

The Gospel Centered Life

TEXT: 1 Cor 2:2

Words for kids:

“What one thing could you do (you aren’t doing now) that if you did on a regular basis, would make a tremendous positive difference in your personal life?” (S. Covey, *7 Habits*, 146 – Habit 3: Put first things first)

The turn of a new year is always a time of personal reflection and evaluation, at least for many people, myself included. I came across this question in my reading in the last few weeks and have been mulling it over and discussing it with others ever since.

1 Corinthians 2:2 brings us to one of those “one thing” confrontations: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” It would be hard to overstate the influence this verse has had on my life and on my perspective on pastoral ministry, especially in the last 10 years or so. People (and churches) can do a lot of different things, but this statement clarifies matters immensely: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” That simplifies things.

Paul was entirely and exclusively centered on the gospel. If you asked him our question: “What one thing could you do that would make a tremendous positive difference in your life?,” he’d reply: “Nothing could make a more positive difference than to know Jesus Christ and Him crucified. That’s my passion. That’s my center. That’s my life.”

What’s your passion? What’s your center? What’s your life? As you begin this new year, what occupies your thoughts and intentions? Do any of your resolutions involve the gospel?

For Paul, nothing is more important than the gospel. Nothing was more central to Christian living than the gospel. Why? Why must our lives be gospel centered?

- The sufficiency of the gospel
- The power of the gospel
- The exclusivity of the gospel

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Scr. Reading: 1 Cor 2:1-5

The Sufficiency of the Gospel

Notice how emphatic Paul is:

- “I decided” – a premeditated course of action; considered the options, the evidence, and made a deliberate judgment (NIV – “resolved”)
- “to know nothing” – not “mostly” or “repeatedly” or “initially.” The language is categorical and utterly exclusive—nothing else. No other topics, no other lessons, no other distractions. Paul’s life and ministry were emphatically one-dimensional.

But what does Paul mean? Didn’t he ever teach on other topics like morality or marriage or giving or prayer or spiritual gifts? Was John 3:16 his only sermon text every single day?

What he means is that he never got beyond the gospel into more advanced Christian teaching. The gospel is not just the ABCs of Christianity; it’s A to Z. It’s not a narrow introduction to online shopping; it’s Amazon.com, where you can find whatever your shopping needs demand. The gospel isn’t just for unbelievers; it’s for Christians, too:

Romans 1:15 *I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.* [The “you” reading Paul’s letter were saints in the church in Rome.]

Often we think we need the gospel for justification, but we need information and willpower for sanctification. Justified by faith, sanctified by hard work.

Galatians 3:1-3 *O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. ² Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*

As Graeme Goldsworthy writes in *According to Plan*:

Examination of the New Testament documents shows that growth is not stepping out from the gospel, but rather stepping out with the gospel.(219)

Whenever we step out from the gospel, we stumble and go astray. No matter how good our intentions: “I’m going to stop losing my temper, stop worrying, stop lusting, start reading my Bible, start helping the poor, start being more patient with annoying people,” we won’t make any real progress without the gospel. Instead, we’ll strangle ourselves!

“All our problems,” Keller writes, “come from a failure to apply the gospel” (“The Centrality of the Gospel” essay). No matter what our situation, the main solution is to think through the deep implications of the gospel and put it to use in our life. The key to spiritual growth is to discover and rediscover the height and depth and breadth of the gospel.

I want to take you through several examples of this, but first we need to be clear on what exactly the gospel is.

1 Corinthians 15:3-4 *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,*

Here’s my attempt to sum it up: **Jesus Christ, the sinless God-Man, absorbed the unrestrained fury of God’s wrath against our sin so that you and I, rebellious sinners, could enjoy the unreserved benefits of God’s pleasure in Him.** That is good news! It’s the gospel. And for Paul, every aspect of Christian teaching is summed up in it. D. A. Carson explains:

What he means is that all he does and teaches is tied to the cross. He cannot long talk about Christian joy, or Christian ethics, or Christian fellowship, or the Christian doctrine of God, or anything else, without finally tying it to the cross. Paul is gospel-centered; he is cross-centered. (*The Cross & Christian Ministry*, 38)

Some examples:

- Feelings of guilt and fear
Romans 8:1 *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*
- Assurance that God will supply
Romans 8:32 *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?*
- Sexual purity
1 Corinthians 6:19-20 *do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*
- Financial giving
2 Corinthians 8:9 *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.*

- Hypocrisy, cowardice and racism are out of line with the gospel
Galatians 2:14 *But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"*
- Forgiveness
Ephesians 4:32 *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*
- Love
Ephesians 5:2 *walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*
- Marriage
Ephesians 5:25 *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,*
- Christian living is measured by the gospel
Philippians 1:27 *Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ*
- Sound doctrine is measured by the gospel
1 Timothy 1:10-11 *whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, ¹¹ in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.*
- Unjust treatment from others
1 Peter 2:23 *When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.*

As John Stott writes so eloquently:

We never grow out of the cross; we rather grow more deeply into it and into the fullness of its implications. (*The Cross of Christ*)

The Power of the Gospel

Why is Paul so determined to center his whole life and ministry on the gospel? Because he wanted to be tapped in to God’s power!

vv4-5 *...and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.*

The gospel is direct access to the power of God.

Only two things in Scripture are called “the power of God”:

1 Corinthians 1:23-24 *we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

1 Corinthians 1:18 *For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

The gospel doesn't just connect us with God's power; it IS God's power.

Ever wonder why your life feels out of control? Why you feel so vulnerable? Why Christianity isn't working very well for you? Why you lack power to change, to cope, to help people? Paul knew that would be him, if he let his focus drift to anything else "except Jesus Christ and him crucified." The gospel is the power of God.

How does the gospel function as the power of God in our lives? Two assumptions:

- 1) Our biggest problems are inside, not outside. Real change in our lives happens from the inside out. It's not our circumstances, our relationships, our resources. It's our reactions, our perceptions, our values. It's our heart. If we could change our heart, everything else would be just mop-up duty.

Mark 7:21-23 *For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."*

- 2) What we want is the key feature of our internal life. What we love, crave, desire. Some say "The heart wants what it wants"—mysterious, unchangeable, unexplainable. Until the gospel enters the picture, that is. Only the gospel possesses the power to change the heart:

James 1:13-18 *Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.*

¹⁴ *But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. ¹⁶ ¶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creation.*

As the gospel gets deeper and deeper into our heart—not for

justification (that's all or nothing), but in how we understand it and apply it—we are progressively changed. Notice how Paul describes it in Colossians 1:5-6:

Colossians 1:5-6 *Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing- as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth,*

All over the world, the gospel "is bearing fruit and growing." It is a living organism that produces its own fruit, and it's meant to do this your whole life long: "since the day you heard it." But it won't do this if we neglect it. It's only as we "understand the grace of God in truth" that the gospel exerts its life-giving power and produces fruit in our lives.

The Exclusivity of the Gospel

1 Corinthians 1:20-21 ²⁰ *Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.*

God's wisdom isn't merely different from man's wisdom. In the gospel we find that God's wisdom actually *opposes* man's wisdom.

Perhaps the greatest tendency in the Christian life is to try to approach it with a "Jesus AND" mentality. The gospel PLUS something else. Some secret, elusive key to life and godliness. Some leading options:

- Formalism – participation in religious/spiritual/church activities
- Legalism – spirituality = keeping rules and staying clean
- Mysticism – connect with God via experience and powerful moments
- Activism – Christianity is a quest to eliminate external evil(s)
- Biblicism – master biblical content and theology
- Therapy-ism – need Jesus for healing

(Tripp & Lane, *How People Change*, pp7-10)

Why can't we just adopt these bits of wisdom and practical solutions? Why must we connect all our problems directly to the cross of Christ? Because only in the cross do we find the wisdom of God and the power

of God. According to Isaiah 55:9, heaven and earth are closer together than God's thoughts and man's thoughts. Even our very best ideas will not build God's kingdom, because we do not think the way God does.

Here's a test. Choose an area of your life—parenting, marriage, money, recreation & leisure, relationship issue, work—and ask yourself this question: “Would my approach to this work for a Muslim, a Mormon, or an irreligious secularist?” If so, I would suggest that this is an area of your life that does not conform to Paul's practice “to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

The cross must stand at the center of everything we teach, believe, and live. Otherwise, everything we do will erode into silly, irrelevant myths.

1 Corinthians 15:1-2 *Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain.*

“Hold fast to the word I preached.” Hold fast to the gospel. Our continual temptation and tendency is to let the gospel slip. As Carson says so well:

I fear that the cross, without ever being disowned, is constantly in danger of being dismissed from the central place it must enjoy, by relatively peripheral insights that take on far too much weight. Whenever the periphery is in danger of displacing the center, we are not far removed from idolatry. (*C&CM*, 26)

Let's not start 2014 off-center, in idolatry. “What one thing could you do (you aren't doing now) that if you did on a regular basis, would make a tremendous positive difference in your personal life?” How about this: “to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” For God's glory and our joy.

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