the fundamental problem. It's the problem of every man and woman and boy and girl in the entire world tonight, that by nature we are children of Adam. By nature we are sinners. By nature we are trespassers. By nature we are alienated from God. There is a barrier. You know what it's like when you are alienated from someone. Even within the society of a marriage when there is a moment of alienation when two people are not communicating and conversing and relating to each other as they ought, and there is this barrier, this non-speaking unfriendly relationship. And that's the metaphor that Paul is employing here — the fundamental problem is the problem of sin, the problem of transgression, that has alienated us from our Father in heaven. That's the first thing.

II. The Gospel is about the Father's love for us.

The second thing I want us to see here is the Gospel is about our heavenly Father's love for us and is fundamentally something that He does for us. The Gospel *is not* about what we do. The Gospel *is not* about some kind of human cooperative relationship. The Gospel *is not*, first of all, something that we initiate.

The Gospel is, first of all, something that God does, God the Father in particular does. It addresses the problem. The problem is sin. The problem is our inability as a consequence of sin. We cannot save ourselves. At one level you understand the problem is God. I want to put it that way. At one level, the problem tonight is God. It is God's holiness. It is God's righteousness. It is God's inability to look upon sin. Sin cannot reside in the same presence as God. God is holy. God is holy. At one level that's the fundamental problem. The fundamental problem is not our dysfunctionality. It's not, at one level, our inability to get along with each other. Our fundamental problem is our inability to get along with God, and until we see that we can't appreciate the Gospel.

You remember the rich young ruler? “Good Master” — he comes to Jesus saying, “Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The very form of the question is telling, “What must I do?” as though he could do something to inherit eternal life. You remember Jesus' response? He took him to the Ten Commandments. He took him to the law. And the rich young ruler's response was to say, “All these I have kept from my youth upwards.” And so Jesus took him to the tenth commandment, the commandment about covetousness and tells him, “Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor,” knowing you see that he loved his riches more than he loved the idea of being right with God. And he could not do that because that young man had no concept, no understanding, no appreciation, no conviction of his real problem - the problem of his heart, the problem of sin, the problem of his transgressions. He had no sense of sin and therefore no sense of the holiness and the righteousness of God.

God takes the initiative. God takes the initiative. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Look at verse 19 — “In Christ, God was reconciling the world.” It is not that we reconcile ourselves to God.

God reconciles Himself to us. That's the Gospel.

Verse 21 — “For our sake, He (that is God) made Him (that is Christ) to be sin for us.” The initiative is God's. It's John 3:16 — “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.” For God hath done what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sends His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin. God does it. The initiative here is God's. That's good news because we are dead in trespasses and in sins. We are wholly unable to do anything about our salvation. We're not just lost, we're not just sick, but we are dead in trespasses and in sins.

And the good news of the Gospel is God has stepped in - the initiative, the determination, the power of a sovereign God at work going into the far country to seek and to save that which is lost.

III. The Gospel centers on the life and especially the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But there's a third proposition here, and that is that the Gospel centers on the life and especially the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now in this text it's not just, it's not just the fact that Jesus died. That in itself is not good news. Hundreds of thousands of people die every day. That's not good news. That a particular man called Jesus died two thousand years ago upon a cross, that is in itself not good news.

I was reading this week, from someone who should have known better, to be honest, in a book where he says “The Gospel is not a set of propositions. It's a story.” Well excuse me, but it is a set of propositions, too, because the story of the Gospel has to be interpreted. Because otherwise, what is Calvary but the death of a Jew upon a cross? That's all it is unless certain propositional truths are attached to that specific death.

Now notice what it is that Paul says here in this text in verse 21. First of all that “He knew no sin.” You understand, all of you understand that could not be said of you. Not a single one of you could that be said of. This can only be said about Jesus. Of all the millions and millions of people that have ever dwelt upon this earth, that statement can only be made of Him, of Jesus. He knew no sin. He was sinless. “Which of you convinces Me of sin?” Who has the audacity to stand up here tonight and say which of you can convince Me of wrongdoing, of sin, of transgression, of breaking God's law? He wasn't guilty of actual sin. He never

committed a sin. And more than that, He wasn't guilty of original sin. He didn't have the desire to sin. He didn't have the proclivity to sin. He didn't have the propensity to sin. He didn't have that inner lust to sin. He didn't have, what Augustine calls *concupiscence*, that bent, that desire to sin and break God's law. He didn't have it. He was tempted, tempted in every point like as we are, yet without sin. He was the sinless one, holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners. Not a blemish. Not a mark. Perfect. Absolute perfection. Not just a good man; not just a great man; but absolute perfection.

They say, don't they, "To err is human." No, not necessarily because Jesus was human but He did not err. He never sinned. He never ever sinned. He was perfect in thought and word and deed and Paul says, "God made Him to be sin." He made Him who was without sin to be sin. In the legal sense, He reckoned Him a sinner. In the whole course of His life He had lived absolutely perfectly. He had never transgressed, never. But on the cross God made Him, reckoned Him to be sin. He treated Him as though He was a sinner. No, my dear friends, He treated Him as though He was the worst sinner that ever had been.

Who killed the Lord Jesus? Who killed Him? It wasn't the Jews out of envy, it wasn't Pilate out of spite, it wasn't Judas out of greed; it was our Father who did it. God made Him sin and punished Him, cursed Him. That's what crucifixion meant — the curse of God. "Cursed is everyone who hangs upon a cross." God did not spare Him. He didn't spare Him. He gave Him up for us all.

Now Paul gives an explanation here. He tells us in verse 19 — "In Christ, God was reconciling the world" made up of sinners like you and me — "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them." That's good news, isn't it? That's the kind of God we want to believe in, isn't it — a God who doesn't count trespasses against us? There are millions of people in the world tonight who think that's the Gospel. "You know, God doesn't count sin against you. I may be a sinner but who's perfect? But God doesn't count sin against you. God forgives because that's what He does." Like they said at the time of the French Revolution, "You know, that's His business. God doesn't count sins against you." My friends, that's not the Gospel. That's not the Gospel and that's not the way Paul is addressing what God did at Calvary in His Son here in 2 Corinthians 5. It is not simply that God doesn't count sin against us. He doesn't count sin against us because He counts our sins against Christ. Paul isn't saying here that God just forgives like that. In order for our sins not to be counted against us, they have to be counted against His Son.

Did you have the word, or at least the idea, of substitution in your definition of the Gospel? "For our sake, He made Him to be sin for us" — for us. It's just a little preposition — for us. But as Luther was wont to say, "The Gospel is all about prepositions." Me in Christ, Christ in me — God reckoning my sins against Christ, reckoning His righteousness to my account. Look at verse 21 again — "For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin so that in Him we might become

the righteousness of God.” The problem, the fundamental problem is the lack of righteousness. How can we have that righteousness which is necessary to enter the gates of heaven, to stand before the judgment seat of God, because as He tells us in this very chapter “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ”? Every one of us must stand before God one day and give an account, and we must give that account either clothed in our own righteousness which is filthy rags, or clothed with a beauty of the righteousness of Christ, reckoned to my account.

Do you see what Paul is saying about the Gospel here? It's about the great exchange. My sins are reckoned to Christ. His righteousness is reckoned to my account. That's what was taking place on the cross. What did we just sing? “Behold the Man upon a cross, my sin upon His shoulders, ashamed I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers. It was my sin that held Him there — it was my sin that held Him there — until He cried, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’” As though He had lost entirely His self awareness of who He was, the Son of the living God. He can't even say from the cross, “My Father, My Father.” But as our sins are now reckoned to His account and the judgment of God is poured out upon His Son and He is cast, He is cast away from His Father's presence into outer darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of death, and my dear Savior is in the place of the wicked damned.

It was my sin that held Him there. It was for me — His enduring, not just enduring, His exhausting the wrath of God that my sins deserve. He exhausts it until there is none left so that my sins can never ever be punished. They can never get what they deserve because it's been exhausted upon His Son. God made Him sin for us so that we might be reckoned the righteousness of God, that in Christ we have the righteousness of God. This is the Gospel of substitution and satisfaction.

IV. The Gospel brings about a fundamental change of status.

But there's a fourth thing here, that this Gospel brings about a fundamental change of status. It releases us from our guilt. If you trust this Gospel, if you believe this Gospel, it releases you from your guilt because you are reckoned the righteousness of God and there can be no guilt. There's nothing to answer for. There's nothing to answer for because He has answered for it all. Horatio Spafford, when his wife and four daughters had left Chicago to sail to England on the ship, the *Ville de Havre*, and it went down in the mid-Atlantic and his four daughters were killed, drowned, his wife, when she got to England sent that little telegram to her husband, “Saved alone.” He made the journey across to be with her and at the very point where that ship went down, they stopped and he wrote those extraordinary lines — “My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin not in part but the whole, is nailed to that cross and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!” My guilt is gone. You stand before the

judgment seat and you hear those words, “Not guilty. Not guilty.” - because we are in Christ.

And not just that, you notice what he says earlier in verse 17 — “If anyone is in Christ...new creation” — a new creation. As though Paul is saying that something of the new heavens and new earth and of that future life has already begun to dawn in our present existence. We are no longer what we once were. I am no longer in Adam. I am in Christ now. That's my fundamental identity. I am in Christ and I am a new creation. Do you notice how Paul puts it in verse 20? “God making His appeal through us, we implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

Are you here tonight because you were invited by a dear friend who loves you and wants you to hear the Gospel? Well let me quote Paul's words here. God is appealing to you through me — through me tonight. God is appealing to you, be reconciled to God. You may die before the day is through. You may be brought before the judgment seat of Christ before the day is through, and God is appealing to you. His heart overflows for you. Be reconciled to God.

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. That's the Gospel.

It's not about what you can do. It's not about your performance. It's not about some kind of model reformation. It's not about the promises that you can make tonight. They are worthless. You come with empty hands, with empty hands, and you say, “Nothing in my hands I bring. Simply to Thy cross I cling. Naked look to Thee for dress. Helpless look to Thee for grace. Foul I to the fountain fly. Wash me Savior or I die.”

Father, we thank You for the Gospel. We never get tired of talking about it and singing it and thinking about it and pondering it in our hearts. Tonight, as we bring this Lord's Day to a close, we want the Gospel, its sweet melodious tones to make melody in our hearts. Father, we pray for some perhaps who are here who really don't know the Gospel, who are still in their sins, who are still in Adam. Bring them out of Adam and into Christ by the sovereignty of Your Spirit's call, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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