

Week One: The Good News of the Kingdom

Introduction

What is the Gospel? Why is it called the Good News of the Kingdom of God? What is a disciple of Jesus, and what sets a disciple of Jesus apart from others in the world? These are all very important questions — In fact, they're the most important questions we could ever ask. And, these are the questions that we'll be answering during this season in this group study.

To begin our time together, I want you to imagine this scenario with me for just a moment. In this mental exercise, I want you to imagine that you receive a text message from a close friend of yours that has been curious about your faith in Jesus and your church, but they've never committed themselves. The text message you receive says something like this:

“Hey! I know that you go to _____ church. I see your posts on social media and it looks like a great place and it looks like you and your family are really doing well! I'd really like to meet with you for lunch one day this week and have you explain to me what that's all about, if you don't mind. I'm curious and have some questions.”

Now, I want you to imagine with me that you meet up for lunch at the local cafe, and after making small talk, your friend says this:

“So, I've been paying attention to you and your church on social media. I've watched a few online services and even visited the website, and I've been considering visiting. But, before I do, I wanted to ask you this question. I keep hearing and seeing this word you guys use called 'gospel.' Could you explain that to me and what exactly that is?”

Now, if you found yourself in this situation, I want you to ponder for just a moment what your answer would be. Would you know how to tell the story of the gospel with your friend if they approached you like this and asked? Would you be able to tell them about the story that has changed not just your life, but your family's lives? If not, the reality is that you're not alone. Studies conducted by Lifeway Research in 2022 found that 70% of Christians actually don't know how to answer this question and thus share their faith.

When faced with this question most Christians say something like this:

- Jesus changed my life.
- I prayed a sinner's prayer.
- With every head bowed and every eye closed my preacher told me to slip up my hand.
- I turned away from my old way of life and trusted in Jesus.

Now, don't get me wrong. Jesus does change our lives. Praying for Jesus to save us is certainly good. Raising our hands to signify our belief is fine. It's even true that Jesus calls us to repent and trust in Him. However, we must be clear — our testimony, praying a prayer, raising our hands, and even our responses to the gospel *are not* the gospel. And unfortunately, 70% of Christians you meet are confused about this.

The Backdrop of the Gospel

After reading or hearing that, you may be surprised. You may be confused, and even a little rattled at this point. But, that's okay, because in order for us to understand what the gospel *is*, we have to state at the beginning what the gospel *is not*, even if it rattles us a little.

Now, for us to properly understand the gospel, we must start at the beginning of the book where the gospel is found — The Bible.

When we open the first pages of the Bible, we are met with the reality that there is a God named Yahweh-Elohim who created the heavens and earth. As the creation story progresses, we see that Yahweh-Elohim creates humans in His own image, puts them in a garden-paradise, and calls them *very good* (Gen. 1:26-31). Humans were created to share not just an intimate relationship with one another, but with the God who created them and gave them the opportunity to rule as stewards over His creation.

But, as the story progresses, we learn that the first humans chose to do what was right in their own eyes rather than obeying the voice of God (Gen. 3:8-19). This leads to a whole host of consequences, and leads finally to Yahweh-Elohim exiling them from the garden-paradise away from His presence and where they would now experience pain, difficulty, and ultimately death as a result of their choice (Gen. 3:24).

Right from the beginning of the story, there is a big, bright “help wanted” sign that appears. Humanity is in desperate need of someone who will come and help them by vanquishing the enemy-serpent who plunged them and the world into chaos. They also need someone who will reconcile their relationship with God and restore them to what they were originally intended to be, liberating them from the curse of sin and death. This expectation was set early on in Genesis because this is exactly what God promised to the woman in Genesis 3:15. This passage is referred to as the “original good news” (the proto-evangelium).

There, God promised the woman a child who would rescue them. He promised that this seed would be wounded by the serpent, but He would be victorious and would crush the head of the enemy who deceived them (Gen. 3:15). Later on, as the story of the Bible unfolds, God says that they will be able to identify this mysterious person because He would be the “the anointed one smeared with oil” or “the Christ.”

The Good News of the Kingdom

When we hit the New Testament, everyone is awaiting the coming of this anointed one who would set things right. Everyone was praying He would come and set them free. Herod was awaiting his birth so he could eliminate him as a child. The Magi were awaiting a sign to show in the heavens that they had probably heard about from Daniel when Israel was in exile in Babylon. John the Baptist was out in the wilderness preparing the way for Him. Everyone was looking for and awaiting this anointed one that God promised to the first humans.

And then, He finally steps onto the scene. And we learn His name was Jesus.

He appears to John in the wilderness of the Jordan and tells him to baptize him so that all righteousness might be fulfilled. John looks at Him with disbelief, and says “I need to be baptized by you!” John knew this was the one who would take away the sins of the world (Matt. 3:13-17). So, he baptized him and like the anointed kings of old in the Old Testament like Saul and David — the Spirit rushed upon Him and a voice declared “this is my beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased.”

Then, Jesus began His public ministry in Galilee. Empowered by the Spirit as God’s anointed one, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. He opened up the scroll of Isaiah and read saying:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me to preach the good news (the gospel) to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.” — Isaiah 61:1

After reading the passage, Jesus sits down and says to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Lk. 4:20-21). In other words, Jesus is saying to the people “I am the anointed one who God put His spirit upon to preach the good news of the gospel. I am here to release the captives, to open blinded eyes, to set free those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the favor of God.” In other words, Jesus is saying to them “I am the Christ. I am the promised seed of the woman who has come to put things back to right.”

And the people all knew that’s what He was saying, because they were all speaking about him saying “but is this not the son of Joseph?” (Lk. 4:22). They couldn’t imagine that this simple man from Galilee who helped his step-father Joseph in his work was possibly the promised seed that the entirety of the Scriptures said would come. But, He was. And, He proved it not only by the miracles in His ministry but also in His crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection from the dead.

You see, it was this event — the crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus that proved that He was God’s anointed one, the Christ. It was this event that atoned for our sins. It was this event that restored us to right relationship with God, and it was this event that proved that Jesus was the one who came to deal with the curse of death. He is God’s chosen one who came to put everything right.

The Apostle Paul himself says this. In Romans 4:25 he wrote:

“He was delivered over because of our wrongdoings, and was raised because of our justification.”

This is the gospel that the Bible teaches us. That Jesus was the anointed one of God who was delivered over for our sins. He fulfilled the Scriptures of Israel, and then He voluntary died a substitutionary death for us and our wrong doings. He died in our place and His death brings us peace with God. It satisfied God’s demand for justice. And, His resurrection is the chief miracle that proves He was God’s chosen one who would deal with the problem of death and restore us to our right standing with Him that we were created for.

Conclusion

Let’s sum up this week’s session. The gospel is not our testimony, praying a prayer, raising our hands, and even our responses to the gospel. The gospel is not something we do. Rather, the gospel is the story of Jesus who is God’s anointed one who died, was buried, and resurrected for the forgiveness of our sins for the purpose of reconciling us to God and restoring us for what we were created to be.

Whenever the first disciples of Jesus talked about this gospel, this is exactly what they said. Here are several Scriptures where they spelled the gospel out explicitly.

- “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you

crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.” — Acts 2:22-24

- “You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. 37 You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” — Acts 10:36-43

- “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” — 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

- “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, 9 for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal.” — 2 Timothy 2:8-9

This is why the gospel is called “good news.” It’s the good news that God has done something amazing for humanity. He has intervened in history and has dealt with the problems of death, the enemy, and sin through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus the anointed one. This fulfilled all of Israel’s scriptures. This is the gospel that we believe and proclaim. Let’s take some time to reflect on this.

Discussion Questions

1. If a friend were to call you and ask you to explain the gospel to them, what would you say?

2. Has anything in the lesson challenged you?

3. So often we confuse our response to the gospel and the life changing power of the gospel to be the gospel itself. What are some things we can do to guard against this, so we can give an accurate portrayal of the gospel?

4. When Yahweh-Elohim says of Jesus “this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased” he is combining two passages from Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42. Read these passages out loud together and discuss them. Prior to reading these passages, did you understand the scope of why God was pleased with Jesus, and what Jesus would accomplish?