

Part 3: And You...But God

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What is the gospel?

In our opening worship set we never once sang the word "gospel." And yet the gospel was sung. The opposite can also be true in many songs. You can sing the word "gospel" without ever singing the gospel.

In my sermons I can do the same thing. I can tell you that in order to be saved you must believe the gospel. John the Baptist gave a simple message in the book of Mark: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the gospel." Jesus himself told his disciples in Mark 13 that the gospel must be proclaimed to all the nations. Paul says in Romans that the gospel is the very power of God.

Yet in all of these direct gospel-centric quotes from scripture itself, the gospel has yet to be shared.

The word gospel simply means: good news. Now the idea of good news is also relative isn't it? For instance, my daughter had a procedure on Friday to see if there was something wrong with her voice box, and it turns out that everything is ok. This is great news for me and my family, and it is new that you I'm sure appreciate, but it's not necessarily good news for you. It is good news for you because it is good news for my family. It's not personally good news.

It is good news that this week is going to be nice weather, and to a degree that really is good news for all of us in here. But it's not good news for those who are facing tornados in the Midwest. It's utterly foreign and wholly unhelpful to them.

For many of us this type of good news is our experience with the good news of the gospel. Because we wrestle to clearly know what the gospel is, it can become good news detached from you as a person. It is good that there is a God, and I'm grateful for that. It could be good news that my eternity has been fixed, but it doesn't really change much. Maybe you are not a Christian in here today and you greatly appreciate that you have friends who believe in the gospel and find joy in it, but for you personally, it is not good news. It may just be news.

So in the most practical manner I want to ask you again: what is the gospel? What is the good news which God has granted to us in his word?

We are looking at a book of the Bible called Ephesians, which is a letter written by the apostle Paul to believers just like you and I. In the book Paul is promoting this wonderful vision that God has for all of the world, that at the fullness of time, God is going to unite all things, things in heaven and things on earth, in Jesus Christ.

But interestingly enough, Jesus has left the building, he is not physically here anymore. But he has left his church, his gathering of believers, beloved by God and supported by the Holy Spirit to help God in his plan to unite all things in Christ.

This is what we saw last week: **Ephesians 1:20-23**. Jesus has conquered all things and now he chooses to continue his campaign of unification through his church. Which means that it bodes those who are part of the church well to know two things: how you are personally united to God and how personally you are united to other people.

This is what Paul alluded to last week when he opened his prayer saying, "I have heard of your faith in Jesus Christ and you love for all the saints." Our text today and our text next time we are in this book will show us how we are united in faith to God and in love towards fellow believers.

And Paul's answer to both of these unions is this: the gospel. Which is why it is incredibly important for us to have a clear understanding of what the gospel is. There are many ways to describe the gospel, some range from short statements, others are really long, and Paul is going to spend a pretty hefty paragraph describing the gospel for us today. At Sovereign Hope we like to define the gospel as: The good news that Jesus did everything required to save sinners and restore us to God.

As Paul unpacks the good news of the gospel today, you will begin to see bits and pieces of that definition show up in the text. Paul wants to provide hope and life change to this church and he knows that only the gospel can do that. So Paul is going to provide three components of the gospel today which help us understand more clearly what the news actually is, and why it is good for us. What we are going to see today is this: **The gospel is the bad news about us, The gospel is the good news about God, and The gospel is life-changing news of conversion.**

Now as we walk through these three aspects of the text I want you to reserve your judgments of the gospel until the end. Salt is the compound of both sodium and chlorine. Sodium and Chlorine are not safe on their own, but when we combine them to make salt it provides nutrients to our body. So too are these components of the gospel.

Any one of these in isolation can be anything but good news. But together they are life giving. If all we know is our bad news then we only have despair. If all we know is that God is loving, then we have the problem of evil. How can a God so loving allow for such unlovely things to happen? And if all the gospel creates is change, then that is just moralism or behavior modification.

Let's keep that in mind as we begin by looking at our first point today: **The gospel is the bad news about us.** Turn with me to **Ephesians 2:1-3**.

Now if you are a rational person you might encounter this text and say, this isn't good news at all. How can the bad news about us actually be good news? But what we don't realize is that this is often the case isn't it.

For instance we have a member of our congregation who has wrestled with various health issues that they could never quite figure out. But recently she was diagnosed with lupus. Now to us who have none of her symptoms this might seem like terrible news, but for her and her family it was a good bad news.

It explained why things were wrong and it set a course for what they could and should expect moving forward. While we don't share the same symptoms of lupus, don't we all share a world which we know to be completely sick?

Have you ever questioned or heard others question: "What is wrong with our world?" Paul's answer in this text is clear: sin. We are what is wrong with this world. This world is broken because we are broken. We have not only transgressed God's laws, we have disobeyed his commands, but we have also sinned by not living perfectly. We have done what we shouldn't and not done what we should've. And he points out three symptoms of this diagnosis: we are under the control of sin, we are under the compulsion of sin, and we are under the condemnation of sin.

There are few things we desire more in our western culture than untethered freedom. But there is actually a theme that we will see by the end of our text today that according to the Bible, it is those who feel most free who are most enslaved, and those who are most enslaved who are the most free.

We see this controlling force in **Ephesians 2:1-2**. Paul is writing to the church and he says, "You, when you were a sinner, were under the control of the Devil." You may have thought you were a free-thinking autonomous powerhouse of success, but you were a follower, your life was lived according to forces and powers beyond your comprehension.

To be caught up in Satan's lies is to be under his power. A power not used to liberate you, though that is often what is promised, but a power used to extort and enslave you. Paul says this in **2 Corinthians 4:4**.

The whole forces of the Devil wages war against us to keep us suppressed in sin. And you might say: "I feel complete freedom in my life, it is with great joy and not slavery that I live my life how I want to live." But that's the very problem that Paul is showing here.

We are not only under the control of sin, but we are under the compulsion of it. Satan doesn't need to appear to us in visions or manipulate objects in front of us, he just needs our hearts to desire things which are not God. Look at how Paul spoke of this **Ephesians 2:3**.

What Paul is saying here is that not only are there spiritual forces opposed to you, but internally your heart, you mind, and your body all are beholden to sin. Why do you want to sin? Because you want to. This doesn't mean that all of us are heinous murderers, but it does mean that if the choice is to seek God or to seek sin, we are free to seek sin and unable to seek God.

Let's say for example you walk into the breakroom at work with your cup of coffee, and you see two options to pair with your coffee. One is a cake doughnut. The other is a piece of broccoli. They are both there and they are free to choose, but we choose the cake doughnut. You might say, "What about discipline?" But that's the problem Paul presents. All of our discipline is bad, our bodies are disciplined to follow their desire, and outside of ourselves we are under the discipline of powers which do not lead us to broccoli. We've lost on two fronts: internally and externally.

We are controlled and compelled by sin. But we are also condemned in our sin. Because we cannot choose God, because we are unable to repent, we are condemned in our sin. Paul says by nature we were children of wrath. It is good that God opposes evil, no one wants a God who lets evil go unpunished. But our problem is that our hearts are evil. And it is a comprehensive condemnation.

Did you notice Paul's inclusive language? "And you were dead," "among whom we all once lived," "like the rest of mankind." You see there is nothing more inclusive in our society than Christianity. We are all sinful, this is where each and every one of us started. We are all broken and bound to sin.

What's interesting here is that Paul doesn't dive deeply into the moral decay of the sinner. Instead he emphasizes the helplessness of the sinner. We are dead in sin. We are under the control of another. We were beholden to death, and we were under an immovable burden of wrath.

Maybe you've heard the gospel explained with this anecdote before: There was a man who was drowning, and right as he was underwater and began to gulp down his first few breaths of seawater, God threw him a life preserver, and at that point all the man had to do was grab the life preserver and God would pull him to safety. The lesson then goes, God has thrown you a life preserver but you must do the work of closing your hands around it.

But Paul's message here provides a much bleaker reality. You aren't drowning, you've drown. Dead men don't grab ropes. Dead men demand resuscitation. The bad news is that we are immeasurably broken and trapped in sin and the good news is that we know the solution: those who are dead need to be made alive.

And this is where Paul turns the whole narrative on its head. The gospel is the bad news about us, but now we see our second point: **The gospel is the good news about God.**

Look with me at what Paul says next, **Ephesians 2:4 (But God.)**. But God. This is really Paul's entire gospel framework. If you want an even shorter gospel presentation all we need to look at are the four words Paul uses in this text: And you (that's verse 1), But God (that's verse 4).

That's the heart of the gospel: And you were, But God is. And you, but God. Now we need to fill this in a bit more, but this is exactly what Paul does: **Ephesians 2:4-6**.

We have seen our character in full, but now Paul points us to the character of God: rich in mercy and great with love for sinners. After describing the power which controls us, Paul shows the moral character of the power which redeems us.

Do you understand the good news behind this statement? Not only does God exist, but he is merciful and full of love for dead, controlled, compulsive, condemned sinners. You might find that to be redundant, well of course he is merciful and loving he is God. But do you realize that there is no other religion which claims to have a god of such great power who is also by nature merciful and loving?

The idea that a god would love people is an idea distinct to the God of the Bible. A cosmically pure, wholly righteous, and self-sufficient God does not need to be merciful and loving in order to be pure, righteous, self-sufficient and even good. In fact God would have been good to simply punish sin. It would have been a perfect execution of divine justice.

But our God, the God of the Bible is rich in mercy and motivated by love for us. Sit under that for a moment. The God who needs nothing has chosen to want us. And remember, we weren't the belle of the ball.

At this moment while we were dead in our trespasses and sins, God loved us. Doesn't that show the love of God? We tend to minimize our understanding of sin because we don't want it to cloud our understanding of God's love. But it is precisely the weight of our sin which makes God's love more lovely.

It is really easy to love my kids when they are obedient. But you would love my kids when they are obedient. It is much harder to love my kids when they are disobedient and rebellious for two reasons. First they are acting less than loveable, and second, it costs me to love them. It costs me to deal with their sin, to address their problem and to correct what is broken.

It is only when we see how unlovable we were, and how costly it was for God to deal with us in love that we can see how powerful and abounding God's love is for us.

Are you someone in here who feels that your life is too out of whack to be loved by God? Look at this God. He loves the dead. He enlivens the broken. He is merciful to the outsider. No one approaches God without being out of whack. This is the good news about our God he is merciful and loving to sinners.

Where do we see God's mercy and love? This is one of Paul's main themes in this book: in Christ. Paul says we have been made alive with Christ which means that the grace that saves us is also the grace that buries us with Christ. The gospel is not only life in Christ, but also death in Christ.

The wrath which sinners deserved was wrath poured out on Jesus on the cross. If you believe in Jesus, you share in his representative death for you. Which means you also share in the life Jesus enjoyed when he was raised from the dead by God himself. That's what we looked at last week in the end of Ephesians 1.

Jesus wasn't the rope God threw to you, Jesus was the force which made you alive. God struck your heart to life because Jesus was struck with your death.

God's mercy and love are good, but they are seen only in the work the Jesus did on the cross. If we do not see what Jesus did for us, the good news will always be distant to us, always the message of someone else's life. But when we see Jesus as God's merciful love, the weight of slavery and death is finally removed. What was broken begins to be put back.

Instead of being bound by death and ruled by oppressive forces, we are made alive and ruled by a merciful and loving God. How do you get this? By grace, through faith. Look at what Paul says a few verses later: **Ephesians 2:8-9**.

You believe in faith that Jesus did all of this, and salvation is freely gifted to you. You see if we could earn this salvation we would never be able to have true assurance of faith. If you undead yourself and lived your life in such a way where you earned God's salvation, then you can never rest. For what happens when you no longer have earned such favor?

But when salvation is applied to us as a free gift of grace, we can find assurance in its fullest. It's hard to lose what you never won. Jesus won it for us, and his sinless sacrifice will not be spoiled. So if we have faith in this God and continue in that, then we know the timeless assurance of Jesus' wonderful salvation.

Have you considered that? Have you seen how it's Jesus and only Jesus who is capable of correcting what is wrong in your life, and that he has promised to do it for all who believe in him? If you haven't I want to encourage you to talk to someone before you leave here today.

But this moment of salvation is also not the end of the gospel message. This is our final point: **The gospel is the good news of conversion.**

Read with me **Ephesians 2:4-10.**

ESPN one time showed a documentary called "Broke," which showed all these athletes who received huge sums of money in their sport but ended up broke. Some of you may also see stories of lottery winners whose immediate wealth failed to actually change their life even to the extent of bringing them out of poverty.

But in this text we see the promise of God that the gospel is really capable of changing our lives. The gospel converts us from one way of life to another by the power of Jesus.

Did you see where this text started and where it ended: **Ephesians 2:1-2,10.** From dead people walking in sin, to resurrected people walking with God. From people following the power of the air, to people doing good works which matter eternally.

Do you see the drastic changes Paul is outlining? Look back with me again: **Ephesians 2:5-7.** Not only have we been made alive with Christ, but we have been raised with Christ and we have been seated with Christ in the heavenly places.

Now we aren't in heaven, but what Paul is saying that the life we have in Christ is a life which carries with it the rule and reign of Jesus. We live with the crest of the King fixed on our chest.

For what reason? Look back again: **Ephesians 2:7.**

We have been made alive in Christ, we have been raised with Christ, we have been seated with Christ so that in the ages to come you and everyone around you might see the immeasurable riches of God's grace and kindness to you in Christ Jesus.

In other words you have been saved so that God might be glorified in this age and in the age to come. We have been saved because God loved us, but wrapped in that conversion is also the end that others might see our lives and not see our power, but the power of the God who loved us.

You see when you have been loved by God through Jesus Christ, your life is no longer about you. It is about the God who saved you. It is not that salvation makes us autonomous again, it is that salvation binds us to a God who is truly life giving.

That is to say this: salvation is for you, but it is not about you. Look at what David himself says in **Psalms 116:12-14.** David says, "What will I give God for his salvation? I will give him praise and service in the presence of the people."

This is why Paul concludes his text the way he did. Our salvation isn't about our boasting. It is about what Jesus did. Our life isn't about freedom for the sake of freedom. It is about freedom to finally serve God like we were created to do.

Do you remember what we saw last week? Last week we saw that the fullness of God's power is for us. His great power, his great affection, his glorious inheritance, his ruling and reigning Son have all been

given to us for our benefit. And that is why it is so important to see what God has given to us in the gospel. Because it's only when we realize that the God of the universe is for us in the gospel that we can realize that the life of a Christian is not about us, it's about God.

Conversion means that the whole of our lives are changed by what we've experienced in the gospel. If the gospel means that our sins have been dealt with by Jesus and freely accessed in faith, then the gospel means that we have God himself.

We don't need a life lived for our glory because we have the God of glory. That's what I mean when I say salvation is for us, but it is not about us. The gospel changes our lives to realize that in God we already have all that we need: we have been raised and seated in Christ.

So now all of our life is living out that salvation in the way and works which God designed us to do for his glory so that others might see his loving kindness in us. Your life is most satisfying when it is satisfied in the glory of God.

This conversion really changes everything. It changes how we wrestle with the hard parts of our life. Resisting sin, sharing the gospel with your neighbor, and sacrificial giving all require us to practically encounter points of tension between our perception and the perception of God's glory.

But the promise of God's conversion is that as you chose to live out the new life you have in Christ, you will never be let down no matter how difficult the cost might seem. You personally will only continue to find God's unending goodness towards you, and those around you will see a disruptive picture of God's kindness to you. Kindness which frees your heart from slavery to self by finding the joy of service to God.

It changes how you view your work, your education and your marriage. Whatever it is that you do, there is something you are doing which represents the ultimate hope we have in the gospel. As you help people, or create products you are able to realize that ever organizing structure you create and ever produce of enjoyment your produce reminds us of the new heavens and new earth where all the obstacles will be removed and we will enjoy God eternally.

What would happen this week if you viewed your work through this lens? How does the product you make, the people you serve or the attitude you embody reflect the kindness which God has given us in Jesus.

What if in your marriages or relationships this week you actively thought about what it means that our relationships are not about our own pleasure or comfort, but they are about reflecting the glory of God as seen in Christ and his church?

What is a small step you can make this week that helps you live out this conversion by walking in the good works which God has prepared for you?

This is gospel change for all of life and it's only this good news, the good news that accomplishes it: that we were dead in sin, but God was rich in love, that we walked in death, but now in Christ we walk in new life.