

February 17, 2008

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Called by the Gospel of Grace

Galatians 1:11 – 16

11 For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. 12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; 14 and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. 15 But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased 16 to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, 11 For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man.

Paul was either responding to his detractors assertions that this gospel he was preaching was made-up, man-made tales – as opposed to the Law given to Moses by God that they were preaching – or he was simply making the point that this gospel is divine, not human, in origin – and contrasting that with the so-called gospel the Judaizers were preaching. Whichever the case, the implication here is that these guys have adjusted or tweaked the message of the gospel somehow to avoid trouble and to make a good showing of religious fervor - because Paul says later in 6:12 – *It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.*

12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

He stressed again that the gospel he preached was not passed on to him by others – he didn't go to school and get it – instead he got it by revelation. I believe Paul was making the point here that *those preachers of a distorted gospel were passing on a man-made thing* that they had learned from others, no doubt mixed up with what they learned in their religious schools. And Paul's contention was that the gospel he preached did not originate with men but God. ***It came not from Paul's head but from God's heart.***

Another reason I think he makes this statement is that since his gospel was not man-made but received directly from the source, ***the Galatians ought not to entertain another gospel*** that was different from what he had taught or suppose that anything needed to be added to the gospel he preached. It is almost as though those teachers of the distorted gospel were saying, 'Paul didn't really tell you the whole story – salvation is by faith *and* by keeping the Law of Moses.'

The other point made here – and I think the most important one – is that ***the gospel of Jesus Christ is understood and apprehended by revelation.*** The word Paul uses is *apokalupsis* – a revelation or epiphany if you will. The gospel of grace is not received because someone sees the logical reasonableness of the death of Christ. People do not come to a saving knowledge of the sacrifice of Jesus because they like the story or just because it explains all the issues of life so much better than any other. People come to Christ because God graciously opens their eyes to the beauty and grace in the gospel.

Ephesians 2:1-2 says, *And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.* Before we came to Christ this was our state – *dead men walking* – dead in sin, not conscious of God, unmindful that we are sinners in danger of damnation and hell – walking according to the philosophy, culture, propaganda and common wisdom of the day. This is crucial that we understand this about the human condition. John Calvin called this state that every man, woman and child that has been or ever will be born into – Total Depravity. Sounds bad, doesn't it? It is! *What this doctrine says is that apart from the grace of God there are no God-ward yearnings in our hearts, no delight in the holiness of God or the beauty of Christ, or any glad submission to His sovereign authority.*

In Romans 3: 9-18, Paul lays it out for us: *'...all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, 10 as it is written: None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands;no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;no one does good,not even one... 18 There is no fear of God before their eyes.'* Some may argue that people do apparently do good or seek God in their natural, unconverted state – but I would counter with the Biblical truth that the good people do apart from God is always self-seeking in some manner, and those who apparently seek God on their own are not seeking the God of the Bible but rather their own idea of God. ***It is a myth that unconverted men genuinely seek God.***

The good that Paul is talking about here is the good that bubbles out of a soul that is glad in God – it is the good that is in relation to the glory and honor of God. Paul tells us in Romans 14:23 that *'Whatever is not from faith is sin.'* That is, whatever good that is not born of a God-empowered faith in the death and resurrection of His Son and the grace that comes to us by faith in Jesus – is not really good at all – in fact he calls it sin. It is sin because God who is the author of all good is not praised or loved or honored or gloried in by those who do the good. It may seem good – but ultimately it honors not God but the one doing the good.

And this is important to understand so that when we preach the gospel we realize that it is not the eloquence of our words, or the graceful elocution of the text that brings men to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ – but it is the blazing light of the glory of God breaking in on deadened, sinful hearts and minds and causing them to see the truth that is in the gospel. That is why Paul speaks of the gospel being veiled: *And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4 in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.* 2 Corinthians 4:3-4

As testimony to this fact – that only a revelation from God could have opened Paul's eyes to the glory of the gospel, he goes on to say: *13 For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; 14 and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.*

Essentially Paul says that in view of his history as a zealous, law-abiding Jew who went around trying to wipe out the church of God, not establish it – the very church that these Galatians now belonged to – it would have taken a revelation from heaven for him to change course. And that is exactly what happened. When you pray for those still unconverted and lost people in your life – pray for revelation above all. Pray that the eyes of their hearts would be opened to see the glory of God in Christ through the gospel. ***Bringing men to a saving knowledge of Christ is not a matter of explanation – but revelation.***

And don't stop praying, don't stop preaching if they hear you once and don't receive the message. There is a time for everything, and Paul's time was one, hot, dusty day on the way to Damascus to wreck another church and throw some more people into prison – Paul had an agenda that day – but God had His own plans:

15 But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased 16 to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles,

This sentence is loaded with truth and has staggering implications for us. First of all we need to understand that ***God Himself is the initiator and sustainer of faith.*** Paul says, *'But when God...'* Don't just pass lightly over familiar phrases – Paul was advancing in Judaism – Paul was ravaging the church of God – Paul was, according to Acts 9 - *'...still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...'* - *but when God!* The sovereignty of God in salvation is never seen more clearly than in just these kinds of circumstances. Paul thought he knew God – he had a big name among the religious community of that day – but he had never been converted by all his careful attention to the rites and rituals and laws of that religion – he was still breathing threats and murder – and John tells us that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. But when God! When God decided that the time was right – he knocked all his props out from underneath him.

The reality is that fallen, sinful men pursue their own course until God determines that it is time to knock them off their donkey. We somehow have the idea that one day we just decide to turn our lives over to God and that's that. We heard a message – we sang a song – we responded to an invitation. But what we fail to recognize many times is the sovereignty of God in the whole matter. Why did we respond that particular night? Why not earlier? Why not later? The answer is *'When God'*.

In his biography, C.H. Spurgeon relates his own experience of the sovereignty of God in salvation: *Born, as all of us are by nature, an Arminian, I still believed the old things I had heard continually from the pulpit, and did not see the grace of God. When I was coming to Christ, I thought I was doing it all myself, and though I sought the Lord earnestly, I had no idea the Lord was seeking me...I can recall the very day and hour when first I received those truths in my own soul—when they were, as John Bunyan says, burnt into my heart as with a hot iron...One week-night, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher's sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, "How did you come to be a Christian?" I sought the Lord. "But how did you come to seek the Lord?"*

The truth flashed across my mind in a moment—I should not have sought Him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me seek Him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, How came I to pray? I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. How came I to read the Scriptures? I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that He was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, "I ascribe my change wholly to God"

The Bible truth of salvation is this: *No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him;* John 6:44 *God Himself is the initiator and sustainer of faith.* Apart from Him, we have no capacity to believe or behave. This is what the gospel of grace tells us. God could have chosen to reveal Himself to Paul at any point along the way – but he waited until he was breathing threats and murder. I'm sure that in retrospect – perhaps it was at the house where he was taken, blinded, shaken, unsure – that the irony of the whole thing struck him. Here he was – a Pharisee of pharisees – a keeper of the holy Law of God – with murder in his heart. O how sweet grace must have seemed to him! O how he must have reveled in the mercy of God not to obliterate him but save him! This is the gospel of grace!

The second thing we notice is ***the choosing of those who come to God is His choice – not ours.*** *'God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb...'* Before Paul was even born – God chose him. In fact Paul's election, and ours, goes back even further than that. Ephesians 1:3-4 tells us: *'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.'* God's choosing extends back beyond the womb, and before the world was formed. It is not as some would say, predicated on God's foreknowledge of our choosing Him at some point – that is God does not choose us because we will choose Him – rather we choose Him because He first chose us. In 1 John, the apostle makes this point: *'We love because He first loved us.'* 1 John 4:19

If you accept that we are totally without grace to come to Christ in our fallen condition, dead in our trespasses and sins, hostile to God, then there must be some outside agency that empowers us in the first place to have any stirrings toward God – and that is God Himself. He chose us in Him, before we were born, before we did anything good or bad, so that He would get all the glory and we would not. If we were in some small measure instrumental in the process, we would in some little part be the means of our own salvation. But it is His choice and not ours. This is what Paul tells the Romans through the story of Jacob and Esau: *'... for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls...'* Romans 9:11

This idea of election – of God choosing who would come to faith – and by implication – those who would not – is a difficult thing for many people to embrace. We would think that it would be fairer for God to let us choose – after all, didn't He give us free will? But if you accept the teaching of the Bible concerning our fallen, deadened state – we can only view the election of God as great mercy toward us. *We were dead and He made us alive – we were helpless and He helped us – we were enemies of God and He made us His friends – we were lost and He rescued us.* Amazing Grace! – John Newton wrote – that saved a wretch like me! I pray that we would echo the words and sentiments of that great 18th century evangelist, George Whitefield who said: *'The doctrines of our election, and free justification in Christ Jesus are daily more and more pressed upon my heart. They fill my soul with a holy fire and afford me great confidence in God my Saviour.'*

The third thing we need to see here is that ***our calling to Christ is through His irresistible grace.*** *But when God... [Who] called me through His grace.'* I do not mean to say that we can never resist Christ – but rather that the Holy Spirit is able to overcome any and all resistance when God concludes that it is time. In Acts 7:51 Stephen tells the Jewish leaders that they were resisting God: *'You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit as your fathers did.'* And in Ephesians and 1 Thessalonians, [Eph. 4:30; 1 Thess. 5:19] Paul speaks of grieving and quenching the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament we see the whole history of God's people is one of resistance. But the Bible clearly shows that in God's perfect timing, He moves to overcome our resistance and bring us to Himself. For Paul, that time was while he was going to Damascus – full of himself – arrogantly bent on a course of murder and destruction, resisting God at every step. *God will do whatever is necessary to overcome our resistance.* And because He is God – it is not that big of a challenge for Him I don't think. But for Paul, God knew it would take nothing less than a bolt from heaven to knock him down, blind him, and leave him in darkness for three days. I often wonder what it will take to overcome the resistance of those on my prayer list. But I always rest in the certainty of His irresistible grace.

I know for my part, although I had made a profession of faith at a fairly young age – I successfully resisted His call for many years. But one day, He overcame my resistance and effectively called me through His grace. It was by grace because prior to that moment of revelation – every thought and intention of my heart was hostile toward Him. But one warm summer night, when I was 20 years old – His grace broke in on my hard heart like a blazing fire and I heard and responded to His call.

Finally, ***the goal of His election and calling is that Christ would be revealed in us.*** '*...when God...was pleased to reveal His Son in me...*' The revelation of Jesus Christ in us does not mean that we simply have an intellectual assent to the truth of the gospel. *The revelation of Jesus Christ in me means that the gospel of Jesus Christ has so impacted my soul that I am no longer the same person I was before that revelation.* The reason Paul contends so fiercely for the purity and truth of the gospel with these guys that are preaching a distorted gospel is that their gospel does not change anything in the soul of those who follow it. They add rules and regulations that look good – but underneath they are still the same proud, arrogant, lying, cheating, lust-driven people they always were.

What Paul is saying when he says that Christ is revealed in us, is that there has been a fundamental change in nature. One moment dead men walking – the next, saints alive to God. *Back in the 1950s, a young man named Jim, was an Arthur Murray dance studio instructor. He was a drunk. He slept around. And in general he lived a very worldly life. When he started dating a Christian girl, she asked him, "Where do you go to church?" And he said, "Nowhere. You don't have to go to church to be a good person." Then, with an air of arrogance, he said, "You can be a good Christian WITHOUT going to church!" And the girl said, "No you can't!" Years later, Jim said, "That was the first time anyone had ever challenged my little pet saying. I was taken aback. And it made me rethink everything I believed." A week later, Kennedy was sleeping in bed in a drunken haze. When he woke up, he heard a preacher on the radio. He got up to turn it off. But before he got to the radio, he heard the preacher say this: "Suppose that you were to die today and stand before God. And he asked you, "What right do you have to enter my heaven?' what would you say?" The question stopped Jim in his tracks. He sat back down on the bed. And listened as Dr. Donald Barnhouse shared the gospel message. That Jesus died for our sins. And rose from the dead. And that if we surrender our lives to him, all our sins would be forgiven. And we would get to be with Jesus in heaven forever. And right then and there, Jim completely surrendered his life to Christ. The next day, as he was shaving, he kept looking at himself in the mirror. And saying, "I'm forgiven! I'm completely forgiven! I'm going to spend eternity in paradise with Jesus!" And he was so happy. And so grateful. That he decided right then and there, "I want what happened to me to happen to as many people as possible." And he started going to church with his new Christian girlfriend. They dated for three more years, until they married. And he spent the rest of his life living to make people glad in God. That's how much the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ changed the life of a man we know as Dr. D. James Kennedy.*

Our gracious God and heavenly Father,

Grant that we would see and savor the incredible mercy and goodness of Your gospel of grace. Open the eyes that have been blinded by the deceitfulness of sin and shine the glorious light of the gospel into our lives. May the truth of Your choosing us be sweet assurance to our souls and our solid foundation of hope. Let the irresistible power of Your grace draw our hearts and minds to the foot of the cross, and ignite faith within cold, sin-hardened souls. Cause life to spring up where death once reigned and make us new creatures in Christ. O Father, make us forever glad in You and fill us with a passion to spend our lives making others glad in You we pray, in the precious, life-giving name of Jesus our Savior, Amen.

*May the Lord bless you and keep yourselves
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto You.
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.*