

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST – THE POWER OF GOD

For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith. (Rom 1:16-17)

GOD'S WORD - THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL

The Bible teaches that God's word has two parts. Apostle Paul wrote to the Hebrews referring to God's word in this way: "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). These two parts of God's word, visualized by the two-edged sword, are the Law and the Gospel.

As we begin our discussion on the Gospel, perhaps it would be beneficial to contrast these two parts of God's word, based on scripture. Briefly consider what the Bible teaches to be the purpose of each:

- a. The purpose of the Law is to reveal to man his sinful condition, and to drive man to repent. The Bible says, "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20).
- b. The Gospel, on the other hand, is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes. In other words, it is through that part of his word - the Gospel, that he offers eternal life to believers.

Although the Law is associated with the Old Covenant and the Gospel with the New Covenant, the Old Testament believers were saved by faith, not by works of the Law or by sacrifices. They believed in the promise that God would send a redeemer. Luther states that all the Old Testament promises "from the beginning were founded on Christ", and that "there is no book in the Bible in which both the Law and the Gospel are not found". Examples of the gospel in the Old Testament are found, for instance, in Psalm 103:8-12, where it is written: "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us." Consider also Isaiah's familiar but ever comforting Gospel words: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" (Isa 9:6).

The English word that we use (Gospel) comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word that meant "the story concerning God". The original New Testament word was, of course, Greek. It was a word (euaggelion) that meant "good message". Sometimes in English we say "evangel"; those who

speaking Finn will probably recognize "evankeliumi" as being very similar to the Greek word from which it came. But aside from the technicality of the words, what is the Gospel?

We've already quoted Apostle Paul who characterizes the Gospel as that power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes. Luther says, "The Gospel is the message concerning Christ, the Son of God, who was first humbled and then glorified through the Holy Spirit."

Luther further elaborates on the Gospel in this way: "∑ the Gospel is such doctrine of the word of God that neither requires our works nor commands us to do anything, but announces the offered grace of the forgiveness of sin and eternal salvation. Here we do nothing, but only receive what is offered through the word." The Bible says, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph 2:8-9).

GOD PROCLAIMS THE GOSPEL THROUGH HIS CHILDREN

From our main scriptural heading where Paul cites the Gospel as the power of God unto salvation, he follows up by further clarifying how the Gospel word is spread. Speaking specifically of the Gospel, he writes, "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith" (Rom 1:17). Luther quoted the teaching of "blessed Augustine" (as he referred to him in this connection) regarding this phrase "from faith to faith". Augustine says: "From the faith of those who confess with their mouth to the faith of those who are obedient." The Gospel word does pass from the mouth of a child of God to the listener. Those who believe it are saved.

When one has received the Gospel, that person also becomes a preacher of God's word. Paul reminded the Corinthians, "And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us" (2 Cor 5:18, 20).

An older brother recently wrote about the Gospel in this way, "The path of life into fellowship with Christ is opened only if the conscience awakens and man can receive the Gospel's message of grace and believe it for his salvation." Gospel work continues here on this earth. We want to preach that Gospel as we've been called to do. In this time and visitation we hold the same heart as Paul when he addressed the Christians in Ephesus. He asked them to remember him in this way: "∑that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the Gospel" (Eph 6: 19). We yet preach the Gospel to those on the outside of God's kingdom.

ONLY ONE GOSPEL

Can it happen that someone would be able to become a Christian or believer in some other way than through hearing and believing the Gospel preached from God's kingdom? Not according to God's word. Paul writes: "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the

feet of them that preach the Gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!" (Rom 10:14-15).

Nonetheless, man in his own wisdom continues to believe that there could be some other way to become righteous or heaven-acceptable than by the way God's word teaches. Jesus himself said, "He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber" (John 10:1). Man yet attempts to build other ways -- whether it's from ancient days such as occurred with the Tower of Babel, or from current times. For example, not so many years ago a young teenage boy received the grace of repentance. His parents were religious, but not believing. They were members of the local Lutheran church where the boy had been attending Sunday school in his confirmation year. The parents naturally became concerned when their son changed religion, so to speak. It was a healthy parental concern. They requested a meeting with their own Pastor, their son and several believing people. The parents' concerns were somewhat appeased at the meeting. They were not able to comprehend God's grace for themselves, but at least they knew their son wasn't mixed up in a dangerous cult or some such thing. The Pastor however, felt it would be good to institute into the local Lutheran church's confirmation exercise a spoken assurance to the students that their sins were forgiven. Sad to say, the Holy Spirit was not present to give the words life. The power of the Gospel is not in man's own words, but is by and through the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63).

Acts chapter 9 provides an account of some men who attempted, without the presence of the Holy Spirit, to drive out evil spirits in the name of Jesus. The Bible describes how "the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, and overcame them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded" (Acts 19:13-16). Not only in days past but also in our time it is the Holy Spirit that gives life.

God has established his grace kingdom here on this earth. He has according to his will separated the dwellers of that kingdom from all others. Even from antiquity he has done this. Consider these words from one of the Old Testament books of Moses: "And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the LORD am holy, and have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine" (Lev 20:26). This separation is a spiritual separation. We certainly mingle with unbelievers in our everyday life at work, school and so forth. Jesus did not pray that his own would be taken out of the world, but that they would be kept from evil (see John 17:15). But he gave to his followers alone, the keys to the kingdom. He said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John 20:22-23). It is therefore only from His kingdom that the freeing Gospel is preached.

The Bible relates of an occurrence during early New Testament times in the area of Galatia (modern day Turkey) where some men tried to preach another Gospel, a different Gospel. Can it be that there is a different Gospel? Here's what Apostle Paul said of this matter, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another Gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the Gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other Gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:6-8).

THE GOSPEL BEGETS NEW LIFE AND NEW OBEDIENCE

The effect of believing the Gospel is new life and new obedience through faith. The Bible says, "Σ If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor 5:17). Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor 4:1-2).

The Bible illustrates in many connections how believing the Gospel effects new life and obedience. For example, one time when Jesus passed through Jericho, there was a certain man who sought to see Jesus. His name was Zacchaeus and he was a chief tax collector -- a profession that presented lots of opportunity to exact more from taxpayers than was due. After Zacchaeus was able to believe the Gospel he vowed to give half of his goods to the poor, and to make fourfold restitution where he had wrongfully exacted. The Gospel word performs its work in those who believe. The Holy Spirit governs the believer's heart. Paul told the newly converted in Thessalonica, "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe" (1 Thes 2:13).

THE GOSPEL – OUR STRENGTH

Once heard and believed, the Gospel remains the source of strength in a believer's faith life. Our Lord Jesus spoke of living water - the Gospel, which flows freely from the grace fountain. The sojourner longs for fellowship with other believers, whether in the smallest Zion at home for example, or at some other gathering where the words of life are heard. We are well acquainted with Christ's words: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt 18:20).

How well it's known to the faith traveler that because of our weak flesh, we experience sin and as a result the conscience suffers. A dear brother who was recently called away to the peaceful sleep of the blessed (Eino Kimpimaki) had thus conveyed the sojourner's experience: "What grace brings, sin consumes". The Psalm writer lamented: "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer (Ps 32:3-4). The living water, the comforting Gospel word, has been that life-giving moisture and has reassured us again and again.

What a comfort it has been to the child of God that the grace privilege of private confession also exists. Over 30 years ago Erkki Reinikainen wrote concerning private confession, which is closely tied to the Gospel word: "Confession is not a condition for salvation, but an especially precious grace gift from God". Luther says: "For when we've laid bare our conscience to our brother and privately made known to him the evil that lurked within, we receive from our brother's lips the word of comfort spoken by God himself". The child of God young or old endeavors to travel as Paul encouraged Timothy, keeping faith and a good conscience. God's

word assures us that "if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I Jn 1:7, 9).

With its freeing power, the Gospel provides the believer with strength to battle against sin. Paul relates: "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world" (Titus 2:11-12). Hence, the gospel is not a cloak for sin. Paul asks the Roman: "What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid. Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness" (Rom 6:15-16).

The gospel is the sustaining source of strength in the life of the child of God. Isaiah encourages the believers this way: "Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments" (Is. 52:1). That garment of righteousness is the forgiveness of sins - the very essence of the Gospel. We can conclude by stating again the Gospel word preached from God's kingdom: In the name and through the shed blood of the Messiah, Jesus, the sinner can believe sins forgiven. Faith in that promise leads to eternal life.

John Stewart 2/26/99
Introduction at Congregational Evening
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What affect does the gospel have in those that both hear and believe it?
2. What is the role of the gospel in the caretaking of conscience?
3. Why does a child of God need the gospel throughout his or her lifetime?
4. Many gospels are preached in this world. How can someone recognize the gospel of Christ?
5. How does the power of the gospel appear in a Christian's daily life?
6. The gospel frees man from sin. Does it grant him the freedom to sin?
7. Who is and who is not authorized to forgive men's sins on earth and in heaven according to the Scripture?