

Have You Ever Really Heard The Gospel?

Are you sure?

My friend, as I listen and observe, I am convinced that many people have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“But Pastor, you are preaching to the choir. I go to church.”

Friend, just because you go to church (or used to go) does not necessarily mean that you have heard the gospel. It appears that whole churches and denominations cannot give a clear answer to the simple question, “What is the gospel?”

Many have bought a message which was hawked as the gospel, assuming it to be what it was labeled. On the other hand, some have rejected the same teaching, and now they refuse to hear even the true gospel.

If I gave you a sheet of paper and asked you to write down the answer to this question, what would you say? *What is the gospel?*

Everyone in the Bible-belt of America knows that the term *gospel* literally means good message, good news, glad tidings. Let us first consider what it is not, and then we will consider what it is.

What the gospel is not:

1. The gospel is not: *Everything will be all right, anyhow, somehow.* (That is simply blind optimism; it is faith in fate or in mathematical probability. Such is fodder for cults and psychologists. God has nothing to do with this at all.)

2. The gospel is not: *Everyone is basically good to begin with, but we all have a few minor flaws. However, by doing the best we can, by being a nice person and helping others, we win God's approval. It doesn't really matter if you are a Buddhist or a Moslem, etc., as long as you are sincere.* (This is all patently false, because in God's sight none of us is good, not even one; nor can we do what the infinitely Holy One regards as good. Notice that Christ does not even enter the equation in this erroneous gospel.)

3. Here is a variation of the preceding: *If I do the best I can, Christ will make up for the part that is lacking; and of course I've always been a pretty good person, so there isn't much to make up.* (But this too is a mixture of works and grace, which the Bible utterly condemns. Christ will not be relegated to the level of an auxiliary.)

4. The gospel is not: *God loves everybody and everybody is going to heaven. God, like Santa Claus, makes big threats, but in the end He overlooks all our sins, except maybe those of Adolph Hitler.* (This, of course, is what we are led to believe at most funerals. Alas, some even hold out hope for Hitler!)

5. The gospel is not: *You will get rich and never again be sick if you come to Christ.* (This is the prosperity gospel of many televangelists. With our naturally selfish nature, it is not surprising that this get-rich-quick scheme is readily accepted. Covetousness is now called a virtue!)

6. The gospel is not: *Feel good about yourself. You are someone special. Let's boost your self-esteem to new heights with this psychological self-help program!* (Even a cursory reading of Holy Scripture gives the lie to such flattery. Pride is an accomplice to all sin.)

7. The gospel is not: *Salvation is found in a church. I just leave it to the professionals or priests to sweat the details and dispense my salvation to me.* (This detached posture makes man, not God, to be the savior. Man, not Christ, becomes the object of trust in this subtle shift.)

8. The gospel is not: *The Son of God, Jesus Christ, came to point out the way, to show us how to*

live, to teach a good philosophy of life. By following His example, we will enter heaven. (The truth is, Christ is the way. More, than a teacher, He is the curriculum! Thank God for His example—but we need a Redeemer.)

9. The gospel is not: *Get this eternal fire-insurance policy, which becomes binding when you say the “sinner’s prayer”.* Make Jesus your Savior now, but not necessarily your Lord. (Eternal punishment is not avoided simply by repeating a prayer as if it were a magical formula. If a person is saved from hell, he is also saved from the dominion of sin which leads to hell. Multitudes have been deceived into thinking that they can live like hell and still go to heaven.)

10. The gospel is not: *Jesus Christ has made it easy now to be saved—at least easier than it was in the Old Testament time, when the Israelites had to offer sacrifices and keep the law in order to be saved. All we have to do now is believe. In the New Testament time, believing takes the place of working; believing is the easiest work of all.* (No, there has ever been only one way of salvation, namely, through the obedience and sacrifice of Christ. It is all by God’s grace.)

11. The gospel is not: *Everyone is made potentially savable by Christ’s work on the cross...as if God puts everyone on the starting line, and those who cross the finish line get an applause. Good luck!* (Some are even applauded at the altar call nowadays! This whole impersonal scheme actually saves no one. It is anything but good news.)

12. Similarly, the gospel is not: *Christ has done all He can do to save your soul; now you must do the rest. Together, you and He can make it happen. All you have to do is contribute your _____.* Fill in the blank with whatever your church teaches: i.e. baptism, sacraments, money, prayer, decision, faith, tears, tongues, etc. The equation looks like this:

Christ’s death + your baptism =
acceptance with God.

or

Christ’s death + your cooperation =
acceptance with God.

or

Christ’s death + your anything =
acceptance with God.

(Yes, even faith is commonly regarded as a work of merit by which you “get saved”. But the Bible plainly tells us that faith is a gift from God, not a praiseworthy donation originating in us, not a sort of compliment we pay to God.)

What then is the gospel?

The gospel equation looks like this:

Christ’s death in the sinner’s place =
acceptance with God.

There is nothing to add—Christ does it all! The problem with all twelve of the items above is that they in one way or another make man his own savior, as he contributes some kind of work.

In ourselves, we are guilty before a just and holy God, our Creator and Sovereign. Our sin and our sins have separated us from Him who is infinitely holy and pure. We have broken His commandments and deserve nothing but His punishment. Further, we are utterly bankrupt and incapable of paying the debt we owe. Nor can we do anything which would reverse this just sentence upon us, or secure His approval of us.

But out of the sheer goodness of His heart, not due to anything good in man now or ever, God has freely taken upon Himself to redeem sinners. How is this possible? How could a holy God receive unholy sinners? How could the Judge acquit the guilty and maintain justice? The answer lies in the gospel!

God the Father sent His only begotten Son, co-eternal and co-equal with Him, from heaven to earth to pay the price of sin. After living a perfect and sinless life, He laid down that life on the cross of Calvary. There, the wrath of God was poured out on Him. There, the transaction was accomplished, the debt canceled, a real atonement made. The death of Christ in and of itself actually secured redemption for all those for whom He died. The Father in heaven was satisfied. Justice was upheld. At the same time, the guilty was pardoned and reconciled. Thus, God is morally self-consistent in His justifying of the ungodly.

The very heart of the gospel lies in two facts:

- First, the sins of Christ's people were laid on Him, and He died.
- Second, the perfection of Christ was laid on His people, and they live.

This two-way imputation is the good news. Both events always work in tandem. Wherever the first occurs, the second also occurs. That is simply to say that Christ was a substitute for individual persons, and He is indeed a "personal Savior".

God's gospel is so amazing, so full of wonder! How many judges do you know who would punish their own son, and set the criminal free? How many would then adopt him into the family forever? Such a love is uniquely divine. This is truly the glorious gospel of the blessed God. Anything less is no gospel at all to unworthy helpless rebels like you and me.

Friend, you do not need to add anything to what Christ has done. To attempt to do so is the height of arrogance and blasphemy, a desecration of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. God does not need your help. Rather, you need His help and deliverance. Come to Him, look to Him, bow to His authority as the King who rose from the dead and sits on the right hand of the Father. Turn away from your sin. Repent of your evil deeds as well as your good deeds and flee to Christ. Trust only in His merits. Believe on Him.

"But Pastor, didn't you just say that faith does not save? Now you are telling me to have faith."

Exactly! It is not faith *per se* that saves, but Jesus Christ Himself who saves. You must receive everything from Him. He is the source of all things that pertain to life and godliness. He must be the object of your faith. Don't look to your faith, look to the Savior! Say with the hymn-writer,

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling.

Even your clinging is a work of His grace! Otherwise, you could not cling to Him at all. By His enabling, cling to Him now!

Dear reader, this is the only true gospel. Don't be deceived by a counterfeit. Your soul cannot afford to be fuzzy on this issue. Is this the gospel you have believed? Is this the gospel you have rejected?