



4 Relationships That Will Change Your Life

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Relationship #4 – You to the World: The Gospel

Recap of first three weeks.

This week we will talk about the fourth relationship; namely your relationship with those who don't know God personally and I'm suggesting that the thing that should characterize that relationship is "the gospel." Now before I go any further, I know that there many of you in this room who may not consider yourself a Christian or a follower of Christ and I want to tell you that this church is a great place to explore that journey. We're not going to ram anything down your throat, but want to create an atmosphere for honest searching and dialogue. I don't want you to feel alienated tonight. I need you to understand something about my motivation in delivering this message. This does not come from a pompous attitude that assumes that I'm right and you're wrong and that I have it all together and you don't. Although I know that attitude is out there among some Christian groups, and it does not bring honor to Christ.

My motivation is more along the lines of how I would react - and how you would react - if you discovered the cure for cancer. You wouldn't sit in a corner and say - we'll I don't want to be presumptuous. I better not tell anyone about this. You would be finding every person that you could who had cancer and you would be offering them the one and only cure, the cure you yourself had discovered and are now making available to them because it works. It's the answer - it will bring healing where there is only hopelessness. It is with that attitude that I bring this message tonight - a true desire to help people who don't know God to find him - because he has been the answer in my life and in the lives of many of the good people here at this church. Another way that I've often heard it described is that it is like one beggar telling another beggar where to find food.

My main objective tonight is to remind us all what "the gospel" is. We are carriers of the gospel to a lost and dying world, and I think the first step being faithful carriers of that message is to be reminded what that message is. What I'm not going to do tonight is get into methodologies like how to share your faith with others or anything like that. We have a great class coming up on next Saturday morning called FRONTLINE and it's taught by Pastor Mike - his team will cover all that and more in a very compelling way in that class, so if you are interested in hearing more of the "how-to's" after tonight - that's a great next step.

A Definition of the Gospel

There is some confusion and misunderstanding as to what it means when the Scripture talks about "the gospel." We've heard phrases used like "that's the gospel truth." We've also probably heard a bit of, although I try to avoid it as much as possible, "gospel music." Many of us are familiar with 4 gospels at the beginning of the New Testament and some of us have heard in somewhere in our church travels a pastor stand up and say that he is going to do a "gospel reading." So when I say we are to communicate "the gospel" to those who are far from God, what does that mean? For starters the word "gospel" literally means "good news." It is the message of Christ in its simplest form. Jesus left his followers with this message and told them to relay it to the rest of mankind.

There is a passage in Colossians in which Paul gives a pretty succinct definition of "the gospel." It's found in Colossians 1:21-23. Paul says,

21Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 22But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— 23if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the

hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

Colossians 1:21-23

Notice Paul says “this is the gospel” there in verse 23 so we look to what preceded that phrase to find out what the gospel is. Notice that there are two parts to the gospel - a problem and a solution. The problem is that mankind is separated from God by sin. We see that in verse 21. “Alienated” and “enemies” describe the state that every person who has ever lived finds themselves in. We’ve all been distanced from God because of our sin.

Sin is a word that has all kinds of connotations. Sin is basically rebellion against God. The Greek word for “sin,” *hamartia*, literally means “to miss the mark” as when an archer fails to hit the center of the target. So “sin” is some kind of action (or lack of it) in which a person fails to meet the goal intended by God. We can’t deny the existence of sin and evil in the world. It’s all around us, and in our more honest moments we recognize that it’s not just around us, but it’s also in us. No one sets out to be a sinful person, but sin has found its way into all of our lives. No one set out to be alienated from God, but the sin in us has caused the separation. Just like no one plans to lead a mediocre life. No couple getting married sits down and says: let’s plan on ending up in a court. No human being walks into a bar and says: I think I’ll become an alcoholic. No man ever has a child and then says: I think I’m going to get so busy and so wrapped up in my career and be gone so much that my children won’t know me, and will carry a hole in their hearts as long as they live. Nobody nurses a grudge, and says to himself: I think I’m going to shoot for becoming a bitter, angry, resentful old person before I die. Just like nobody sits down and plans on going to hell. But sin runs its course, and it has affected all of us whether we intended it to or not.

And if we don’t deal with this alienation from God, if I just decide that I’m my own God, sin leaves us with no real peace about our lives. There is something in us that longs for more, and the symptoms vary widely, but this disease called sin and its results are universal. Separation from God causes boredom, guilt, loneliness, moral weakness, lack of purpose.

But thank God there is a second part of this gospel, and it is the solution. God offered forgiveness to mankind through Jesus. By the death of his Son, God is now creating a new race of holy people who have given up their hostility to God. God aims for Jesus to be the leader of this new people by virtue of his sacrifice and love. You see Christ is the central figure in the gospel because it was through his death and coming back to life again that he proved himself to be God and took all of humanity off of death row. “I’m paying the price for your guilt - you can go free if you wish.”

And so according the gospel and verse 22 here, we can go from “alienated” and “enemies” to “holy” and “without blemish” and “free from accusation.” That’s a pretty good trade. Raise your hand if you have kids who are at the “trading their stuff” stage? Kids have to learn at an early age how to make good trades. But there are usually some bad ones first. “You seriously traded your retainer for three popsicle sticks?” “How could you trade your sneakers for a pudding snack pack?” Are you crazy? This is a crazy trade too, but in the good sense – we can trade our identity as “enemies” of God for “without blemish.”

And the key to how that happens is sandwiched right in there at the beginning of verse 22. ***“He has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death.”*** Just like that – this is the key to the gospel. An innocent third party has taken your place and now you stand before God without blemish. This is the heart of the gospel and the heart of Christianity. Jesus died and came back to life and somehow through his doing that – you who choose to follow him are considered holy before God. Paul uses the word reconciliation which is a relational term. It just means that you were made right with God – your relationship was mended. You are no longer an alien or an enemy. That’s the gospel in a nutshell. That’s the problem and the solution. But for a moment, I want to press the pause button and go back in history for a moment.

A Brief History of the Gospel

I want to get a richer picture of the depth of this gospel message – this story of separation and forgiveness. And I’m going to trace this separation from God and God’s mercy back through scripture to the very beginning and look at the gospel from a different angle.

Does anyone know the name Richard Speck? He was a mass murderer who systematically killed eight student nurses from South Chicago Community Hospital on July 14, 1966. Speck was sentenced in 1968 to consecutive live prison sentences. He ended up dying in 1991 some 20 years into his sentence, from a heart attack. His body was not claimed and he was cremated. But he again became notorious after pictures and videos of him in prison were made public. In the videos, Speck was shown using drugs and carousing with fellow inmates. He also seems to have found out other ways to work the system so that he lived a life of luxury in prison; with drugs and sex and other entertainment at his disposal whenever he wanted it. He later boastfully proclaimed, "If people only knew how much fun I was having in here, they'd turn me loose."

When this video came out after Speck's death, people were outraged. It touched such a nerve that the video was used to argue for the death penalty. Why do you suppose people were outraged? What is so offensive about that video? I mean – the justice system did its job – he never raped or murdered another person so who really cares what he did behind bars? People were outraged because it didn't seem like Richard Speck made appropriate payment for his crime. You see we have within all of us a need for justice to be served. That when there is a wrong that happens – it is more than just a "want," we have a "need" to see something come of that, and when justice isn't served in some case, we feel it to our bones.

With that in mind, I want to go back to the beginning of it all; back to the creation of mankind. In Genesis 1 we find God creating Adam and Eve and He basically communicates with them saying (and I'm doing some paraphrasing here!), "You guys are going to have great lives. I've made you like me and I've breathed my own breath of life into you, and I'm allowing you to make decisions. You're very wonderful and you're smart, and I love you, and this is going to be a wonderful experience."

"But you need to know at the outset that I am Holy and just. And if you start acting in destructive ways, if you violate My laws, and shake your fist at me, you need to know this wonderful gift will come to a screeching halt. You will die and be separated from me forever." And very shortly after God laid down the ground rules, Adam and Eve flagrantly disobeyed God, and all creation held its breath to see what God would do. The earth had not known disobedience until this moment and creation waited to see how God would handle the consequences for this violation.

God's response to this sin would set the tone for how He would deal with sin for the rest of human history. It is interesting that God didn't immediately strike them dead, but He didn't wink and walk away and walk away either. He explained how whole universe would be tainted by sin because of what they did. He promises that giving birth would be painful, and that people would struggle and toil to manage the creation and their own lives. He suggested that human relationships will be complicated by ego and that human bodies will eventually grow old and die.

God explained that people who live in a consistent pattern of rebellion and resistance to God would eventually be charged guilty for their crimes against God and will be banished to hell for eternity. Sin is serious and Adam and Eve felt the effects of guilt, and it caused them to hid from God. But then God did something magnificent. He did something that made all creation gasp in horror. I want to read you what I believe to be one of the most profound passages of Scripture in the Bible.

The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.

Genesis 3:21

People often skip over this verse, but this verse is a big deal because it's the first glimpse at how God will deal with people's sin. He is an absolutely fair and righteous judge, so sin can't go unpunished but at the same time he is loving and tender and is captured by these two people and all who will follow. And in his love and in his compassion, God provided people with an alternative way to have their crimes paid for. To have their guilt and shame covered over. The thought of Adam and Eve paying forever for their own sin broke God's heart and it moved Him to provide an alternative punishment.

Some of you are still saying, "What's so profound about that verse?" Read it again – don't you see it? It is the first time anything in creation had seen death. God didn't cover them with leaves or make a grass skirt, this passage says that God made garments of skin which means that God took an animal and killed it, so that Adam and Eve's guilt and shame could be covered. I can picture Adam and Eve crouched behind a tree hiding from God as he walked through the garden, and gasping in horror as they saw him approaching the animal and heard the squeal, and saw the struggle, and then silence. God took the skin and covered them as if to say, "In order for your wrongdoing to be paid for an innocent third party will have to bear the penalty that's rightfully yours." This is a sneak preview of things to come.

Let's jump ahead a couple thousand years to God's chosen people, the Israelites. They were in captivity and slavery and being worked to death by Egyptians. Finally, this pushed God to breaking point. He called His leader Moses and said, it's time for judgment. In God's Holy wrath, He said the angel of death will kill each first born child in all the land. You see with God, the wages of sin is death. But God added a PS. He said that He would offer a way out of this judgment. He told His people that if they would take an unblemished male lamb and slaughter it, and place the blood of the lamb above the doorpost of their home, that when the Angel of Death comes, he will pass over that home and let the first-born child live. God said, "Sin must be paid for, and this is my arrangement, so you decide."

Some people blew it off. They didn't take God at His word. But many of the Israelites took God seriously. They knew that this sounded like something that God would do so they went out and got the lamb. And imagine if you will a 15 year old kid watching dad run around the sheep pen in the back yard trying to kill the prize lamb. Imagine the confusion in the mind of the son, and him saying, "Dad you look like a fool out there! What are you running around so furiously for?" And the father looking back at his son in dead earnestness saying, "Son, tonight sin is going to be paid for. And I'm putting this effort in because son tonight it's the lamb's life or it's yours."

As I said earlier, in God's economy sin is serious. It separates and alienates us from God, and if God wishes to be in relationship with us, He must do something with sin. So when it is judgment time sin gets paid for. Again at Passover an innocent third party was sacrificed and the guilty party went free. And for many years God commanded the Jewish people to use a sacrificial system, where animals were chosen to take the place of people when sin needed to be paid for and it became a visual reminder to the people that sin was serious to God.

Then about 800 BC, the prophet Isaiah made an announcement that made peoples' heads spin and hearts stop. He began prophesying things like, "But he will be wounded for our transgressions bruised for our iniquities and the Lord will lay on him the iniquity of us all." And it got people's attention because it sounded like someday somewhere God was going to send a human sacrifice to pay the ultimate price for sins of the world. They knew that God had strictly forbidden human sacrifice, so it became a source of argument among the Jewish people for hundreds of years.

Then one day the rumors became reality; Jesus was born. There were clear indications his whole life that he was God's son. John the Baptist announced him with some pretty high-threshold words, "Behold Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." How's that for an introduction. And John proclaimed, "Here he is, the one we've been waiting for. You are finally looking at the one whom tens of thousands of lambs have been foreshadowing. The savior, the Messiah, the ultimate sacrifice has finally arrived."

People strained to understand all this, just like some of you who might be still working out your faith are trying to understand how it all fits together. But Jesus began teaching and talking in sacrificial terms. He would make some profound point as he taught and his disciples would applaud, but he would say, "You've got to know ... I'm going to be killed. I'm going to be sacrificed to take the place of all your sins. I'm going to lay down my life for you."

And so he went on to live a sinless life (remember the lamb had to be perfect). He was falsely accused because he was a threat to the religious leaders, he was beaten and battered and led to the cross. And all of the saints and angels in heaven looked on in horror as Jesus was nailed to the cross outside Jerusalem. You think Adam and Eve cringed as they peeked out from behind that tree and watched God sacrifice that first animal. You think that 15

year old boy was nauseated as he watched his dad slice a knife through the throat of the prize lamb in the back yard, imaging heaven as God himself bled to death. And he was hanging there in front of the people who should have been bowing down, but instead were auctioning his robe to the highest bidder.

It didn't seem right in heaven, the price seemed too high. Guilty people didn't deserve a substitute like the one God provided. They ought to pay for their own sins. And do you know what? We should. I should because I'm the one who deserves it. It's my sin that needs to be paid for. It's my guilt that needs to be covered up and accounted for in order to be in right relationship with God. I mean, we're the foul-ups. We're the ones who lie when we should tell truth. We're the ones who hate when we should love. We're the ones who hold back when we should give. We put people down when we should be building them up. We're the ones.

But the truth remains that as Holy and righteous as God is, He has this thing about you. He knows your name. His heart is moved with love when he thinks of you, and that love has caused Him to go to extreme lengths to ensure that He can have a relationship with you. You see, Christianity is about Jesus Christ taking your place and mine. We can be forgiven and blameless because God made an arrangement that the ultimate innocent third part would take the place for you and me and make a way for us to be reconciled to God. This is the gospel – the good news – that has been offered to us and also entrusted to us.

What should we do with the Gospel

I want to suggest two things.

1. First, is to **make a decision about it**. This news calls people to a decision. This isn't some humdrum news that you can kind of yawn and look away from. This is earth shattering, life altering, history changing kind of news. And between the time you are born and the time you die, you have to make a decision about what you're going to do with this news. Your sin must be paid for - question is who is paying the tab? If you're going to pay your own price, you'll do it forever, but there is another option available. A third party had paid the price if you accept it.

I became an atheist in college. My parents raised me in a godly Christian home and when I went away to Taylor University I went through a period of serious questioning and doubt. I was a philosophy major there and upon being introduced to many other philosophies and systems of thought, coupled with seeing first hand some of the hypocrisy of the Christian sub-culture, I threw out my whole belief system. And I wasn't a quiet non-believer. I set out to ruin the faith of as many Christians as I could find. I would attend churches and classes just to ask as many unanswerable questions as possible. I spoke with a very wise friend during that time who challenged me that the claim to believe in nothing is at best a lazy position and at worst a copout. He pushed me to search and to seek after truth until I found it; to intensely research the claims of Christianity and other religions until I found truth because he was convinced that when I found truth, I would find God. His words arrested my spirit. It was easier to go around poking holes in what everyone else believed, but much harder to actually believe in something myself.

So in addition to my academic studies I began a personal quest for God. I would go to the library and read and research a variety of religions and beliefs. At some point about a year into my quest, my study lead me squarely back to the scandal of this gospel; namely the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was the shining jewel among all the world religions. If it were true, if it really happened, it stood out as the most profound act in all of human history. And as I began to pursue the historical credibility of the resurrection of Jesus, because without the resurrection Christianity is meaningless, I became convinced of the truth of that historical fact. And I realized in a moment of insight that if Jesus really died and came back to life, that is a fact of history that can't be ignored. It is the one event that every human being must come to grips with and actually do something with. And when I was convinced in my head that it really happened, I knew I was faced with a decision. Would I become a follower or not? That day I returned to my house off campus and went into my bedroom and fell to my knees and began to talk to God for the first time in over a year. I was very scared at first, I actually experienced intense fear, because I was truly convinced that He really existed and was aware that I had been trifling for more than a year now about the existence of the most powerful being in the universe. My fear soon melted away into forgiveness and assurance that my relationship with Him was restored. Several hours later I stood up to my feet again after working through a decision to follow Christ and his teachings for the rest of my life.

An appropriate response to the gospel is a response in faith to what Jesus did. And at some point every person is going to make that decision. The Bible says that you can understand about what Jesus did and still wind up paying for your own sin, because understanding isn't enough. God calls you to make a decision to act on that understanding.

In humility and with a repentant Spirit every one of us must say, "I don't fully understand this mercy, but I need it, and God I accept what you did on my behalf, and I hand over ownership of my life to You. Now You are in control I'm not calling the shots anymore." And when it comes to making decisions, you consult Him in prayer, and you consult the scriptures, and you consult Christians whom you trust and you say I only want to do what God wants. And there is this wonderfully heart-thumping life that goes along with being a true follower of Christ. And some of you are admirers of Christ, but you haven't yet made that decision to be a follower. The gospel compels us to a decision.

2. But there is a second response to the gospel and that is to **become an ambassador of it**. You see when you finally make a decision to be a follower of the life and teachings of Christ, you also make a decision to be a carrier of this good news message to others. In fact in the book of Acts, Jesus is getting ready to ascend into heaven and go back to the Father. But before he does, he gathers his disciples on a hillside and issues some final words to them.

He didn't say go make more money, or make decisions, or make families. He said, "Go and make disciples. Now it's up to you. You will be my witnesses. You'll be ambassadors, carriers of this wonderful and life changing message. The salvation of this planet depends on you."

I can imagine those guys looking at each other and saying "how are we going to do that?" Jesus gives them a plan. He said, "The Holy Spirit will help you, but you have to do your part. If you come through as carriers of this grand message, lots of people will come to faith. People will enter purpose filled lives, and they'll be set free from sin and lots of folks will wind up in heaven forever. We will change the world one life at a time. But if you drop the ball on this, if you decide not to participate in this grand endeavor, if you get caught up in other things, if you get distracted or discouraged, if you neglect being loving carriers of the message of hope, there is no Plan B. I'm not going to assign angels to cover your backside, I'm not going to drop leaflets from heaven, and I'm not going to do any divine heroics. You're it. You're Plan A, and there is no Plan B. If you take up the challenge we can and will change the world. If you don't we'll watch the lights go out on the world one light at a time. And we'll watch a steady stream of people go to hell forever. It's up to you now. After Jesus said that he ascended to the Father."

How does it feel to be reminded of Jesus words, "It's up to you?" This message is yours to carry, protect and spread to all mankind, because you see that message wasn't just given to the disciples 2000 years ago, it is given to you and I today. Imagine if disciples that dropped the ball and said "outreach isn't my thing, or I'm too busy with my career, or that's the job of the professionals the pastors and priests you know."

But they didn't, they said "Jesus entrusted this message to a bunch of ordinary everyday people, with ordinary jobs, and ordinary lives. So we're going to share this message with our ordinary friends, in fact everyone we meet we're going to make sure they know the urgency of this message, and because they were faithful you and I are sitting here today knowing that we have been snatched from the icy waters of a sinking ship, and have been given life.

The disciples took Jesus' words seriously as he urged them to allow their lives to be so overflowing with the joy and the hope of this good news that people would take notice of their lives and be compelled to be a follower of Christ. St. Francis of Assisi is credited with saying, "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words." Paul captures it a different way:

17Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 18All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us

the message of reconciliation. 20We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. 21God made him who had no sin to be sin[a] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

One of the ways that we begin to be a light to those who need the love of God in their lives is to pray for them. We've done things here before where we've asked you to pray for someone in your life who needs an encounter with God, but tonight we're going to do something a little different. You received a piece of paper when you came into the auditorium. I'm just going to provide a moment of reflection right now to call to mind 2-3 people that you could write down on that piece of paper that you would be willing to pray for and be intentional about being an ambassador of the gospel for. It is important as you write names that you only write their first name – you'll find out why in a moment.

But there are some who aren't ready to write down someone else's name because you are still on a journey with God yourself. If you are not sure where you stand with God or would like someone to pray for you in your quest with Him, I'm going to ask you to write your own first name on that piece of paper. After a few moments of silence in which you can all write names down, the band is going to come and play two songs. During the first song we're going to ask that you get out of your seat and come forward to place your paper in one of these baskets down front as a prayer offering to God. During the second song the ushers will come to collect these baskets and as you leave the auditorium tonight, they are going to hand you a random piece of paper. They are someone else's names and we would ask that you pray for the names on that list even though you might not know the person. Just take a moment now to prayerfully write down your names.