

January 9, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

In the Beginning Was the Word

John 1:1 – 13

I have chosen to preach through the gospel of John this year as we discover what it means to live out the gospel in real life, for several reasons. The first is that this is, like all the other books in the Bible, the divinely inspired word of God, and for that reason it is eminently profitable for teaching and correction and instruction in righteousness. And preaching through an entire book instead of picking topics and passages from week to week helps me not focus on my favorite topics, or rely on my own judgment as to what I think you need to hear. I find as we take the passages as they present themselves, God has a way of speaking so much more directly and insightfully than I ever could have presumed.

I also have never preached through any of the four gospels before and that is something I've wanted to do, and the gospel of John has always attracted my attention for its sheer majesty in the way it portrays the Lord Jesus. I love this gospel because it is both simple and profound. This is the gospel toward which you point those who are not yet Christians and those who are new in the faith, and it is the gospel you go to for the deepest kind of revelation about who Christ is. Commentator Charles Erdman said: 'Its stories are so simple that even a child will love them, but its statements are so profound that no philosopher can fathom them.' Another commentator wrote that 'it is a pool in which a child may wade and an elephant may swim'.

I wanted to do this gospel as well because I have never memorized one of the four gospels before and I'd like to start with John. I would invite you to memorize this gospel along with me as we journey through its pages. Because no other book so clearly and profoundly reveals the Christ of the gospel as John, what better way to get to know Him than to meditate on Him by memorizing the word about Him? The old puritan, John Owen wrote: *The revelation...of Christ...deserves the severest of our thoughts, the best of our meditations and our utmost diligence in them.... [W]hat better preparation can there be for [our future enjoyment of the glory of Christ] than in a constant previous contemplation of that glory in the revelation that is made in the Gospel. (Works, I, p. 275)*

John's gospel is unique among the four gospels in many ways. The other three, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are often called the synoptic gospels. Synoptic simply means 'see together' and these three gospels present the life of Christ in pretty much the same format. They also focus more on what Jesus *taught* and *did*, while John focuses more on who Jesus *is*. But each gospel has its own thrust and central point. Matthew portrays the Lord Jesus as the Son of David, the Heir to Israel's throne and we see Him as Christ Jesus the King. Mark shows Jesus as coming from Nazareth and portrays Him as the Servant of God, and everything in this gospel brings out the characteristics of His service and the manner in which He served. Luke takes Jesus' lineage all the way back to Adam and demonstrates throughout his gospel that Jesus is the perfect Man. And John reveals that Jesus came from heaven as the eternal Son of the Father and shows that He is God.

John's gospel paints a portrait of Jesus Christ and His saving work and John's purpose in writing this is made clear in chapter 20: *Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book ; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God ; and that believing you may have life in His name.* John 20:30-31 This was written to help people believe on Jesus Christ and have eternal life.

But don't just think that this book is only for those without faith in Jesus. Throughout this gospel, John makes the point that it is those who believe and receive the word of life, and keep on living in it, are those who are saved in the end. In chapter 8 John says, *"If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine"* John 8:31 That is why we need to rehearse the gospel to ourselves, and there are few better ways of doing that than digging into this gospel. **John was writing to awaken faith in unbelievers and to sustain faith in those who already believe**, and that is my prayer as we begin our journey through this book. I am praying that the eyes of you who do not yet believe are opened to see the majesty and glory and eternal worth of Jesus Christ the Lord; and I am praying that you who do believe will see and savor more of this wonderful Savior and the joy of your salvation and your passion will be ignited to spread this joy to more and more people.

So let us go to the text: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God* John 1:1-2 Mark began his gospel at the River Jordan; both Matthew and Luke begin in Bethlehem; but John steps out of time and goes back to the very beginning of all things, as if to say the best perspective on the Lord Jesus must be seen in the light of eternity. Now anyone familiar with the Scriptures in John's day would have been struck with the similarity to the very beginning of the word of God in Genesis: *'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...'* In fact in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament Hebrew text, the exact same expression is used as it is used here.

Think of it – the man John knew and loved and followed for three and one-half years is now displayed as the very Word of God, transcendent, eternal, without beginning and without peer. The One John walked with and talked with and ate together with was God Himself. This is the point at which so many people today stumble. They can picture Jesus as a good man, a great moral teacher, even a prophet. But to accept that He is God goes too far. This is where Muslims stop and Buddhists balk and Jews refuse to listen. But if you do not accept that Jesus is God, you have no basis for eternal salvation. If He was just a man, then He could not carry the sins of mankind to the cross and bear the wrath of God and die in our place. So it was very important for John to make it crystal clear that **Jesus of Nazareth was the very word of God**, who was with God, who was God.

John introduces Jesus as the Word of God, and that has some profound implications. John uses the Greek word **logos or word**, which had deep and rich roots in both Jewish and Greek thinking. Jewish rabbis often referred to God in terms of His word. They spoke of God Himself as **'the word of God'**. In Exodus 19:17, where our editions say, *'Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God'*, ancient editions of the Old Testament read, *'Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet the word of God'*. So in Jewish thinking, word of God meant God Himself. The Greeks saw this **logos** as the power that pours meaning and sense into the world, creating order out of chaos. They viewed **logos** as the ultimate reason that controlled everything. So John says, 'All you who have for centuries been thinking and talking and writing about this **logos, this word** – this is who He is'.

And it is words that make the unseen visible – they make things manifest or known. **As the Word, Christ makes the invisible God visible to mortal eyes.** When John gets to verse eighteen he says: *the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.* John 1:18 As we look at Jesus, we see God. And as the Word of God, Christ communicates the heart of God to us, and as the Logos, He reveals all the vast dimensions of God, His character and attributes, His power, His wisdom, His holiness, His grace and His eternal plan. We cannot know God apart from His word. So it is very important for us to know Christ as the Word of God.

In fact if you do not know Christ as the Word of God, you cannot get saved. Contrary to popular opinion, people do not get saved apart from the word of God. **The word of God is vital for salvation.** Romans tells us this: *for "whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?* Romans 10:13-14 The implication is clear – people preach the gospel – with words, people hear the gospel – with words, and those words ignite faith in the hearer and they believe the gospel – as they heard it, they then, using words, call on the name of Jesus for salvation. It is the Word of God that saves. That is why we have to be about the business of telling people about Jesus.

There is a popular quote by St. Francis of Assisi that goes: **"Preach the gospel at all times -- If necessary, use words."** That is at best an incomplete thought. What he meant was that our lives should always reflect the glory of Christ so that people might see the reality of Jesus in our behavior and that is the gospel. But the Bible says that actions alone are not enough – we need to put words to our actions, not just actions to our words. People need to hear the good news of the gospel in their ears so that they can believe. In December we were in China with our children for Christmas and one of Hilary's friends from her days at the Southwest University for Minorities came from Shanghai to visit. His name is Brian, and his testimony of coming to faith was that he saw how the Christians behaved during and after the big earthquake in Sichuan a couple of years ago, and was struck by their peace and joy through what was a time of terror for everyone else, and he decided he needed a Savior. But he still needed to hear the gospel in words from Hilary and others before he could call on the name of the Lord to be saved.

We need to hear the Word of God before we can respond to it because it is **the word of God that conveys the power of God, generating faith to believe**. Peter tells us: *'...for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God.* 1 Peter 1:23 Just as it was the Word of God in the beginning that spoke the universe into existence, it is the living Word of God that ignites faith in our hearts to believe the Word of God unto salvation. **Only the Word of God has creative power in this universe.** All men can do is simply rearrange what is already here.

One day a group of scientists got together and decided that man had come a long way and no longer needed God. So they picked one scientist to go and tell Him that they were done with Him. This guy walked up to God and said, "God, we've decided that we no longer need you. We're to the point that we can clone people and extract DNA and split the atom and send men into space and do all kinds of things people once considered miracles, so why don't you just go on and get lost." "That's fine" God said, "But to be absolutely sure that you don't need me anymore, what do you say we have a man-making contest?" To which the scientist replied, "OK, great!" But God added, "Now, we're going to do this just like I did back in the old days with Adam and all I had was some dirt" The scientist said, "Sure, no problem" and bent down and grabbed himself a handful of dirt. "Whoa" God said, "Not so fast pal, you get your own dirt!"

Not only was the Word existing before time in eternity, but John tells us that this Word was with God and was God – and just so we don't miss the connection between the Word of God and Christ, he adds, **He** was in the beginning with God. *and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God* John 1:1-2 The preposition translated **with** here is not the kind of **with** that we might use to talk about the fact that this morning I have my Bible with me. It is a **with** that indicates fellowship, communion, communication. John uses this in his 1st epistle when he says *'We have an Advocate with the Father'*. That is the Lord Jesus is at the Father's right hand and is actively interceding for us with the Father. They share a common interest and enjoy communion and fellowship as Father and Son. And this is the fellowship that the gospel calls us to join. We read later in John that Jesus prayed that His followers would *'...all be one even as Thou Father, art in Me and I in Thee, that they also may be in us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me'*. John 17:21

This **with** along with the climactic clause, *and the Word was God*, is also at the heart of the great historic doctrine of the Trinity. The Word, Jesus Christ was with God, and He was God. He is God, and He has a relationship with God. He is God and He is the image of God, perfectly reflecting all that God is, and standing forth from all eternity as the fulness of deity in a distinct person. There is one divine Essence, and three persons – two of which are named here, and the third, the Holy Spirit is named a little later in John. This is the conviction that John is wanting his readers to come to – that this Jesus, a man who lived and died among them, and was resurrected, is the very God. **This Jesus, the eternal Word who was with God and was God, is worthy to be worshipped even as the Father and the Spirit are worthy of our worship.** In the climax of this whole gospel, we have the Lord Jesus in resurrection appearing to a doubting Thomas who falls down before Him crying, 'My Lord and my God!'

John goes on to say: *All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.* John 1:3 Christ, the Word spoke and it was so. It was through the Word of God and by the Word of God that all things came into being. Paul, in Colossians tells us: *For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities -all things have been created through Him and for Him.* Colossians 1:16

Science and philosophy notwithstanding, it still remains that Christ spoke the universe and all that is in it into existence and all our attempts at finding some other explanation for the existence of everything is spitting into the wind. This one thought is more crucial than we know. What we believe about how things came into being has direct consequences on the way we live and the way we think. If we believe that through unknown means our universe came to be, and then through a random process of still-yet-undetermined means life began and then evolved from amoeba's to apes to men, it will have a profound effect on our ethics and morals and sense of worth and the ultimate meaning of life.

Michael Medved shared this story some time ago: A few years ago, Rabbi Jacob Karmenetzky made a trip to Israel accompanied by his teenage grandson. Ironically, these two deeply religious people were seated in the airplane next to a prominent Israeli socialist leader and outspoken atheist. On the flight, the cynical atheist traveler couldn't help noticing the way the teenage boy attended to the needs of his aged, bearded grandfather. He got up to get the old man a glass of water, helped him remove his shoes and put on some slippers, and otherwise demonstrated that the rabbi's comfort represented his primary concern.

At one point, as the boy got up for yet another errand on behalf of the old man, the atheist could contain himself no longer. "Tell me something," he asked the rabbi. "Why does your grandson treat you like some kind of a king? I have a grandson, too, but he wouldn't give me the time of day." ***"It's very simple," the old man replied. "My grandson and I both believe in a God who rules the universe and created all things, including the first man. That means that in the boy's eyes, I'm two generations closer to the hand of God Himself. But in the eyes of your grandson, you're just two generations closer to a monkey."***

What you believe about the origin of all things really does make a difference, and it will manifest itself in how you act toward others. If we see our origin as purely a matter of chance and the end product of mere material agents, then we have no basis on which to assign value to others. On the other hand, if we understand that we were intentionally created by a loving God, and that there is a plan and a purpose to our existence, that gives us all the reason in the world to hold others in high regard, and gives us incentive to tell them about the Christ who created them.

I am praying that this year we would saturate ourselves in the Word of God. That we would let the Word of God, Christ Himself, be the rule and definition of all things. I am praying that as we immerse ourselves in the written word, love for the Living Word would awaken in our hearts. I am praying that our hearts would be pierced by this Word so that we will see and savor more of this wonderful Word and the joy of our salvation and our passion will be ignited to spread this joy to more and more people.

Finally, I am praying that the eyes of you who do not yet believe are opened to see the majesty and glory and eternal worth of Jesus Christ the Lord, the very Word of God, and that this morning you would come to Christ and be saved.

Our gracious God and merciful Savior,

We come just as we are this morning – trusting in Your grace and the power of Your Word to penetrate our hearts and minds. O how we love Your Word, Father. It is precious beyond all the things of this earthly plain and all its temporal treasures. Incline our hearts to the Christ who is the Word and break our bondage to other things. Let us see Your form and face and beauty in Him today. Pierce through our souls and waken spiritual life. Confirm the substance of our faith and make us real, through and through.

For those who are aching with sorrow, may this Word be a healing balm and fierce comfort. For those who are rejoicing may this Word increase and broaden their joy. For those who have wandered away from You may this Word draw their hearts and affections once more into Your presence. For those who have surrendered to the awful tyranny of sin may this Word set them free and inspire faith. For those who come with cold and stony hearts may this Word ignite a fire and passion and love for You that many waters cannot quench. O Father, let Christ, Your Word deliver us today from every other attachment and affection into the awesome brilliance and beauty and joy of Your love, and grant us to spread this joy to more and more people, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ the Living Word, Amen.