



# What Does Grace Church of Philly Believe about the Gospel?

## What is the gospel?

The gospel is the proclamation of good news that the promised Messiah/Deliverer has come and that His name is Jesus. This proclamation of good news is rooted in the OT promise of the Messiah/Deliverer who comes in both suffering and glory to rescue mankind and the cosmos from the effects of Adam's rebellion and the resultant curse.

Without diminishing other aspects of the good news that the promised Messiah/Deliverer has come, we understand that the heart of the gospel is that Jesus lived the life that we failed to live, died the death that we deserve to die, and rose again to restore the life we forfeited because of our sin.

## The Gospel has implications on at least three levels:

**Personal level** - the Gospel is about the most passionate love, the deepest mercy, the most magnificent grace, the most underserving forgiveness, and the greatest transforming power - because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

**Church level** - the gospel creates a new community of believers whose lives corporately progressively reflect the most passionate love, the deepest mercy, the most magnificent grace, the most underserving forgiveness, and the greatest transforming power.

**Societal level** - the gospel takes transformed individuals living in transformed community to influence transformation in all areas of society that have been affected by the ravages of human rebellion and idolatry.

Keeping the gospel central was Paul's concern, as he wrote the book of Galatians. The gospel foundation of the Galatian churches was being undermined as others mixed human effort with grace. Paul's message to the church and false teachers is that a non-grace gospel is a non-gospel. Again, the good news of the gospel is that Christ faithfully lived the life that I have failed to live and died the death that I deserve to die and that sinners stand in God's favor always and solely on the merits of the righteous life and substitutionary death of Christ. Human effort neither brings a sinner into a relationship with the Holy Triune God nor does it enhance or maintain one's relationship with God.

We see clearly in The Epistle to the Galatians some of the implications of getting the gospel wrong. Let me briefly suggest some of those implications.

- **GETTING THE GOSPEL WRONG AFFECTS HOW YOU SEE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY**

When something other than the gospel is elevated among Christians, unity in Christ is threatened. In Galatians 2:14-16 we see how Peter failed to live out the implications of the gospel of grace. Even though he knew that the gospel of Christ removed the barrier between Jew and Gentile and that the ceremonial practices of the Old Covenant were abolished in Christ, he broke fellowship with Gentile believers because of the influence of those who set forth law-keeping as a measure of one's standing with God.

In the gospel we dance in celebration together over the victory accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, not over our preference for theological systems or denominational labels or ethnocentricities or idiosyncratic church expectations.

- **GETTING THE GOSPEL WRONG AFFECTS HOW YOU SEE YOUR STANDING WITH GOD**

When something other than the gospel is elevated in my life, we attempt to achieve our own righteous standing before God rather than resting in the finished work of Christ. Paul's extensive discussion in chapter 3 clearly sets forth the antithesis of human effort to the finished work of Christ. Either one's standing with God is an unfinished process being achieved through human effort or one stands fully accepted through faith in the finished work of Christ. The gospel declares – we are fully accepted through Jesus Christ. Consequently, we do not live with the burden of trying to achieve our own righteousness nor do we live in fear of God's rejection.

- **GETTING THE GOSPEL WRONG AFFECTS HOW YOU READ AND UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE**

When something else other than the gospel is elevated in your hermeneutic (i.e. how you read and interpret the Bible), you may misread the OT. When the centrality of the gospel of Christ is marginalized or minimized, we read the Old Testament as a handbook on morals, a compilation of character studies, only a history of a chosen ethnic people, and not the story of God's preparation of the world for Jesus Christ.

In some sense, the coming of Christ and His work of redemption creates a new hermeneutic. Were you to read the OT apart from the NT, you would come to radically different conclusions on concepts of temple, land, chosen people, obedience, eschatology – all of which are redefined by the gospel.

Chapter Three suggests that without the gospel we misunderstand the promise to Abraham in not recognizing that the quintessential seed of Abraham is Jesus Christ. He alone is the inheritor of the promise and all of those who have faith in Him share that inheritance.

Chapter Four suggests that without the gospel we misunderstand the institutions of ancient Israel and the nature of the law. In Paul's discussion of Hagar and Sara he takes an unexpected turn in interpreting the history of the Old Covenant people. We would expect the law (Mt. Sinai) and earthly Jerusalem to be associated with Sara the wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac, the progeny through which the promise comes. Rather these sacred institutions of Ancient Israel are identified with Hagar and with words like "of the flesh, slavery, earthly," while Sara is associated with promise and because of promise "our mother is the Jerusalem that is above."

No one reading the Old Testament without the vantage point of the gospel of Christ's finished work would come to the conclusions that Paul does in Galatians 4. As has been said for ages, 'The New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed; the Old Testament is in the New Testament revealed.' The gospel informs our reading of the Old Testament and enables us to see its proper place in the progress of redemption.

Graeme Goldsworthy nicely sums up the relationship of Jesus Christ to the OT:

The New Testament emphasizes the historic person of Christ and what he did for us, through faith, to become the friends of God. The emphasis is also on him as the one who sums up and brings to their fitting climax all the promises and expectations raised in the Old Testament. There is a priority of order here, which we must take into account if we are to understand the Bible correctly. It is the gospel event, as that which brings about faith in the people of God, that will motivate, direct, pattern, and empower the life of the Christian community. So we start from the gospel and move to an understanding of Christian living, and the final goal toward which we are moving.

Again we start from the gospel and move back into the Old Testament to see what lies behind the person and work of Christ. The Old Testament is not completely superseded by the gospel, for that would make it irrelevant to us. It helps us understand the gospel by showing us the origins and meanings of the various ideas and special words used to describe Christ and his works in the New Testament. Yet we must also recognize that Christ is God's fullest and final Word to mankind. As such he reveals to us the final meaning of the Old Testament.

- **GETTING THE GOSPEL WRONG AFFECTS HOW YOU LIVE OUT THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.**

When something else other than the gospel is elevated in your living, self-effort rather than the power of the gospel becomes the focus of the Christian life. Chapter five of Galatians reminds us that the Christian life easily becomes a matter of legalism, or spiritual disciplines, or struggling against the flesh, rather than freedom through the

victory accomplished by Christ on the cross. If the gospel is central in living out the Christian life it leads to a life of humble reliance on the Holy Spirit; if human effort is central in living out the Christian life, it inevitably leads to pride.

J.I. Packer notes that “the focus of health in the soul is humility, while the root of inward corruption is pride. In the spiritual life, nothing stands still. If we are not constantly growing downward into humility, we shall be steadily swelling up and running to seed under the influence of pride.”

Only the gospel of grace leads to humility because it reminds us daily of our inability to earn God’s favor and of our need of His grace and mercy. Contemplation on the finished work of Christ and willing submission to His Word is the means the Spirit employs to transform the life of a believer.

**Galatians 5:1** *For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*

- **GETTING THE GOSPEL WRONG AFFECTS THE PURPOSE OF YOUR LIFE.**

When something else other than the gospel is elevated in your focus, you bring glory to yourself and not the God of glory. We recognize the inadequacy of both the soteriological and doxological purposes of life. If our primary focus is on our performance such as evangelism (soteriological) or on glorifying God by obedience (doxological), then our focus is on human effort, leading to either pride of success or shame of failure. If our primary focus is on the gospel of what God has accomplished for sinners through Christ, then we live in humility, knowing that in Christ we are accepted by God. The outcome of resting in Christ’s finished work and submitting to His Word will be a concern for evangelism and living a life of obedience in which God is glorified.

**Galatians 6:14** <sup>14</sup> *But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*

**As Michael Horton says,** “Whenever we move from God’s saving purpose for our lives to advice for how to fulfill it, we circumvent the cross for our own glory.”

So Grace Church of Philly will primarily be about the gospel so that glory will never be in our programs, or agendas, or successes, or performance, but in God who calls us and redeems us in the grace of Jesus Christ.

It is the gospel that is the underpinning for all we do, the driving force behind everything, the fulcrum by which we hold in balance everything else.

(1 Cor. 15:3-4 ESV) <sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures

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