

Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith
What Is The Gospel? May 9th, 2010

Many of you know the story of how I became a Lutheran Christian. I had never stepped into a Lutheran church before college, but my first year at Stanford, I needed to make some money, so I applied for a youth director job at a nearby Lutheran church. I didn't know anything about Lutherans, but I could play the guitar and lead a Bible study, and I could throw a Frisbee.

When the pastor and I met, I told him I didn't believe babies ought to be baptized because they couldn't make a decision for Christ by themselves. I disagreed with the idea that Christ could be truly present in the sacrament of Holy Communion. But they hired me anyway. And as I began to worship at this church, it felt like I heard the word "grace" for the first time in my life. The pastor kept preaching about this God who unconditionally loved me. I didn't have to do anything to earn that love.

And that was such good news for me, because up until then I'd had the sense that I had to do things to earn God's love and acceptance. If I did this, then God would love me more. If I read my Bible more, if I prayed more, if I served my neighbor more, then God would really approve of me. And that had felt like such a burden. And now I was hearing as if for the first time about the unconditional grace and love of God, and it changed my life. It was a little glimpse of Martin Luther's experience. He had tried so hard so win acceptance with God through his works, and he finally realized as he studied Scripture that our relationship with God is a gift, received by faith in what Christ did for us in the cross and resurrection.

Romans 1:16-17 especially clarified it for him: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" The other way to translate that is, "The one who is righteous through faith will live."

When we think of the Gospel, probably the clearest expression is found in Ephesians 2: 8-10- "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God- not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

When someone says to us, What is the Gospel, especially if they ask us Lutherans, we say something like, "The Gospel is the good news that Jesus took the punishment that should have been ours on the cross, forgiving us of the original sin that has been passed along to us, making us right with God. St. Paul used a legal term called "justification." We have been justified, made right in God's eyes, by grace through faith in what God for us in Christ.

Now what if I said to you, What is the Gospel according to Jesus? After all, we call the four books about Jesus Gospels, don't we? The Greek word *euangelion* literally means the good news. What was the good news for Jesus? Well, when Jesus first began his ministry in Mark's gospel, Mark says Jesus was proclaiming the good news (or the Gospel) and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:14-15) Jesus' message is that *the kingdom of God has come near, or is at hand*. And because we have tended to interpret Jesus' words in the light of Paul (justification by grace through faith) we hear "the kingdom of God" and that means the "kingdom of heaven", and that probably means where I go after I die if I believe in Jesus.

And yet for Jesus, the kingdom of God wasn't the heavenly afterlife. Remember he said the kingdom of God is *near*. He taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven." Jesus said the kingdom of God is *at hand, it's near, it's among us*. And when he said "kingdom of God," that had a specific edge to it in his day, Remember in his day the kingdom that had the power was the kingdom of Caesar, the empire of Rome. Jesus was saying there is *another kingdom* among us that I am inaugurating, and it is in competition with the values of the kingdom of Caesar.

Remember that when Christians said, Jesus is Lord, that was a treasonous thing to say, because they were saying, Caesar is *not* Lord. Jesus' good news wasn't simply information about how to get to heaven after we die. It was good news that God's will was going to be done *on earth* as it is in heaven. You heard his mission statement last week from Luke's Gospel, when Jesus said he came to bring good news to the poor, and release to people who are captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. (Luke 4:16-21). That's incredibly good news for people who are suffering.

You remember I've spoken before in this series about the three great themes that are in the Hebrew Scriptures, and how Jesus fulfills those themes. Genesis has the themes of *creation and reconciliation*; Exodus of *liberation*, and Isaiah of a *new peacemaking kingdom*. And Jesus message is *good news* in all those areas! In John's Gospel, when he tells Nicodemus that he must be "born again," that's a new Genesis (John 3). Jesus' good news is that life can be abundant *now* (John 10:10).

Yes, there will be new life for us after this life; we don't have to be afraid of death. But that life begins now as new life in Christ! Let me give you an illustration from Scripture. Martha's brother Lazarus has died in John 11. Jesus says to Martha, Your brother Lazarus will rise again. She says, I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. And then Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:23-25) So yes, Jesus offers us life for the life after this. We don't need to be afraid of the future!

But Jesus also says in the chapter earlier: I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10) Somebody has translated that "life of the ages." It's a new way to live that starts now in this life! So Jesus' Gospel fulfills that Genesis theme of new life

and creation. Luther used to say that every day when we remember our baptism, we are born again, born to new life. We're given a new start because of God's love and forgiveness. So what was the Gospel for Jesus? It certainly included new life in him. (John 1:4)

Then you remember that the second of the big themes in Hebrew Scriptures is the Exodus. The Exodus was the journey of the people of God out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land. How does it happen in Jesus? In Jesus, we pass through the waters again, the waters of baptism; we eat the new Passover meal, which is communion. Jesus is the one who brings good news to people in bondage, people in slavery to their addictions, people enslaved to sin, like all of us.

And then the good news of Jesus has to do with a new kingdom that the prophets talked about, where enemies are loved, and debts are cancelled, and we share our bread with the hungry, and we welcome the stranger.

So here's the question: How does Jesus' Gospel of the kingdom of God relate to what we see as the Gospel that we find in Romans? Are they different? Are they reconcilable? Jesus talks about a new way to live in this world. Paul talks about a new relationship with God, made available to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul, remember, is writing a letter to the Christians in Rome. And let me suggest this to you: he's trying to explain to Jews and Gentiles how this good news that Jesus talks about works in their lives.

He's writing to a community in Rome that had both Jews and Gentiles in it. Remember that the Jews had always defined themselves in exclusive ways. You ate these foods, you behaved in these ways, you stayed away from these kinds of people. And then Jesus came along and questioned that whole system. He didn't wash his hands ceremonially, he ate with sinners, he said that some prostitutes and tax collectors were closer to the kingdom of God than religious people. So if you were Jewish and became a follower of Jesus, you wondered how much of your religion you needed to keep and what you could let go of. Paul was writing to a community of Jews and Gentiles who were gathered around the Lord Jesus, but they were bringing a lot of baggage with them that needed to be worked out.

For instance, what if a gentile follower of Jesus invited a Jewish follower over for dinner, and they offered their biggest, juiciest pig as the main course? Did the gentile followers need to obey all the religious holidays that the Jews did? How could they begin to see each other as brothers and sisters in Christ? So Paul writes Romans to help them see what the Gospel of Jesus would look like in their setting. What does being a new creation in Christ look like? What does freedom and liberation look like? What do peacemaking values look like in the community?

Let's do a quick tour of Romans this morning. Remember that he is writing this letter through Tertius, a scribe, so we can picture Paul sitting on a sunny Mediterranean rooftop, thinking through what he is dictating to his friend Tertius. The first move that he

makes is to reduce Jew and Gentile to the same level of need. Remember he's trying to help them form community, so it won't help for one group to feel like they're superior to the other. So he begins by describing the whole Greco-Roman culture in graphic detail: there's idol worship, there are sexual orgies, there is gossip and slander and rebellion against parents and lack of compassion.

This has the well-known section on same sex behavior that Paul condemns, and the question of interpretation is- Did Paul know about sexual orientation, or did he assume everybody was heterosexual in orientation, and so same sex behavior would be against their nature? We've had scholars argue on both sides of that issue. And I am someone who believes that the same sex behavior mentioned here is different from a loving, mutual, committed same gender relationship we see today. But Paul understands it as an example of idolatry that he can bring forward from his day, only one example of many sins.

But in the larger scheme of things, Paul is setting up a trap for the one who hears this list of sins and says, I'm not that kind of person! I don't do those things! Paul continues in Romans 2: 1- "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things." Now he is talking to the Jewish believers who stand in judgment on those evil Gentiles, and he says, You do the same things. We all stand under judgment.

This is how Paul begins to explain the Gospel of Jesus to these believers; he helps them realize they all need a Savior. The second move he makes (Romans 3:21-4:25) as he explains the Gospel is that there is a new way forward for Jew and Gentile, and that is the way of *faith*. That's the passage we heard earlier from Romans 3 (21-28): "All who have sinned are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement through his blood, effective through faith." This isn't a new religion, it's not trying harder at the old religion, it is faith- dependence on God- that is available to everyone. So Paul puts everyone in two categories: we're all guilty sinners, and we all are made right by grace through faith. He uses Abraham as an illustration, when he says that before the law, and before he was circumcised, Abraham simply trusted God and responded to God's call.

And then Paul uses illustrations from the sin of Adam- "If, because of the one man's (Adam) trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion *in life* through the one man, Jesus Christ." (5:17) Remember how Jesus said that in him was life abundant? And how Jesus fulfills the Genesis theme of creation? Here it is again Paul! Paul says, the death that comes to us from Adam is overruled by the *life* we receive in Christ.

In chapters 9-11, Paul asks the question, Why have his fellow Jews mostly rejected the Gospel? Maybe they didn't hear it? No...Maybe they didn't understand it? No...Maybe God hardened their hearts to achieve a greater good? And that's what Paul concludes

happened. When many of the Jewish people did not accept the Gospel, the early Christians shared Christ with the Gentiles. Because most of the Jewish people rejected Jesus, the Gentiles were included. But even here Paul says that the covenant with the Jewish people remains, because “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” (Rom. 11:29) The Gospel according to Paul gives hope to both Jew and Gentile.

How else does Paul explain the Gospel of Jesus? In chapters 12 and 13, Paul says that the Gospel of the kingdom of God has to do with their common life and mission. We have gifts that the Spirit has given us for the common good (12:3-8). Imagine hearing that in the church in Rome: there are Jewish Christians here with gifts that I as a Gentile need, and vice versa. And so much of what Paul says here sounds like Jesus and the kingdom of God: be patient in suffering, extend hospitality to strangers, associate with the lowly, don't repay evil for evil, if your enemies are hungry, feed them, overcome evil with good. (Romans 12, selected verses from 9-21)

And in the last part of the letter, Paul speaks to followers of Jesus who might see things differently, in terms of whether or not to eat food offered to idols, or what days to observe as religious days. The church always has people who take a freer interpretation of things, and a narrower interpretation of things. And Paul says, Don't judge one another for that (Rom. 14:13) It's exactly what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount- Do not judge, so that you may not be judged (Matthew 7:1-5). But Paul also says, you can be convinced in your own mind that eating a certain food is OK, or taking part in a certain activity is alright, but don't let it be a stumbling block for somebody else in Christ's family. The Gospel of Christ helps us to look out for sisters and brothers.

Paul is preaching the same Gospel of the kingdom of God in this letter: Jesus' good news of the kingdom of God is available for everybody. And it provides life now for us and for all people, and life for the world to come. Look again at that passage from the end of Acts that was read earlier today: “From morning until evening (Paul) explained the matter to them, testifying to the *kingdom of God* and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets...He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the *kingdom of God* and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. (Acts 28: 23, 30-31)

Notice that Paul was preaching *the kingdom of God*. That's the same Gospel Jesus preached. The kingdom of God is here; it's a different kingdom than the powers of this world; it's good news that frees us from the power of sin now, that frees our neighbor from bondage, and that gives us life forever. Is Jesus' Gospel different from Paul's? No. But it might be helpful to call it *the Gospel of the kingdom of God*. Amen.