

The Essence of the Gospel

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- [0 : 0 0] This has been a fantastic weekend. Many of you know, but maybe some of you don't, especially if this is your first time here. Welcome. You're here at a good time.
- We're celebrating ten years in the life of this church. Advent has turned ten this year, and it's been a great joy to be together. We had a number of people fly in from around, actually around the world.
- In ten years, being in a place like D.C., we've sent a lot of people out. And one of the cool things about that is that we now have a literal global family of Advent alumni who are all around the world.
- And so a lot of those people flew in. We had a fantastic time of worship in the Brooklyn Parish this morning. We're welcoming some more of our people who have come into town tonight in the Columbia Heights Parish.
- But it's been a fantastic time. We had an amazing party yesterday of just hearing how God has been at work in the lives of His people. And it's been amazing to celebrate that together.
- [1 : 0 1] You know, when we first started Church of the Advent, started meeting on Friday nights, we were meeting at 1488 Newton Street, which is just across 16th Street, on the other side of 16th Street.
- And we were just down here. And if you walk out of the front of this church, you can look down and almost see the house. And I remember 10 years ago looking across the street at this church and wondering, maybe one day we'll be worshiping in that church building.
- And it's amazing to see what God has done to bring us here. And so as we've been celebrating all of this, I don't think there's any better thing that we could do with our time right now than to focus on that which is at the very heart of the Christian faith.
- That which is at the very source of life and vitality and growth and transformation in the Christian life. And that is the gospel itself. The gospel is not just the 101 level introduction to Christianity.
- It's not just the doorway. It's the entire building. It's the entirety of our faith. It's the source of life. It's the source of transformation.
- [2 : 0 8] It is the means through which God accomplishes his work in our lives. And so we're going to look at the gospel. And Galatians chapter 2, verses 11 to 21, this is a magnificent view of the gospel that we get.
- It's like being on a hike and you come up and you crest a hill and you just have this beautiful glimpse of the valley below and all of the richness therein. And that's what this passage is.
- It gives us this amazing view of the gospel. So we're going to be looking at this. We're not going to get through the whole thing tonight. We're going to get through about verse 16 tonight. And the next week we'll pick up and we'll finish. But I wanted you to hear the whole thing read because it's just a magnificent place to really understand why the gospel is so essential to the life of the church.

Because it shows us two things about what it means to be a gospel-centered community. And from the very beginning we started this church with a vision to be a gospel-centered church that plants and starts other gospel-centered churches.

And so we're going to see that being a gospel-centered community entails at least two things. That we are called as a church to contend for the truth of the gospel. To contend for the truth of the gospel.

[3 : 16] And then beyond that we're called to be people who are seeking to live in step with the gospel. So contending for the truth of the gospel and living in step with the gospel.

Let's pray and then we'll open God's word. Lord, we thank you because we know that your word is your means of doing your work in the lives of your people.

That you send it out and it does not return empty. That you send it out and it accomplishes all that you will it to accomplish. And we know that you have purposes in us tonight in our lives that maybe we don't even know.

We have needs that perhaps we can't even identify. Hungers and longings that we can't even articulate. And you know them, Lord. And you know what we need to hear.

And you are the one who can speak life into hearts and turn stone into flesh. And so we pray that you would do that through the power of your word. We pray that through this written word we would come face to face with your living word, Jesus Christ.

[4 : 16] And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So Galatians chapter 2 starting in verse 11 contending for the truth of the gospel. Let me read a few verses and then I'll explain what's going on.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I, meaning Paul, opposed him to his face because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles.

But when they came, he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

Even Barnabas. You can hear Paul's heartbreak and his horror and his outrage at seeing what Peter has done. And this word that he uses, the word hypocrisy.

In the Greek, you know, that's a very powerful word. Greek drama, the costuming wasn't nearly as elaborate as we have today. They would hold a mask on a stick and they would hold that mask in front of their face.

[5 : 23] But they would deliver their lines from behind the mask. And that's where the word hypocrite comes from. The Greek word is the word that was used to describe an actor speaking from behind a mask.

So this is the accusation that he levels at Peter. It's a very powerful word. So what's going on here? Well, here's some context to help us understand it. Earlier in his life, Peter had been a very faithful Jew.

And being a faithful Jew meant you upheld the ceremonial law. Ceremonial law, this is all the laws about cleanliness. It's all of the dietary restrictions, right?

Eating shellfish and pork, you can't do that, right? It's restrictions around things like menstrual cycles and ritual cleansing and bathing. And there were also regulations around who you could associate with.

And so a faithful Jew knew that they could not associate with uncircumcised people, Gentiles, because that would make them unclean. You couldn't even really go in their house, much less eat with them or share food with them.

[6 : 24] That was considered very, very, very wrong. So nobody did it. Because the principal symbol of your cleanliness as a Jew was your circumcision. That was the thing that told everybody that you had a special relationship with God.

You were one of the inner circle, God's chosen elect. And so you had to preserve that status. You had to keep your ceremonial cleanliness at all costs.

It was very important. So up until this point, Peter knows this. He grew up being taught this. He knew not to associate or eat with Gentiles. But then Jesus came. And Jesus began to do radical things.

And Peter knew Jesus. And he was befriended by Jesus. And he began to follow Jesus. And he began to realize that Jesus is here to change the world. And he thought first that Jesus was going to do it through his teaching and through social upheaval and through radical rebellion, maybe against the Romans.

But then he began to realize the vision was much greater. Because through Jesus' death and through his resurrection, Jesus began to call into existence one great worldwide family.

[7 : 26] Through the grace and the forgiveness that became possible on the cross. And as Jesus began to do this, Peter and the other Jews who followed him began to realize that their entire understanding of the law had been wrong from the outset.

They realized that the entire purpose of the ceremonial law was not to make them clean. They realized, in fact, that there was no way that a human being could make himself or herself clean.

The purpose of the ceremonial law was to teach the Jews, generation upon generation, that cleanliness is impossible apart from Jesus Christ. That no matter what they did, they would have to offer sacrifices.

No matter how cleanly they lived, they would have to offer sacrifices at the temple. And what they needed was one true sacrifice that would make them clean from the inside out for all time. And so Peter began to realize this and began to realize, now that Jesus has come, his circumcision matters, not at all.

It's obsolete. The ceremonial law has been fulfilled. It doesn't matter anymore. There is no longer any difference between Jews and Gentiles. All are welcomed in through Jesus Christ to one great worldwide family.

[8 : 38] And so Peter began to live this out. He began to associate with and socialize with and befriend and worship alongside and eat and share food with Gentiles. This is a radical world-changing thing, overcoming these racial barriers.

The power of the gospel to reconcile people. Paul visits Peter at first, realizes this not long after Paul's conversion, sees Peter doing this, and praises God and says, this is the power of the gospel at work, bringing people together.

Well, then Paul finds out that something has happened. False teachers came from the community that James led.

Now, this isn't necessarily from James. This isn't necessarily James' teaching. But people from his community came, and they began to teach a different gospel. They began to say, no, in fact, Paul's wrong.

And there is still a difference between Jews and Gentiles. And Gentiles who want to become saved should get circumcised. And the ceremonial law does still matter.

[9 : 39] And they began to revise the early Christian understanding of the gospel. And so they came and they began to exert tremendous social pressure on the community where Peter was. So what does Peter do?

Well, we know Peter from the gospels. We know what Peter is like. He's very passionate. But sometimes he lacks conviction. Right?

He had already experienced that once when he denied Jesus right before his crucifixion. Three times. Right? And here's another moment of weakness in Peter. Peter, the rock upon whom the church is founded.

Right? The first pope. Nevertheless, he wavers. And he doesn't stand up for the truth of the gospel in the face of these false teachers.

He capitulates. He takes the path of appeasement. I don't want to stir up trouble. I don't want to cause conflict. I don't want to bring all this wrath down on myself and cause this whole thing.

[10 : 36] So I'm just going to keep the peace. And while these guys are here, I'm just going to separate myself. I'm going to, you know, only eat with Jews and not associate with the Gentiles. And I'll just kind of do what they say. And then maybe when they leave, you know, I'll go back to doing what I was doing before.

And Paul gets word of this. And Paul is utterly horrified. He's horrified. And so he goes and he says, literally, when I heard what was happening, I went up to Peter and I got in his face.

I got in his face. Conflict. Confrontation. Paul's contending for the truth of the gospel. Now let me ask you this. What's the big deal? Why does Paul get so upset?

And why are the stakes really that high? You may be familiar with those of you who are familiar with World War II history. In the early days, 1938, 1939, when Hitler was just getting going, Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia.

And he took some land from Czechoslovakia. And before this happened, the British were actually in a position where they could have opposed this and maybe even stopped it from happening.

[11 : 43] History actually tells us that they had a pretty good shot, if they had wanted to, at thwarting Hitler at this point. But the prime minister at the time in England remembered World War I. They were not eager to get back into another world war.

And so Neville Chamberlain, the prime minister, had a famous meeting with Hitler. And Chamberlain took the path of appeasement with Hitler. In other words, Chamberlain said, we do not want war. Peace at any cost.

Whatever it takes to avoid conflict. That's what we want to do. And so he sat down with Hitler and he made an agreement in Munich where he said, Hitler, you can take some of the land in Czechoslovakia.

We will not oppose you as long as you agree that our countries will never go to war. We want to keep peace with you. Hitler happily, happily signs that deal. Right?

And immediately they invade. It was later called the Rape of Prague. But anyway, Neville Chamberlain comes back. He announces this. We're not going to have war after all.

[12 : 40] All of the anxiety for a moment dissipates in the streets of England or filled with shouts and cheering and people singing for he is a jolly good fellow. But Winston Churchill dared to say the hard truth that nobody wanted to hear.

And he said this. The path of appeasement with a man like Hitler is the road to disaster. It's the road to disaster. And he said because as important as peace is, there are some things in life that are more important than keeping the peace.

And one of those things is freedom. Human freedom. Whenever human freedom is at stake, you have to fight. You have to fight.

Because there's a lot of peace in a cage. But you're not free. And so Paul and Peter are very much like Churchill and Chamberlain.

Right? Paul sees the truth about Peter's path of appeasement. He says this is the road to disaster. If you give ground here, if you stop associating with and eating with Gentiles, if you give a little ground, it doesn't seem like a big deal.

[14 : 00] But it's a huge deal because freedom is at stake. And whenever freedom is at stake, you have to fight. Right? There are some things that are worth conflict. Because Paul understood that the entire purpose of the gospel is to set human beings free.

He understood that if you put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone, and you trust in the grace of Jesus Christ alone, he will set you free.

He will set you free from sin. He will set you free from condemnation. He will set you free from death. You know, one of the great joys of this weekend of having so many people back in D.C. to celebrate the 10-year anniversary is that we've seen all these people that we've had to say goodbye to.

And, you know, life is about, so much of life is saying goodbye. It's transitions and people moving and getting jobs and internships elsewhere, getting married and moving on, doing things like that. D.C. is a very, you know, transient community.

And then we have people occasionally who pass away. But the great hope of the Christian faith is that no goodbye is forever. Right? And this weekend, for many of us, has been a kind of foretaste of that time when we will all have a great family reunion again.

[15 : 18] If you put your faith in Jesus alone, you are promised that no goodbye is permanent. We're set free from the permanence of death. Right? Jesus liberates us to overcome racial division, to become part of one great worldwide family.

All of this freedom is on offer through Christ alone. But, if you add anything to that, if you add anything to that, if you believe that there is anything in addition to Jesus that you need in order to be saved, as the Judaizers did.

You need Jesus plus circumcision and the ceremonial law. You need Jesus plus your own efforts to make yourself clean. If you add anything, then you have departed from the gospel.

You're not preaching just a different version of the gospel. You've wandered into another religion entirely. This is the thing that makes the difference.

Right? Moreover, if you believe that there is anything that you need in addition to Jesus in order to be okay in your life, fundamentally, existentially okay, then you are voluntarily relinquishing that freedom.

[16 : 31] You're walking back into the cage. And the reason is this, is because the only guarantee that we have in life, the only thing that is a certainty, is Jesus Christ. Nothing else is certain.

And if you tie yourself to an uncertainty, it will haunt you and it will ultimately enslave you. Right? So if you believe that you need Jesus, but you also tie yourself to the need for ceremonial cleanness, you will be haunted all of your days with doubt.

Am I clean enough? Have I done enough? Do I need to cleanse myself once more? When I had that thought a moment ago, when I had that inclination, did that make me unclean?

Do I need to do more than I'm currently doing? You'll be plagued by doubt and uncertainty. You'll never know for sure. Right? That will enslave you. If you believe that you need Jesus plus the admiration of the people around you, and if you tie yourself to that, then you'll be haunted by insecurity.

What do they really think about me? What do they say about me when I'm not around? Do they really like me? I know they said this, but what do they really mean by that? I really disagree with this person inside, but what if I actually say that?

[17 : 50] Are they going to still like me? You know, I really actually don't like the way this person is treating me, but if I say something, are they then going to hate me? You know? If you tie yourself to that, it's going to drag you under.

You know, if you believe that you need Jesus plus you need a spouse, you know, in order to be okay, I have to find somebody to spend the rest of my life with.

Well, what happens if you don't? You very well might not. You might, but you might not. What happens if you get into a marriage, but then that marriage self-destructs? And despite your best efforts, it falls apart.

What does that mean? Right? It's not a certainty. Right? If you believe that you need Jesus plus a stable career, what happens when you do your best, but you get laid off?

Because they're downsizing. Right? Jesus, Paul understands that Jesus came to lift us up from the dark waters in which we were drowning, in which we were lost.

[18 : 53] To lift us up and to set us on solid ground. And he also understands that if you tie anything to that, Jesus plus anything, that is like voluntarily strapping a millstone around your neck that will drag you back under the water and hold you there.

Jesus came to set people free. Jesus came to set people free.

Peter did. Adding to the gospel. Yeah, I believe in Jesus. Yeah, I believe the gospel. But I also really need this other thing. Then we must contend for the truth of the gospel. Right?

If there are people who are departing in any way, shape, or form. Right? So there are people in our community who may depart from the gospel by becoming spiritually superior. Feeling that they are unique and blessed in a way that other people are not.

maybe even beginning to look down their nose at other people and feel a bit of smug superiority, right? It's hard when you have so many amazing people who do amazing work in the world and do all kinds of things all around the world and make such a difference.

[20 : 24] It's easy to get that little voice in your head saying, wow, you've really done a lot for the kingdom, unlike this person, you know? That person's departing from the gospel. And it could be that God is calling you to contend for the gospel.

You know, you're a sinner. Saved by grace that you didn't earn, that you can't repay. You know, nothing more. How dare you think so highly of yourself? Or it could be that somebody's departing from the gospel by repeatedly and unrepentantly sinning, right?

And you know it and everybody knows it. Nobody wants to say anything and it's happening and everybody kind of looks the other way. And it could be that God is calling you to contend for the truth of the gospel in that person's life.

Jesus died to liberate you from this. Why are you going back there? Why won't you let it go? Jesus died so that you wouldn't have to hold on to this thing. Communities that are centered on the gospel contend for that truth whenever and wherever human freedom is at stake.

So that's the first part. The second part, though, flows out of the first. Living in step with the gospel means we're not just contending for it, but we're actually seeking to live it out in our own lives.

[21 : 37] In verse 14, Paul says, I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel. Now what does that mean? What does it mean to be in step with the truth of the gospel?

This past summer, as some of you know, we went on sabbatical thanks to the amazing generosity of this church. We had four months away. Two of those months were spent traveling in Western Europe. I've not spent much time there before.

And so we really, the only way we got around, we drove all over France and northern Italy and Switzerland. It was amazing. And the only way we knew how to get anywhere was because we had a really good map. And we would pull the map out and we would show our kids how we knew.

Maddox would ask, well, how do you know where to go? We're going to Paris. How do you know how to get there? And he thought I had just memorized all of the roads. And I said, no, no, no. I got this great map. And I showed him, here's where we are and here's Paris.

And see this little purple line? That's the course that the map software charted out. And if I follow that course, I know that in about five hours we'll be in Paris. And you say, okay.

[22 : 38] And that's how a map works, right? And the kids knew that, like, me putting my finger on Paris, that that wasn't actually Paris, that the map was a representation. That we had to actually follow the course if we wanted to actually make it to that destination.

Now, C.S. Lewis talks about our doctrine, right? Particularly our belief in the gospel, that's like a map, right? And when you say that I intellectually assent to the gospel, I believe the gospel, what you're saying is I believe this map is going to take me to the destination that it says it's going to take me to.

Now, what's the destination of the gospel? It's a lot better than Paris. A lot of things are a lot better than Paris, actually. It turns out.

The gospel is meant to take us into the arms of the Father. It's meant to take us to that place for which we were made. It's meant to take us into the arms of our perfect Heavenly Father.

Right? And in the arms of the Father, there is no fear. In the arms of the Father, there is no dread. Right? There's no isolation.

[23 : 53] There's no alienation. There's no division. In the arms of the Father, there's no shame. There's no insecurity.

There's no criticism. You know, in the arms of the Father, that's the only place where we will truly be made whole. In the arms of the Father is where we begin to experience what it is to be the object of total mutual adoration.

The kind of love that has existed within the Trinity for all eternity. That's where we begin to experience that. In the arms of the Father. It's what you were made for. That's where the gospel is meant to take us.

But you cannot get there simply by giving intellectual assent to the doctrine. That's the map. But it charts a course in our life. And we have to begin to walk that course.

Which means we begin to pull all of the various parts of our life into alignment with that course that it lays out for us. And a lot of us have never done that.

[24 : 56] We say, you know, at some point in my life I gave intellectual assent to the gospel and then I kind of moved on. And if you're somebody who believes the gospel and you've been a Christian for years and yet you haven't really experienced that sense of what it is to be in the arms of the Father.

That love and that embrace and that transformation. It's probably, at least partly because, you've never really thought about what it means to bring your life into alignment with the course that it sets out in your life.

And we see this here. And if you want a great example of how this applies specifically to this case, Tim Keller has a great sermon on this. This is something that he's very good at elucidating.

What it means to have gospel alignment in one's life. But what's going on here with Peter is he's essentially being a racist. I mean, Peter is somebody who knows the gospel. He believes the gospel intellectually.

But he's being a racist. He's capitulated to social pressure. And so the interesting question becomes, how does Paul confront Peter? You know, does he just go up and say, Peter, you're being a racist.

[25 : 54] That's against the rules. Stop it. No. Because Paul understands the law cannot change hearts. If you tell somebody you're breaking the rules, all you're doing is giving people a means by which to separate themselves, those who can keep the law and those who can't keep the law, those who are clean and those who are unclean.

And really what you're doing is you're creating an opportunity for people to demonstrate externally their ability to keep the law with no guarantee that there's any real heart change. I mean, think about the way people respond to racism today.

You know, in our kind of, in our sort of secular post-enlightenment culture, you know, a first-century Jew, their salvation story might have been something like this. You know, if you're a Gentile convert, I was unclean, and then I encountered the Torah, and I got circumcised, and now I'm clean.

I'm one of the insiders. I'm one of the good guys, unlike all of you unclean people out there. Not too dissimilar from the way a lot of people talk about how they have engaged issues of racism.

You know, in post-enlightenment, the kind of analog for being unclean is being ignorant. You know, our kind of secular equivalent of that is to be ignorant. I was ignorant about privilege. I was ignorant about injustice.

[27 : 08] I was ignorant about all of these things. But then I read a few articles online, and now I'm woke. I'm aware. You know, and what's the next thing you do? Well, you immediately need to let everybody in your social network know how woke you are.

You start posting all of these articles, right? Check out this Ta-Nehisi Coates article. It's amazing. It's going to change your life, right? We begin to put all this stuff out there, right? To display our righteousness. Right now, is it important to be aware?

Absolutely. Is racism wrong? Absolutely. But Paul's approach shows us the difference between the law and gospel transformation. Because here's what Paul says. Paul says, he doesn't say racism is wrong.

He says racism is not in line with the gospel. Now, what does he mean by that? Here's what he means. God has not dealt with you on the basis of your race or your ethnicity.

How dare you deal with other people on the basis of their race or their ethnicity? That's where heart change begins. When you begin to root your understanding of your relationship with someone else in your relationship with God.

[28 : 18] He says, how dare you do that? And this is how the gospel changes hearts, right? So to take another example, we live in a highly polarized society. And a very divided society.

And it's easy with the onslaught of information that we're subjected to on a daily basis to begin to curate the news sources that you expose yourself to and to curate the people that you're willing to engage with about issues of politics and things like that.

And it's very easy and very tempting to kind of build an echo chamber around yourself where you're only interacting with people and ideas that you already agree with. And in that kind of context, it's more and more easy to then begin to look at people across the aisle who disagree with you and to begin to mock them, to deride them, to caricature their arguments and them as people, to see them less as three-dimensional human beings and more as two-dimensional kind of cutouts, you know, people that we can demonize and reject without ever engaging with.

And this is happening in every sphere of society. It's easy to do that. That is not in line with the gospel. That's not in step with the gospel.

But what does the gospel say? At one time, everybody in this room, you were an enemy of Jesus because of your sin, because of your rebellion.

[29 : 38] You were born that way. You were his enemy, his mortal enemy. The hard truth of the gospel is that if Jesus had decided to obliterate us, he would have been perfectly justified in doing so.

And yet, Scripture says that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us because he loves us. So the gospel says, when you were Jesus' enemy, he didn't mock you, he didn't deride you, he loved you, he died for you, he embraced you.

How dare you mock and deride those people whom you call enemy? How dare you? Right? Jesus was willing to die for his enemies.

The least we could do would be to listen to ours. Right? That's gospel alignment. If you're somebody who does feel proud, you feel superior, you feel like you understand these things in a way that other people don't, you feel, you look down your nose at people, that's not in line with the gospel.

The gospel says, listen, you're a sinner saved by grace. How dare you? Look down at other people. You didn't earn any of the blessing that you have in your life. You don't deserve it. You never will.

[30 : 52] But if you're the kind of person, like a lot of us are, who's on the other end of the spectrum, and you're prone to self-hatred, you're prone to making comparisons, you constantly are criticizing yourself, you feel like your best is never good enough, you hate your body, you hate what you think is a lack of success and accomplishment.

If you're constantly thinking that way about yourself, listen, guess what? That's not in line with the gospel. Because what does the gospel have to say to you? It says that when God looks at you, he sees someone of such infinite worth that he was willing to pay the highest price to gain you so that you would belong to him.

That's what you're worth. And so the gospel would say to you, how dare you devalue that which God has imbued with ultimate value? How dare you call God a liar?

How dare you do that, right? It's not in line with the gospel. And so in all of these ways, living in step with the gospel means taking all of our values, all of our perceptions, all of our attitudes and priorities and relationships and ethics and bringing them in line with the gospel, bringing them in line with that course that the gospel lays out in our lives, following that path into the arms of the Father.

When you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior, when you decide to put your faith in him at that moment you are saved, at that moment you are promised to spend eternity in the arms of the one who made you.

[32 : 26] But if you want to experience that, it begins with, in the power of the Spirit, bringing our life into alignment with the truth of the gospel, beginning to walk that course, not just sitting on your couch looking at a map, but getting up and getting out the door and starting to walk that road.

So brothers and sisters at Advent, it's been a great ten years. And if this is your first time with us, we're just getting started.

And as we look ahead to the decades to come, I think my prayer and my hope, especially over this weekend, is that if nothing else, if the only things we do as a church are to be a church where we are contending for the gospel and we are seeking to live in step with the gospel, then this is absolutely just the beginning.

And we have an amazing, many decades to come. And we can count on and await with eager expectation all of the fruit that will come out of this gospel faithfulness.

That's my prayer and my hope. Let's pray. Amen.