

THE GOSPEL

The Gospel is the good news of the grace of God in Christ Jesus. No one knows it by nature, and no one can discover it by human reason. Apart from Jesus Christ, human beings are without God in this world, and God is a consuming fire. God has revealed the Gospel. It has the highest value and the deepest meaning for our lives. The essence of this good news is that God is gracious to us because of the vicarious satisfaction that Jesus has achieved for all sinners in the world.

A “gospel” that does not proclaim Christ’s vicarious satisfaction, but sets up Christ as another giver of laws, is no gospel at all. Neither is a teaching that people by their moral lives without Christ are “anonymous Christians”, or that Jesus is an example to follow because He was a great teacher and a very good man.

If the Gospel is to have its proper effect, God’s Law must also be preached. The Law makes its appeal to the innate consciences of human beings, even though sin has corrupted the clarity of their consciences, and God’s revealed Law exposes all people as guilty persons, who deserve damnation. The chief purposes of the Law are to show people that they have not kept it, to accuse them, and to condemn them. The “strength of sin is the Law.” Without the Law the Gospel lulls people into spiritual sleep and carnal security. Does anyone feel the need of medicine when he does not think he is sick? When people despair of fulfilling the Law’s demands and, moved by the Spirit of God, cling to Christ’s cross, the Gospel comes into its own.

The Gospel establishes the Law. It shows that the Law has not lost its authority, but that the debt that was owed under the Law has been paid. The Law tells us that God was right to demand payment of the debt. Jesus Christ is our substitute, who has fulfilled the Law for us. His bitter and shameful death was the payment of the penalty of our guilt. The joyful message of Jesus’ resurrection is the receipt that the debt has been paid, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, and it is valid before God.

Some people have died because they championed a just cause and had high ideals that were not understood. Some people like them are honoured afterwards. Jesus had high moral ideals, and He was sinless; but He did not die because of His high ideals. His death was not a death that brought Him honour, like a death on a battlefield, but to the people of His time it was a criminal’s death, in a public execution. He was “numbered among the transgressors.” To die on a cross was so disgraceful that Roman citizens were legally free from facing that penalty. Romans reserved crucifixion for slaves and criminals of the worst sort. Jesus died the death we had deserved, and He died as one condemned by an earthly judge and the leaders of His own people. The Law of the Jews said that being hanged on a tree meant being under God’s curse. God condemned Jesus and forsook Him as the Sin-bearer. Right at the centre of the Gospel there is this offence of the cross and also this change of places. God reckoned Jesus as the sinner, and declares sinners righteous. God was not unjust to do so, because He met the cost of that verdict Himself, when His Son laid down His life for sinners voluntarily.

Because Jesus is God, the price that He paid was a perfect price. It was a ransom that was able to deliver all lost sinners. Because He is God, the blood He took from our humanity had the power to atone, and the flesh He took from our humanity has the power to give life. Because He redeemed sinners, their justification is complete. All that people need to do is to receive God’s verdict as a gift.

Every promise of salvation without Christ is a vain hope. Attempts to comfort sinners apart from Him are useless.

The Gospel is unconditional. It is good news, because it does not require levels of goodness before a person can receive it, or levels of satisfaction to make up for what been done wrong. It is God’s declaration of reconciliation to the sinful world. It is the proclamation that God justifies the ungodly for Jesus Christ’s sake.

The ceremonial laws of the Old Testament share some of the nature of the Gospel. Many of them were types of the Saviour who was going to come, and they help to explain what He has done. The festival of the new moon spoke to the Jews about the coming true Light of the world. The Sabbath prefigured the rest that was going to come to people through Christ. The year of jubilee was a type of the New Testament times, when the Messiah would achieve freedom and cancel mankind’s debts to God. The unblemished Passover lambs, of which people were not to break any bone, pointed forward to the true Lamb of God, and the coming Passover meal, the Lord’s Supper. The many sacrifices taught the Israelites that there was no forgiveness without the shedding of blood. They pointed forward to the sinless Son of God, who would make one sacrifice for all time with His blood. The atonement-cover, the solid gold lid of the covenant-box, on which the high priest sprinkled blood each year, was a type of the death of Christ on the cross, which appeased God’s wrath against sin and His just demands for death as punishment. Christ fulfilled this ceremonial law, not only in the sense that He obeyed its requirements perfectly, like the Sabbath and the laws about ceremonial cleanness, but also through His life and death, which

those regulations and ceremonies had foreshadowed. The tearing of the veil of the temple when Jesus died was a clear indication that the time of those shadows had passed.

The Gospel is not only the message that God has graciously provided salvation for sinful mankind, but it is also the means through which God offers, conveys, and seals His salvation. It is the means through which God powerfully works faith in those who hear it. In other words, the Gospel is not only a report about the forgiveness of sin, but it applies it.

The Gospel provides God's forgiveness richly, in the preached Word, in absolution, through the mutual consolation that Christians give each other, and in the visible Word in both Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The doctrine of the ministry rests on these two pillars: that Jesus has won forgiveness and salvation for all people, and that the Gospel offers and applies this forgiveness and salvation to people.

We must never hanker for something more than the Gospel. We should not rely on our own feelings and experiences; or look for confirmation in miracles, answered prayers, and success to confirm that the Gospel is true. Faith in Christ rests on the word of the Gospel alone. Church services, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper are not in the category of ordinances to follow. For the Gospel is God's means of grace, charged with the God's forgiveness. The Gospel is also the means by which the Holy Spirit preserves and strengthens faith.

The Gospel is not a contribution the church can make towards making this world a better place. It is the message to every person, "Nevertheless, God loves you in Christ Jesus." It is a message of joy, peace, and hope, which this world cannot give. May God grant that we continue to confess the Gospel, with penitent, and thankful hearts!

Let us thank God that we still have the Gospel! With it we shall accomplish the purposes for which God has placed our church in this world. Indeed, the more faithful we are in this, the more we shall also accomplish our social and political responsibilities as honourable citizens.

Because the Gospel is good news, mission work is necessary. God is still sparing the world the fire of judgment day, so that Christians may proclaim the Gospel. We ought to make use of every means that we can to tell this news. It is a great privilege to take this news to people who are bewildered, and facing an eternity of torment without hope. May He grant that we are not ashamed of it, but eager to spread it!