

The Gospel as Center

Galatians 1:1-12; 2:1-21

There once was a time in New England when the local church not only stood at town centers throughout the region, but was central to the everyday life of much of the population. Even on frosty mornings like this, without any heat in the meetinghouse, parishners would gather for worship with little foot-stoves filled with hot coals, to keep them warm for the service that was often two hours or more in length. Then, after a break for dinner, everyone returned for the afternoon service, which was another two hours in length, both services including about an hour-long sermon.¹

Obviously not all New Englanders were actively involved in church life, but most were (with varying degrees of commitment and personal faith). In fact, as many of you know, the royal charter of the Massachusetts Bay Colony says that its very purpose was “to win and incite the natives of the country to the knowledge and obedience of the only true God and Savior of mankind and the Christian faith.” Even as Puritanism diversified, the basic tenets of gospel faith were widely shared: the sinfulness of sin in humanity’s fallen condition; God’s sovereign mercy in redeeming sinners through the substitutionary death of Christ; the necessity of personal conversion and faith to know God and live a holy life, and the sufficiency of God’s revealed word in Scripture.²

Interestingly, Massachusetts was the last state among the original colonies to officially sever ties between church and state. But even when they did so in 1833, that constitutional amendment affirmed that “the public worship of God, and instructions in piety, religion, and morality, promote the happiness and prosperity of a people, and the security of republican government.”³ The Christian faith and the local church were highly valued and integral parts of society.

My, how times have changed. Today, the name Jesus is more likely to be used as a swear word than a reference to our Savior and King. If you overhear people talking about Christianity in a restaurant or on the street, the tone is likely to be quite derogatory.⁴ If you talk to someone about Christianity, the reactions tend to range from offense to suspicion to polite indifference to a blank face—they have no clue what you’re talking about. Polls tell us that Vermont, New Hampshire,

¹ See Elijah Kellogg, “Religious Worship in the Early Century,” reprinted in *Elijah Kellogg: The Man and His Work*, W. B. Mitchell (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1903). See also http://www.osv.org/explore_learn/village_tour.html?L=27#A-163.

² See Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 10, 21.

³ Article 11, amending Article 3 of the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution. As cited in Noll, 10.

⁴ Josh Cousineau, “Mission New England (Part One),” Project TGM Blog, Oct. 3, 2012. Available at: <http://projecttgm.com/2012/10/mission-new-england-part-1/>.

Maine, and Massachusetts are the top four least religious states in the U.S. Only about 2% of New Englanders attend evangelical churches, and the percentage of atheists or agnostics here in Massachusetts is nearly double the national average—nearly 17%.⁵ And for many, as one writer notes, “it is not that they have turned their back on the family religion, or let their parents down by bailing on the Easter service this year . . . Their parents probably didn’t go to church much in the first place.” We live in what has been described as a post-Christian or “gospel-depleted” culture.⁶

And yet, the gospel of Jesus is afoot. Two major publications have run stories in the last month and half on what they call a “quiet revival” in New England—a growing movement of evangelical faith, much of it among immigrant communities (which is awesome), but a significant portion of it among English speakers as well.⁷ This is really exciting. God is doing something here. And it’s at this time, in this place, among this culture, that he has given us, as Westgate, a vision to be a gospel-centered community living each day on mission for Christ.

My point in comparing the difference between New England’s gospel heritage and the largely gospel-deprived climate of today is *not* to suggest, “Wouldn’t it be great to go back to the glory days?” I’m not suggesting that they had everything right, nor that they faced no harsh opposition, nor that it was even a good idea for the church and state to operate so closely together. Rather my goal in here is underscore the fact that we live in a very different world today. And yet, many of the ways churches go about trying to reach people for the gospel today are more at home in the world that existed back then, when church was a valued and trusted part of culture, when people knew who you were talking about when you said the name Jesus. A lot of ministries today still depend on getting people to come to the building, instead of going and bringing the gospel to where they are living.

So what does it look like for us as *this people*, in *this area*, at *this moment in history*, to move toward, even to charge toward the vision God has given us to be a gospel-centered community living each day on mission for Christ? What will it take for our experience of ‘church’ to be less like something we *go to*, and more like something we *are*—a family of missionary servants empowered by God’s Spirit to make disciples for Christ? To share life together as a community, not just when we gather on Sunday morning, but as a normal rhythm of our life? And to share life not just with each other, but with others around us who don’t yet know the Lord, laying our lives down in loving service for one another, and bringing the gospel of Jesus to bear on every part of life? What will it take for us, here and now, to live as a gospel-centered community on mission?

That’s the question we’re focusing on in the month of January (and will continue to wrestle with it far beyond). And when I say “we” I mean *we*—all of us together. I don’t have all the answers.

⁵ See http://www.netsinstitute.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=111&Itemid=186.

⁶ Josh Cousineau, “Mission New England.”

⁷ Ruth Graham, “Re-evangelizing New England,” Slate Magazine, Nov. 27, 2012. Available at: http://www.slate.com/articles/life/faithbased/2012/11/re_evangelizing_new_england_how_church_planting_and_musical_festivals_are.html. G. Jeffrey MacDonald, “Who’s filling America’s church pews,” Christian Science Monitor, Dec. 23, 2012. Available at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2012/1223/Who-s-filling-America-s-church-pews>.

I want us to grapple with this together, which is why we have a couple of meetings for us to pray and discuss and dream together about tangible next steps.

God is at work in New England. And he has given us a vision of how he wants us to serve him. What does that look like? This morning our focus is on the center of that vision—that which everything flows out of and points back to: *the gospel*. The gospel as center, and what difference that makes.

The Gospel as Center

What is the gospel? Why must it be central to our lives, relationships, and mission? And what practical difference does it make?

The word gospel means “good news,” specifically the good news of what God has done to establish his kingdom and deal with our sin through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. Paul’s opening greeting in Galatians gives us a wonderful summary of this gospel message. Galatians 1:3-5:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

In these verses we see *a God with a plan*—God, who does all things according to his will, for the sake of his own glory. God created all things and rules over all history, and he has a plan for his creation that humanity would give him the glory and worship that he alone deserves, and find their life and joy and satisfaction in him.

But we also see here *a people with a problem*—people are sinners, and we live in the “present evil age.” All humanity has turned from God in rebellion, rejecting his plan, and as a result, God’s good creation is fallen in sin—it doesn’t work the way it should. Not only is it broken; it is in bondage to sin. We are enslaved to our rebellious impulses which master us. We live in an evil age. But the problem of sin is not merely that things don’t go the way they should, but that a holy God will judge our sin and rebellion. He will bring to justice those who throw off his rightful rule, pouring out his holy anger and wrath on sinners in the end.

And yet, praise be to God, we also see in these verses *a Savior with a solution*—Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, in order to deliver us from our sins and rescue us from the present evil age, in accordance with God’s plan, for the sake of God’s glory. God in his incomparable love, chose to act in *grace* toward a rebellious humanity. That means that though we deserved something terrible for our rebellion, he offers us something wonderful instead—new life, forgiveness, adoption into his family through his Son Jesus Christ. He sent his own Son to live the life of holiness and faithfulness that we couldn’t live, and to take on himself the full penalty of our sin—all the holy anger of God’s wrath against us—and to exhaust that wrath, paying the price in full, on the cross. Through the cross and resurrection of Jesus, God deals justly with sin and mercifully with sinners, in order to forgive us and give us new life by the Holy Spirit.

That is the hope of the gospel, and it’s a hope we take hold of not by cleaning up our lives, or going to church often enough, or being a better person, but *by faith*. By trusting fully in Jesus—in who he is and what he’s done for us. As Paul says later in ch. 2, “a person is not justified [or

declared in the right with God] by works of the law [what we do] but through faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16).

The gospel is all about what God has done for us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is *news*, not advice. It’s not something we do for God; it’s news of what he’s done for us. And this gospel—this news—changes everything. That’s why it must be the center of all we are and all we do as a church.

What do we mean by the phrase “gospel-centered”? Simply this: that *everything flows out of the gospel and points back to the gospel*. It is the center. It’s the *source* of all that we are, all that we have, all that we do; it all comes from God and what he’s done by his Spirit through Jesus. And it’s the *goal* of all that we are, all that we have, and all that we do; everything points back to God’s redeeming work through Jesus, that he might be glorified and we might be truly satisfied in him. The gospel of Jesus shapes our focus by keeping us guided by Scripture and intent on making disciples. It shapes our identity by rooting us in our union with Jesus. It shapes our relationships by keeping us reliant on grace. It shapes our very ability to walk with God by keeping us dependent on the Holy Spirit.

We never move on from or outgrow the gospel. It’s been common in recent decades to think of the gospel of Jesus as merely the front door of the Christian faith. As author Jerry Bridges puts it, “We have a truncated view of the gospel, tending to see it only as a door we walk through to become a Christian. In this view, the gospel is only for unbelievers. Once you become a Christian, you don’t need it anymore except to share with people still outside the door. What you need to hear instead are the challenges and how-tos of discipleship. . . . we fail to see it as the basis of our day-to-day acceptance with Him. As a result, many believers live in spiritual poverty.”⁸

So in other words, many of us rightly understand that we’re saved by grace and the Spirit’s power, but then once we’re in, we move away from that gospel truth and power and live as though the Christian life depends on our own effort and performance. We still agree with the truth of the gospel, it just has little practical affect on how we live our lives. It’s not central.

The problem with living that way is not only that it’s unbiblical; it’s deadly. And yet it is perhaps the greatest fundamental temptation that every church faces—to move away from the gospel, not just in what we believe, but in how we live out the Christian life. This is the temptation that the churches in Galatia were facing when Paul wrote this letter. Look with me at ch. 1:6-9:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel--⁷ which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!⁹ As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

The churches in Galatia had been infiltrated by a group of people often referred to as “the Judaizers”—those who were trying to convince the churches that the gospel of Jesus—faith in

⁸ Jerry Bridges, *The Gospel for Real Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 12-13.

his life, death, and resurrection for us—was not enough to truly know and walk with God; one still had to live like a Jew, to keep the Old Covenant law, including circumcision, in order to be in the right and to live rightly with God. This was not merely a matter of doctrine—what they believed; it was also of practice—how they lived. Having begun with the right foundation (i.e. God’s grace, justification by faith, dependence on the Spirit, and adherence to God’s Word), the Galatians were now at risk of making the tragic mistake of moving away from the gospel in their faith and practice. As Paul says in 3:3: “Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?”

In their case, the temptation was to look backward to Israel’s law before Christ had come. Our temptation today is more often to look sideways to new laws of our own making—our own rules and standards, what we can accomplish in and of ourselves, forgetting God’s grace and Spirit. We create a culture of performance that fuels either self-righteousness and pride among those who can keep up the show, or self-loathing and shame among those who can’t. This kind of culture often looks good from the street, but it’s not real. It’s painted on. And therefore it can produce neither lasting change in our lives and relationships nor bear genuine fruit in our efforts to advance the gospel.

Only the gospel of Jesus can change us and change others around us. It must remain central to all that we are and do, if we are to be faithful to God, and particularly faithful to the vision he’s given us.

Let’s think about what’s at stake for a few minutes. Think about how keeping the gospel central shapes our *focus* as a church—what we’re about. If we look at Paul’s focus in Galatians, we see that it both came from the gospel—from what God had done in his life. As he says in 1:15-16, “God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me *so that I might preach him among the Gentiles. . . .*” His focus came from the gospel, and it points back to the gospel—his aim in life was to make much of Christ. He says in 6:14: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, . . .” The goal of his labors was to help others know Christ, to delight in him and depend upon him, and so reflect his glory. He describes his ministry among the Galatians in 4:19 as being “in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.”

So the question is: *how do our ministries work together to bring the gospel of Jesus to bear on our lives and the lives of our neighbors and friends who don’t yet know Jesus?* Is the gospel of Jesus our focus? Does it give shape and significance and direction to all that we’re doing? Do our ministries emphasize not just what God expects of us but how God supplies for us all that he commands through the gospel? How comfortable do you feel explaining the gospel to a non-Christian? How about helping a fellow Christian apply the gospel to a question, a conflict, or a situation in their life—to help them see how what God has done through the death and resurrection of his Son, by his grace, in the power of his Spirit—how that speaks to whatever matter we’re facing?

Maybe it’s dealing with a grouchy neighbor. How does the grace of God in Jesus give us a patience and love for that neighbor, and remind us that there’s something greater at stake than getting their dog to stop pooping in our yard—their souls?

Maybe it's fighting an ongoing sin. Do we only give our friend strategies for how to avoid temptation, or do we bring them to cross where that sin was dealt with decisively, where Christ became that sin on our behalf to cleanse us and forgive us and free us from our sin. Do we help them lean by faith on the Spirit's power, rather than the weakness of our own flesh? Do we labor in prayer with them, opening our lives to them, sharing their burden? And how are we as shepherds doing at helping you to love one another that way?

The gospel of Jesus must be our focus. Because if the gospel doesn't give us focus, either we'll lack focus as a church and be all over the map, or we'll become all about something *other than* what God is doing to establish his kingdom and deal with sin explicitly through the death and resurrection of his Son. We'll give ourselves to some other mission than making disciples for Christ. It may even be a good thing, but it's a secondary thing. And if it doesn't flow out of the gospel and point back to the gospel, it will be powerless to accomplish anything of lasting significance for God. The centrality of the gospel must shape our focus.

What about our *identity*—who we are? Think about how keeping the gospel central shapes our identity. We'll look more specifically at this question next week, and our identity as a church. But so much of what we struggle with in life is rooted in a poor understanding of who we are. We find our value and significance in what we have, where we live, what we do, in what others have done to us. We try and anchor it in our accomplishments and achievements—even spiritual achievements. Or try to hide our failures and flaws, and bury our wounds. Because we want to look good for God and for one another. We want to be loved and accepted.

But listen to where Paul anchors his identity in Galatians—in the gospel of Jesus. He says in 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” When we believe in Jesus, we are united with him in his life, death, and his resurrection—our old self, in bondage to sin, is crucified and done away with, and we are raised spiritually, born again, to new life in Christ. Our identity and significance comes from our relationship with, our *union* with Jesus our Savior and King. As one author describes, “You aren't what's been done to you but what Jesus has done for you. You aren't what you do but what Jesus has done. What you do doesn't determine who you are. Rather, who you are in Christ determines what you do.”⁹ And the security of having our identity rooted in our union with Christ frees us to risk loving, to risk serving, even to risk being rejected for the gospel's sake, because we know we are accepted by God on the basis of Jesus.

The gospel of Jesus has a huge impact on our *relationships*. What's at stake in keeping the gospel central to our relationships? Our default mode as humans is to perform for God and others, and to make others perform for us. We're all legalists at heart. Which makes us downplay the sinfulness of our sin, and exaggerate how good and holy we are, because we think that by that (again, back to identity) we'll find acceptance, or otherwise get our way.

But our relationship with God is not based on performance, but grace. Otherwise, Jesus would have never needed to die on the cross. That's what Paul says in Galatians 2:21: “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for

⁹ Mark Driscoll, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 3.

nothing!” If you in your flesh and self effort were capable of keeping God’s law perfectly and earning his affection, then there’s no need for Jesus. But you’re not, and I’m not. We are poor, miserable, weak, and needy sinners apart from Christ. Sinners upon whom God has lavished his grace by giving us his Son.

So our relationship with God is not contingent on our behavior, but Christ’s behavior. We are declared in the right with God, or *justified*, not by works, but by faith. By believing in Jesus. Again, Galatians 2:16: We “know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”

This truth not only affects our relationship with God, but how we interact with one another as well. When we’re united by faith with Jesus, we’re united with each other, too—all who are in Christ. Paul says in 3:26-28: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” And so our relationships—how we treat one another—should both flow out of the gospel and point back to the gospel as well.

Paul illustrates what’s at stake in applying the gospel to our relationships in chapter 2, where he tells a story about a conflict he encountered while in the city of Antioch—a story that illustrates the problem the Galatians were facing. Paul had had a beautiful, unifying time with the other apostles in Jerusalem as they compared the message they were preaching and recognized God’s call on each other’s ministries. But Paul says in v. 11:

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.¹² Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.¹³ The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.¹⁴ When I saw that they were *not acting in line with the truth of the gospel*, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? (2:11-14)

Talk about an awkward conversation—the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter, two pillars of the church, duking it out publically. But what’s interesting here is that their disagreement was not over doctrine (what to believe). Rather, the disagreement was whether Peter’s *behavior* of usually eating with Gentiles (non-Jews), but then pulling back from in order to win the approval of certain men who looked down on that—whether that behavior was “in line with the truth of the gospel.” And Paul points out clearly that it wasn’t. What Paul is saying is that Peter lost sight of the gospel, and it had a devastating effect on relationships within the body of Christ.

That’s pretty easy to do. In our selfishness, we ignore others, we neglect others, we even take advantage of others in order to get what we want, using people instead of loving them. In our fear, we avoid people, or marginalize them, or tear others down to make ourselves look good, forgetting our acceptance in Christ and putting on a show to keep others happy. In our pain, we withhold forgiveness from those who hurt us, closing our hearts off in silent bitterness, or in vengeance seeking to inflict on them the same pain they caused us.

So what did Paul do when Peter stepped out of line with the truth of the gospel? He pointed him back to the gospel. He reminded him what we just read a minute ago (v. 15): “We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. . . .” (2:15-16). The gospel of Jesus reminds us that all who trust in Christ, no matter what they’ve done or where they’re from, are now family. It reminds us that just as God lavished his grace on us while we were yet sinners, so we are to give grace to those who hurt us, and receive grace for how we’ve hurt others. The gospel of Jesus is what frees us to deal honestly with our own sin and insufficiency, because it provides an adequate solution to deal with our sin: the grace of God and the power of the Spirit. We need to act in line with that truth.

And it’s the gospel itself that gives us the strength to walk in line with that truth, because, again, the gospel is about what God has done and is doing by the Holy Spirit. Let’s think about what’s at stake in how the gospel shapes our *ability* to walk with God in obedience.

As Jerry Bridges noted earlier, so much of our Christian experience has been all about “the challenges and how-tos of discipleship.” These are not bad things; these are very good and necessary things. Our mission is to make disciples of all nations, as we’ll look at it in two weeks. But the “challenges and how-tos” by themselves are powerless things. No matter how simple the strategy or method is, our flesh is incapable of accomplishing God’s purposes. Our effort will never be enough. And again, when we rely on what we can accomplish for God in our own effort and ingenuity, we’re going to cycle back and forth between pride and despair as we succeed and fail, succeed and fail, and fail, and wonder why we never seem to be able to get things right for very long.

But the gospel of Jesus points us not to ourselves and our own effort; it doesn’t tell us to tighten the belt strap or look deep within; instead it points us to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. That’s what Paul rebuked the Galatians for moving away from in 3:3. That’s what he calls them to rely on in chapter 5. Verse 16: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (5:16, ESV). It is the Spirit of God who has the power to produce in us the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control befitting our community and our mission. “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (5:25, ESV). Our very ability to walk with God flows out of the gospel and points back to the gospel.

The gospel of Jesus affects everything. It’s what shapes us into a community; it’s what guides and fuels us on mission. We never outgrow our need for it; it must remain central in all we do. It is the gospel of Jesus that has the power to change lives in New England, as God makes himself known through us by the Holy Spirit in the face of Jesus Christ.