

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *The Heart of the Gospel*

SERIES: *What is the Gospel*

SCRIPTURES:

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**Credit to Bible Gateway; Scott McKnight, NT Wright, Dallas Willard, The Bible Project,*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church, to everyone here in the room and also to those of you tuning in to the livestream.

So, I'm gonna need a little bit of audience participation this morning. No, you won't need to get out of your seats or anything like that. I just want some responses. We're gonna play word association. You know how this works, right? I say a word, you shout out the first thing that comes to your mind that you associate with that word.

FOOD

AUTUMN

WORK

FOOTBALL

Ok, one final word...

GOSPEL

Often, when we say the word gospel there may be all kinds of things that come immediately to mind. Some of them probably get us closer to what gospel is, others maybe not as close. Many of the things we think about are not necessarily wrong. It's just that they're often incomplete.

For example, a lot of people, immediately think of some form of “**salvation message**”. The Gospel is that I’m a sinner, and Jesus saves me from my sin. We’ll come back to that in a minute.

But the word, Gospel is central to our Christian faith. How we think about and understand the word gospel, can have a huge impact on how we choose to live our lives.

And so, for the next 3 weeks, we want to talk about what this word means...in the fullest sense of the word. When the writers of Scripture were using this word, what did they mean? As we unpack this word a little bit, I think we’ll come to discover that the gospel really is good news, great news...in fact, it’s the best news the world has ever received. But we have to understand it in it’s fullest sense.

And so to unpack this word, we’re gonna break it down into three primary ideas. Today, we’re going to talk about: **The Heart of the Gospel** (What is the primary word you should associate with the Gospel, first and foremost?)

Next week, we’re going to talk about: **The Gifts of the Gospel.** (Why is this gospel such good news for you and me?)

And then in the final week, two weeks from today, we’ll talk about: **The Purpose of the Gospel.** What is the end to which the gospel is taking us? And that will make more sense when we get there.

So today,

I. The HEART of the Gospel

Now as we begin this conversation we first need to make a clarification about...

A. What the Gospel is NOT

And it's an important clarification to make, because the misunderstanding surrounding this word has caused great harm to the church.

Dallas Willard says, **“The primary barrier to the power of Jesus’ Gospel today is a view of salvation and grace that has no connection with discipleship and spiritual transformation. It is a view of grace and salvation that primarily gets one ready to die, but leaves us unprepared to live now in the grace and power of resurrection life.”**

So, listen to what I say and then follow along with me as I explain what I mean.

...the Gospel is not the same thing as SALVATION

Salvation is a critical part of the Gospel, but it's not the fullness of the Gospel. Today, when most people think about the gospel they tend to think about some version of what might be called “the salvation formula.” Let me just give you few examples of this.

The first and most popular example of this is the **“The Four Spiritual Laws”** written by a guy named Bill Bright back in the 1950's and then made more popular, recently, by a group called Campus Crusade for Christ.

- 1. God loves you and has a plan for your life.**
- 2. Our sin has separated us from God.**
- 3. Jesus is God's provision for this sin.**
- 4. We must receive salvation by faith in Christ.**

Billy Graham was perhaps the next big name associated with this salvation formula. He called it: **“Steps to Peace with God.”**

- 1. Step 1 – God's plan: is peace and life**
- 2. Step 2 – Humanity's problem: is separation from God**
- 3. Step 3 – God's remedy: is the cross**
- 4. Step 4 – Humanity's response: is to receive Christ.**

Eventually people began to realize that this “formula” is spelled out in the book of Romans. What came to be called **the Roman Road**.

- 1. Humanity’s need (Romans 3:23)**
- 2. Sin’s penalty (Romans 6:23)**
- 3. God’s provision (Romans 5:8)**
- 4. Our response (Romans 10:9)**

And so today, the Gospel, has come to be associated with some version of the “salvation formula.”

And, again, just want to be clear this a crucial piece of the Gospel. I agree with and appreciate much of what these formulaic expressions of salvation communicate! They have their place, in helping to break down complex theology about salvation into smaller pieces for us to comprehend.

But each of these approaches shares a common flaw. In and of themselves, they are incomplete descriptions of the gospel. You with me? I’m not saying they’re wrong or that we should throw them out, just that they are incomplete. In fact, I suspect many of those associated with these formula’s, like Billy Graham would quickly agree...his salvation formula is not “the whole gospel.”

“For many people the gospel has shrunk right down to a statement about Jesus’ death and it’s meaning, and a prayer with which people accept it. That matters, the way the rotor blades of a helicopter matter. You won’t get off the ground without them. But rotor blades alone don’t make a helicopter. And a microscopic theory of atonement and faith don’t, by themselves, make up ‘the gospel.’ (N.T. Wright)

So salvation is important, and it’s a piece of the gospel pie, which we’ll talk about more next Sunday, but it’s not the whole pie. And here’s

B. Why it's so important to make this clarification.

When we minimize the gospel to our salvation formula, a few dangerous things start to happen with our understanding of faith... (McKnight pg. 61):

1. We make the gospel intellectual rather than relational.

If the gospel was a formula or collection of information then following the gospel would turn into belief in certain facts, rather than trust/relationship with a person.

Suppose you come to Five Forks Church for the very first time. And you hear a number of people talking about this amazing person they know. The coolest person you could ever meet. Right? Let's just say the person's name is "Shaun"...to pick a random name. Let's say you hear enough intriguing information about Shaun that you'd like to meet Shaun and get to know him also. Then you find out that Shaun is at Five Forks Church. Then Shaun actually walks into the room. Clearly the best way to get to know Shaun is to do what? Go and talk to Shaun. It's to have a personal interaction with Shaun...that's relational. But if Shaun becomes simply a formula, or a piece of information, or a collection of facts...then all you need to do is talk to other people about Shaun, or pick up a fact sheet about Shaun...memorize a few facts about him, you don't actually need to go and meet Shaun or have a relationship with Shaun. Do you see the difference?

There are a lot of people today who have followed the salvation formula, they've said they believe in a certain bit of information about Jesus and his death. But they don't have personal interaction with Jesus...no relational connection. But Jesus is not a formula or piece of information to learn, he's a person.

It's interesting one of the more popular salvation formula passages is found John 14:6 – Jesus says, **"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."** Most of us take this information and turn into our formula. Believe Jesus died for your sins...and he becomes the way for you to get to

heaven. But notice what Jesus says, he says, “I, am the way.” In other words, the pathway is a person, not a formula. Therefore, the Gospel is not about mostly about believing the right bit of information about Jesus, it’s about having a relationship with Jesus.

Second, because we think of the gospel as the salvation formula...believe the right things so you can get to heaven...

2. We turn the gospel into a decision story rather than a discipleship story.

This has caused great harm to the church in our day.

I have read that as many as **75% of Americans say they have made a decision** to accept Jesus. But **only about 25% go to church regularly**. Not that church attendance is the measure of a persons discipleship, but it does tell us something. The emphasis has been on making a decision over “walking with Jesus regularly.”

Among teenagers 13-17 yrs old, almost **60% of the population makes a commitment** to Jesus (McKnight 19)

That number changes to just over **80% for Protestants, 90% for non-mainline protestants**. And **6 out of 10 Roman Catholics** say they have made a commitment to Jesus. In other words, most Americans would say they “decide for Jesus.” But if you start looking at discipleship statistics, there is a dramatic shift in the numbers. Again we don’t want to become legalist about these various aspects, but they do help paint a picture. When we start looking at things like: Bible reading, prayer, church participation, how faith transforms or impacts one’s behavior...that 60% **becomes 6%**. That 80% **becomes 20%** or less, that 90% **becomes 20%** or less...

At the most conservative of estimates, “at least 50% of those who make decisions for Jesus don’t live a consistent life of discipleship.” Bible scholar Scot McKnight says,

“We cannot help but conclude that making a decision is not the vital element that leads to a life of discipleship.”

There are many people not living like Jesus, because they claim to have made a decision for Jesus and believe that’s the gospel. **Sadly, the gospel has been reshaped to facilitate “making decisions” rather than making disciples.**

(McKnight)

Third, when we equate the gospel with the salvation formula we tend towards...

3. Individualism over community.

So many of us think of salvation in personal terms. We turn the story of Jesus, into a simple story about me and God. “I have sinned. Jesus died for me. I need to receive his death on my behalf so I can get saved.” And that individual aspect is part of the Gospel, but it’s important to remember that in Scripture...faith, even salvation, wasn’t viewed on such individualistic terms.

The word **Messiah**, from which we get our word, savior, was not a word about someone’s personal savior but was a Hebrew word meaning **“anointed King”** or ruler. You wouldn’t have a king or ruler over an individual person, but over a kingdom or community. For the Jews, Messiah was much more about Jesus as the long-awaited king and savior of the Jewish people...the community.

This is why when Jesus was born, it was announced to the Shepherds as **“good news, that is great joy, for all people.”**

It’s why the central hub of gospel life revolves around church.

There are a lot people today, who because of the failures of the church or perhaps because they simply think church is “not entertaining enough”...wonder if they can be a follower of Jesus but not be part of a church community? That kind of thinking

actually comes from our misunderstanding of the gospel. We've told people, "You can have your personal sins forgiven and never be part of a church." But the gospel isn't simply about you having your personal sins forgiven...gospel is about joining the community of people following Jesus as Lord.

By defining Gospel as our version of the salvation formula, we've settled for only part of the Gospel, but not the whole Gospel. The result of this misunderstanding is what has led to the nominal Christianity that is prevalent in our society.

So, if the Gospel is not the equivalent of salvation...then let's talk for a few minutes about...

C. What the GOSPEL is.

In Greek, the word for gospel is the word **euangelion**, and I suspect many of you already know that it literally means...

1. GOOD NEWS

And while in our world today, the word is very much a religious kind of word associated with Christianity, at the time of Jesus it was not. It was usually an imperial announcement that an heir to the empire's throne had been born or that a distant battle had been won. That's good news!

But during the time of Jesus, Jesus' followers adopted this word as "the announcement that the long-awaited Jewish Messiah had finally arrived."

Again, when the angels were announcing the birth of Jesus they say, **"We bring you good news that will bring great joy for all people, today in the city of David a savior has been born."** The Messiah is here.

For Jews, who had been waiting several hundred years for the Messiah, this was certainly "good news." In fact it wasn't just "good news"...it's kind of like good news

on steroids. It's great news. It's the best kind of news. It's life-altering kind of news! (I love you too. The test came back negative.)

The long-awaited Messiah is finally here. So since that time, the Gospel has been primarily associated with what? Actually not, what but with who? We might be more accurate to title our series "Who is the Gospel?" Jesus! This brings us full circle to where we started earlier today.

2. Jesus is the heart of the Gospel

Jesus is the first word you should associate with the Gospel. In the New Testament there are 4 gospels. Mark begins his gospel with these words...

Mark 1:1 - The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,

And then what does Mark do...he goes on to tell the story of Jesus...birth, life, teachings, death, resurrection, promise of return...

In other words, the Gospel is a person not a formula or a doctrine or a set of beliefs you have to hold to. The emphasis of the Gospel is relational.

The Gospel writer John says, in fact that in Jesus **"the word became flesh and lived among us."**

John could have used more respectable language to describe what God became in Jesus. He could have said the word became "human". He could have said the word became "a man." He could have said the word took on "a body." But instead, he said, the word became "flesh." He used the Greek word **sarx**, it's a rather raw, vulnerable kind of word, closely associated with human frailty and weakness. Through Jesus God takes on all of the frailty, weakness and brokenness of human flesh. This is what theologians call the **incarnation**. You've maybe heard that word

before. It comes from the Latin word **caro**...meaning “**in flesh.**” Another form of this word, shows up in a popular Mexican food dish. “chili con carne.” That is chili with meat. Jesus is literally, “God con carne.” God with meat.

Which means that the heart of the gospel is not so much about believing the right things as it is trusting in a person.

And to build on this...

3. The Gospel is the WHOLE story of Jesus.

When the Gospel becomes more about our salvation formula than it does about Jesus we tend to be become “Good Friday Christians”. We emphasize the death of Jesus and leave out the rest of his life and teachings. I’ll give you an example of this...let’s play “spot what’s missing.”

This is one of the ancient creeds or belief statements of the church called the Nicene Creed. This is the part about Jesus...

For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

This is a summary, in a sense of the story of Jesus. Do you see what’s missing? **The entire life and teachings of Jesus.** The creeds skip straight from the birth of Jesus to his death! We go from Christmas right to Easter. And that becomes our understanding of the gospel. It’s an incomplete gospel.

There’s another sort of fascinating story that highlights this concept, about needing to tell the whole of story of Jesus as we think about the Gospel, found in **Mark 14.** Where Jesus is eating a meal and a woman comes with a jar of perfume and pours it

over Jesus. And his disciples and some of the other guests who were present basically are ready scold the woman for wasting expensive perfume like this. And then as the story ends Jesus says, **“⁹ Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told...”**

Isn't that interesting? Jesus thought, wherever the Gospel is preached, it's going to include the story about the woman who anointed him.

I don't about you, but so often when people present what they call the Gospel in our world...I don't hear much about this lady. *“For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and the wages of sin is death. But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus. If you accept and believe him you can go to heaven when die...”*oh and by the way, I'm also supposed to tell you that there was a lady who poured perfume on Jesus...

It's just not how we think of the gospel. Because our gospel has become the edited version. Truth is, if we're going to share the gospel with people or talk about the gospel we need to tell the WHOLE story.

The Gospel isn't just the message that Jesus died for your sins. That's part of it. And we'll be talking in more detail about that next week. But the full gospel includes his entire life and teachings.

Jesus taught practical love, he fed the hungry and healed the sick. That's part of the gospel. Jesus taught sacrificial generosity saying that it is better to give than receive. That's part of the gospel. Jesus taught simple living rather than greed and materialism. That's part of the gospel. Jesus taught that we are to love our enemies, even healing a violent man who came to arrest him. Jesus taught radical forgiveness, forgiving even those who were nailing him to the cross. That's part of the gospel.

So yes, the gospel is the good news that Jesus died to save you from your sin, but it's way more than that.

Then fourth and finally, therefore the Gospel is also accepting...

4. Jesus is Lord

We tend to encourage people to accept Jesus as savior. But the fullness of the gospel means accepting Jesus as Lord. There is a difference. Paul wrote to the church in Rome...

Romans 10:9 – ⁹ If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Paul says that when we say Jesus is Lord and sincerely mean it, that is salvation. Notice Paul doesn't call us to embrace the reality that Jesus is savior. He tells us that when we embrace Jesus as our Lord, we get him as our savior as well. Which is interesting because how are we saved? How does Jesus become our savior? Not by pursuing him as our savior but by submitting to him as Lord.

So often when we talk about the gospel we like to emphasize how the Gospel is a free gift of grace...you don't have to do anything we say, just ask Jesus into your heart. Which is true, in one sense. We can't die the death Jesus died on our behalf, but we're often leaving out the part about how it's gonna cost you, your life...when you accept Jesus as your Lord!

Jesus says, **“If you want to follow me? Be willing to pick up your cross,** be willing to die, every day to follow me!”

Sometimes when we ask people to accept Jesus as savior they end up wrestling the rest of their life, whether they really want to submit to him as Lord. But the gospel

means submitting to Jesus as Lord. To say Jesus is Lord, is much more than a ticket to heaven.

By claiming Jesus is Lord, it means that Ceasar is not, politics are not, power is not, economics are not, comfort is not, fame is not, fashion is not, appearance is not, food is not, fitness is not, friends are not, family is not!

I sometimes wonder if we need to change our language. Instead of inviting people to accept Jesus as their personal savior...lets invite people to come follow Jesus as Lord.

When you follow Jesus as Lord you get him as savior as part of the package.

Here at Five Forks our purpose statement says, that we want to be a church “knowing, loving and following Jesus.” We want to be a church that puts Jesus at the very center of our faith. So that when people hear the word, Christian or hear the word Gospel or think about the church...what they immediately begin to associate is Jesus. His life, his teachings, his death, his resurrection. And that living a life with him, is the heart of the gospel!