

The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration

Lesson 4: The Span of the Gospel

Statement 2: We affirm that the Gospel is the saving power of God in that the Gospel effects salvation to everyone who believes, without distinction (Rom. 1:16). This efficacy of the Gospel is by the power of God himself (1 Cor. 1:18). We deny that the power of the Gospel rests in the eloquence of the preacher, the technique of the evangelist, or the persuasion of rational argument (1 Cor. 1:21; 2:1-5).

I. The Strength of the Gospel

A. The Gospel and Power

1. Paul knew that getting the Gospel right was essential to its efficacy. The Gospel is not advice or a suggestion; it is the very power of God!
2. Power for witnessing is promised and demonstrated (Acts 1:8; 19:19-20; Rom. 15:18-19).

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

“A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power” (Acts 19:19-20).

“I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done--by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ” (Rom. 15:18-19).
3. Paul frequently ascribes power to the Gospel (1 Cor. 1:17-18; 2:4-5; 1 Thess. 1:5).

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Rom. 1:16).

“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel--not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:17-18).

“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power” (1 Cor. 2:4-5).

“our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5).

B. The Gospel and Persuasion

1. We must be prepared to accept the biblical truth that the Gospel message is the height of idiocracy and foolishness to the unbelieving world (Note: 1 Cor. 1:18 “*μωρία*” or moronic). Yet, an essential part of sharing the Gospel message is persuading people otherwise.
2. We must also understand the place of persuasion in relation to the Gospel. While it is true that the Holy Spirit does not work in a vacuum, it is equally true that the Gospel is exclusively God's means of salvation and wholly dependant upon His mercy and power (1 Cor. 1:18; Rom. 9:15-16; Tit. 3:5).

“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel--not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (1 Cor. 1:18)

“For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy” (Rom. 9:15-16).

“He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy” (Tit. 3:5).
3. This is not to denigrate persuasive argument or apologetics. These are important as a means to breaking down barriers and clearing the pathways of the mind and heart in demonstrating the relevance of the Gospel message. However, persuasive argumentation, illustrations, and life experiences are merely *subjective human expressions apart from the Spirit's implantation and application of the Gospel message upon the heart*. In essence, sharing the Gospel is neither an art form nor a formula.

II. The Stipulation of the Gospel

A. *The Relationship of Belief to the Gospel*

1. Salvation is *monergistic* not *synergistic*. The ability to believe (i.e., faith) is granted by God alone (Acts 5:31; 11:18; 1 Cor. 3:5-7; Eph.2:8-9; Philip. 1:29; 1 Tim. 1:14; Heb. 12:2; 2 Pt. 1:1). A dead person cannot choose to believe the Gospel truth.
“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).
“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him” (Philip. 1:29).
“The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 1:14).
“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2).
2. Is it reasonable that God requires faith of those who cannot believe (cf., 2 Cor. 4:4, NIV, NASB)? In the spiritual and moral economy of the universe, it is essential to distinguish between *de jure* and *de facto*; the way things ought to be vis-à-vis the way things are.
 - a) The universal call of the Gospel does not exhibit what humans are able to do, but what they ought to do (contra Kant, *ought* does not necessarily imply *can*). Example: The civil law requires of those who are legally drunk not to drive, even though, in their impaired condition, they are unable to do so. The civil law exhibits what people ought to do, not what they are able to do.
 - b) God’s commands, not human ability, are the measure of our duty.
 - (1) God commands everyone everywhere to love Him with heart, mind, soul, and strength, even though He knows that self-centered unbelievers are not capable of doing so.
 - (2) God commands everyone everywhere to love his or her neighbor as herself even though the hateful in heart is guilty of murder.
 - c) In God’s economy the Law exhibits his moral perfections and knowing what those are does not entail abiding by them (cf., Jn. 4:17). See Jn. 12:37-40 (“cannot” because they “will not” and “will not” because they “cannot”), a philosophical and theological conundrum?

B. *The Relationship of the Gospel to Belief*

1. It is not one’s belief that gives the Gospel its power. Rather, it is the power of the Gospel that makes it possible to believe. “Faith is not the human condition for receiving new life; it is the divinely given *instrument* by which God saves lost souls” (Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, p. 263).
2. And, it is gloriously true that all who believe become God’s children (Jn. 1:12-13; Acts 16:31; Rom. 10:9-13; Eph. 1:13).
“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God--children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God” (Jn. 1:12-13).
“They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household’” (Acts 16:31).
“That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, ‘Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’ For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’ (Rom. 10:9-13).
“And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph. 1:13).

III. The Span of the Gospel

A. *Does Paul Discriminate in Preaching to the Jew First (Rom. 1:16)?*

1. The word *first* “*πρῶτον*” is missing from some MSS. “It is interesting that Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles, writing to a group made up largely of Gentiles (v. 13), should not hesitate to speak of the priority of the Jew” (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*). Most likely, Paul is simply stating the span of his mission extends to the entire known world, Jew and Gentile.

2. The Gospel proclamation should and must go out to all people everywhere and at all times without discrimination or distinction. That God chooses to save some and not others is purely a matter of grace and not justice. For, if justice were served, everyone would spend eternity away from God's loving presence.

B. *The Call of the Gospel: General or Specific?*

1. Scripture seems to indicate both a general call to all and a specific call to some (Matt 22:1-14).
 - a) On the general call see Is. 45:22; Jn. 7:37
 - b) On the special call see Jn. 6:45; 10:27; Acts 16:14; Rom. 1:6-7; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; 1 Pt. 2:9
2. Since the biblical Gospel is a gospel of grace, we must avoid the following mindsets/attitudes that defy the tenet of *Sola gratia* or by grace alone:
 - a) "God helps those who helps themselves"— suggesting that all of humanity is left spiritually equalized and capable of becoming born-again.
 - (3) This attitude says, in effect, "I came to Christ by myself."
 - (4) This rests in a faulty anthropology, maintaining a higher view of humankind than Scripture allows.
 - b) "God brought me to Christ and I did not resist." This assumes that:
 - (5) Human depravity is so neutralized by the effects of the cross, that everyone has the ability to respond in faith and the only determining factor as to whether persons heed the Gospel call is free will.
 - (6) The human will could obstruct the plan of God in salvation (I could have resisted, but didn't).
 - (7) The grace that saves is resistible. There is a common grace or general call to all that can be resisted (Matt. 22:14; Lk. 16:24), but the grace that saves cannot be resisted (Rom. 8:29-30).
 - c) "God started the process and I cooperated." An under-informed theology because:
 - (8) God does not begin something and not finish it (Philip. 1:6).
 - (9) God's purposes are never made contingent upon humans (Pr. 16:4; Acts 17:25).
3. The mindset or attitude that most faithfully coheres with Scripture is "God brought me to Christ."
 - a) If there are conditions to be met, God ultimately meets them (cf., Jn. 6:44; 2 Tim. 1:9).
 - b) Though many were invited to the banquet and sinfully rejected (Matt. 22:1-6), those who were brought in to feast were done so *at the king's discretion*. It is, therefore, God's prerogative to save those whom He chooses.
 - c) Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost constitutes a general call to everyone present; yet only some were specially called by God (v. 39) and were baptized into the faith (Acts 2:14-39).
 - d) Saul's conversion clearly sets forth God's special call (Acts 9). Paul ran from Christ; Christ pursued Paul. Paul resisted Christ; Christ disarmed Paul. Paul persecuted Christ; Christ converted him. Paul was an alien; Christ made him a member of the family" (Lewis B. Smedes, *All Things Made New*, p. 119).
 - e) It is true that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom.10:13) *because* "no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (Jn. 6:44).

In John Newton's personal diary he wrote that he was in school only two years, from ages 8 to 10. He was self-taught his entire life and never had any formal theological education. After his conversion and upon beginning his pastoral career, he devoted himself to a rigorous program of learning Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac. In addition, he read many theological works in Latin and French, which he taught himself while at sea. Yet, despite all his learning, he never ceased to be amazed that, as he says at age 72, "such a wretch should not only be spared and pardoned, but reserved to the honour of preaching thy Gospel, which he had blasphemed and renounced . . . this is wonderful indeed! The more thou has exalted me, the more I ought to abase myself."