

The Gospel Changes Everything

Living the Gospel

Two old, retired baseball players loved to sit around and debate whether or not there would be baseball in heaven. One was a catcher, the other a pitcher. Hours of such conversation helped pass the time of day.

Then the old catcher died. His friend was so sad that his playing partner was gone. One night he had a dream. And in his dream, his friend paid a visit. His friend greeted him with these words: “I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that there is indeed baseball in heaven.”

The long-since retired pitcher was so delighted to hear this good news. He asked, “What’s the bad news?” “You’re scheduled to be on the mound tomorrow!”

This month we are focusing upon the Gospel – the “good news.” The good news – we could say the great news – is that God intervened in human history to resolve the human dilemma. As sinners, we all stand guilty and condemned before a holy God. This is the bad news. Paul describes our state in Ephesians, chapter two, this way:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passion of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.
– *Ephesians 2:1-3*

But, thankfully, the good news trumps the bad. Paul goes on to say:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive with Christ – by grace you have been saved.... – *Ephesians 2:4-5*

Last week we considered the necessary response to the good news of the Gospel – we must repent and believe. And when we do, God, by his sovereign grace, saves us for eternity.

Today, I want to carry our thoughts further down the road. We need to consider some of the implications of our salvation. In particular, what are the implications

of living the Gospel? How does believing the Gospel affect the way we live our daily lives?

More than anything else this morning, I want you to really see that living the Gospel means “living free.” The Apostle Paul, writing to the Galatians, chapter five, says:

For freedom Christ has set us free.... – *Galatians 5:1*

We are going to consider three areas or three aspects of that freedom. The first is this:

I. Living Free from Guilt

Now, we need to distinguish between theological guilt and psychological guilt. Or another way of stating that is the difference between objective guilt and subjective guilt, or guilt feelings.

Theological guilt or objective guilt results from violating God’s standard. We have sinned against God and are accountable to him. King David shows the heart of one who acknowledges this. In Psalm 51, speaking of his sin, says:

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified when you speak, and blameless when you judge. – *Psalm 51:3-4*

In Psalm 32, David is reflecting on his sin and God’s grace. He writes:

I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin. – *Psalm 32:5*

When we understand the Gospel, and we believe the Gospel and put our trust in Christ alone for salvation, God forgives the guilt of our sin. This has to do with objective guilt – the fact that we have violated God’s law and therefore are guilty. This is the work of God’s grace.

In Romans, chapter three (we looked at this in the first message), Paul talks about how God justifies us by his grace. That is, he declares us “not guilty” because of the work of Christ on our behalf and in our place. Then he comes to chapter eight

and writes an amazing thing. This is the result of God's saving grace in our lives. Turn over to Romans, chapter eight, and just stay there for a few minutes. Look what he says:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
– *Romans 8:1*

Why? Why is that true? Because God has forgiven the guilt of our sin. He has marked our debt of sin as "Paid in full." Some of you have yet to really grab hold of the truth in this verse in your life. God has declared you free from the guilt of your sin. You have been justified, declared "not guilty."

And yet, you carry around the burden of guilt like a great weight around your neck. Listen, what you are saying, in essence, is that your sin is too great for Christ to die for; it is too great for the blood of Christ to cover; it is too great for God to forgive.

Really? Look what Paul writes towards the end of this chapter:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. – *Romans 8:31-34*

You say, "Yes, but I still sin." That's true, and you will until the day you die. But what sin will you ever commit that was not paid for at the Cross? We still confess when the Holy Spirit convicts us of sins, but they were all paid for – once for all – when Jesus died in your place. Your confession is simply agreeing that what you have thought, said or done was wrong. And it is also an acknowledgement that God, in his grace, has forgiven you.

You say, "But I still feel guilty." Now we have crossed over to psychological guilt or guilt feelings. Where do they come from?

They might be from God if we have sinned. We feel guilty because we are guilty. But guilt feelings produced by God always leads to conviction, not condemnation. They produce repentance, not shame.

Guilt feelings might also come from our enemy. Satan is described in Scripture as the “accuser of the brethren.” Here’s the difference in my experience. The Holy Spirit brings conviction which is specific, which targets clearly something I have done wrong. The accusations of the devil produce a very vague, general guilt feeling. It is intended to divert my attention from the grace of God, the forgiveness of God, and focus upon myself and how I feel.

I love the advice C.S. Lewis gave in his *Letters to an American Lady*:

If there is a particular sin on your conscience, repent and confess it. If there isn’t, tell the despondent devil not to be silly. You can’t help hearing his voice (the odious inner radio) but you can treat it merely like a buzzing in your ears or any other irrational nuisance.... What the devil loves is that vague cloud of unspecified guilt feeling or unspecified virtue by which he lures us into despair or presumption. “Details, please?” is the answer.

Sometimes we feel guilty because we don’t feel worthy of God’s forgiveness. You’re right! You’re not! That’s grace! Erwin Lutzer writes:

We may believe that it is a mark of humility to think our sins are greater than God’s grace. But if we doubt God’s ability to forgive, that’s pride and unbelief, not humility (*How to Have a Whole Heart in a Broken World*).

You say, “But I keep committing the same sin over and over again.” Let me ask you, “Does God’s forgiveness have limits? Does God’s grace extend only so far, for only so long, for only so many times?” It certainly grieves the heart of God that we would continue to fail, but, as John the Apostle writes in his first letter, “God is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

When we live free from guilt, we are free to enjoy. We are free to really enjoy our relationship with Jesus, our Savior. We are free to enjoy our relationship with others. We are not carrying the guilt of our sin into those relationships. And when we really understand and accept that we are free from guilt, we realize that our brothers and sisters are also free from that guilt. There is the freedom to be real, authentic, and genuine. Because, though we are still sinners, our guilt has been forgiven.

And we are free to enjoy ourselves. There are no grounds for beating yourself up over your sin. Some of you are doing the devil’s work – accusing, judging, and

condemning yourself. Remember the video clip a while back from the Bob Newhart show. Bob, the psychologist, is telling his patient that she can solve her problem with two words, and those are the two words I would say to you: “Stop it!”

“Just stop it.” We need to hear those words when we continue to carry around the guilt of our sins, sins that God has forgiven in Christ.

Here’s a second implication about living the Gospel:

II. Living Free from Performance

Dr. David Seamands, in his book *Freedom from the Performance Trap*, writes:

The performance-based Christian life comes from the malignant virus of sinful pride – a pride which encourages us to build our lives upon a deadly lie. This lie claims that everything depends on what *we* do and how well *we* perform, on *our* efforts and *our* work. We will enjoy acceptance and love if we can win them, success and status if we can earn them.

He goes on:

This pride extends to every area of life but is especially crucial to significant relationships, including our relationship to God (salvation), our relationship to ourselves (self-esteem), our relationship to other people (security and satisfaction from friendships, marriage, and parenthood), and our relationship to society (success and status). In other words, whether or not God loves us, or whether we feel good about ourselves, or whether other people will like us, or whether we will be considered a success in life – all depends on how well we can perform. Everything of importance in life is conditioned on whether we can deliver a perfect, or at least near-perfect, performance.

Here’s how it affects our spiritual life in a practical way. We hear and understand the Gospel. We respond in repentance and faith; God saves us; he forgives the guilt of our sin. We are quick to say that it is by God’s grace that he has done these things in our life.

But then, as we go along, we fall into the trap of thinking that I must do certain things to continue to experience God’s grace, God’s favor, God’s love. Good things – like Bible study, prayer, witnessing, fellowshiping with other believers.

And if I fail, either by my expectations or the expectations of others, I begin to doubt God's love; I begin to question whether I'm really forgiven; I begin wonder if I've lost God's favor. And because I am so wired to a performance-based life, I might just try harder to earn and gain God's love and favor.

Do you see how frustrating and futile this becomes? The harder I try to get God to love me, the more I fail, the illusive his favor feels.

Let's look at something from John's Gospel. The setting is in the Upper Room. Jesus is a short time away from his betrayal and arrest. He is preparing his disciples for what lies ahead – his departure, the giving of the Holy Spirit, the way the world will hate them even as they have hated him. Then Jesus lifts up his head and prays. Turn to John's Gospel, chapter 17.

John 17:20–23

Do you get what Jesus is saying? God the Father loves you even as he loves his own Son, Jesus the Christ. He cannot love you any more; he cannot love you any less. This doesn't mean that it doesn't matter to God how you live. Don't distort the truth here. But God's love is constant; his love is consistent; his love is continuous; it never changes!

You do not need to earn God's love; you can't anyway! So, rather than trying to work *towards* God's love, accept the reality of God's love and work *from* God's love. In other words, obey because you have God's favor, you enjoy God's love, you have experienced his forgiveness. You don't obey to *get* God's love, his favor, his forgiveness. You obey because you *have* God's love, favor and forgiveness.

When you really begin to grasp the truth and begin to experience living free from performance, you are really free to serve.

Service to God and for others is not driven by a performance-mentality. It flows from a grace-mentality. God sets you free to serve him and others in response to his work of grace in your life.

There's one more implication I want you to consider this morning. When we have understood the Gospel and believed the Gospel, we should be:

III. Living Free from Enslavement

Jesus said this:

If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. – *John 8:31-32*

Then he went on to say:

Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who habitually practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed. – *John 8:34-36*

God in Christ has set you free. When we live free from enslavement, we are really free to live. You have been set free, but do you continue to live as if you are enslaved?

Paul talks about this issue of enslavement and freedom in Romans, chapter six. Turn over there, if you would. Let's begin at the end of chapter five to follow Paul's argument.

Romans 5:20 – 6:14

When we understand the Gospel, and when we believe the Gospel, and when we respond to the Gospel by repentance and faith, God sets us free from the slavery to sin. But listen, he doesn't set us free to run amuck. He doesn't set us free to be the masters of our soul. We exchange one slavery with another – slavery to sin to slavery to God. We acquire a new master.

Story of the ship's captain – cruel and tyrannical. Replaced by the Executive Officer until the ship reaches port. The old captain, though, would walk around the deck and bark out orders to the sailors. They would hop-to. Until they realized, he was not longer the captain. He had been replaced. They needed to choose to live free from his command.

And so it is with us. There is a new sheriff in town; there is a new captain, a new master, in our lives. We need to choose not to listen to the commands of the old master – our old nature – our body of sin. We choose to listen to and obey the new master.

This slavery is not a grievous bondage, but a bondage of love and grace, mercy and compassion. For the first time, I am really free to become all I was created to be – a child of my heavenly Father. I am free to live!

Do you see yourself in need of an adjustment in how you are living this morning? Do you need to believe the Gospel that you are free from guilt and free to enjoy, free from performance and free to serve, free from enslavement and free to live?

It is a perspective adjustment. It requires you to believe what God has said is true of you, of who you are in Christ.