

Series: Gospel-Centered Paradigm

#1: What is (not) the Gospel?

New City Church of Los Angeles

June 22, 2008

By Kevin K. Haah

I. Introduction

- Welcome: Our vision statement—to be an inclusive gospel-centered community of lovers of Jesus Christ. We are a gospel-centered community. What does it mean to be gospel-centered? That’s what we’re going to talk about for the next few weeks.
- All of us have a paradigm from which we view the world. These are foundational presuppositions and assumptions we use to interpret everything. We have these paradigms, these grids that we use to categorize and interpret the world. The way that major progress is made is not really through addition of knowledge. It is usually through a paradigm change, a change in the foundational assumptions, and it leads to an exponential progress. For example, people used to think that Earth was at the center of the universe—that everything revolved around Earth. Then, all this data came in that wasn’t consistent with that belief, that wasn’t making any sense. Then, someone said maybe everything, including Earth, was revolving around the sun. When the paradigm changed, all kinds of things started to make sense. There was exponential progress.
- What we do when we become a Christian is that we keep our old grid and paradigm and just add Jesus and the gospel into it. A lot of stuff bothers us. We start to pick and choose what we want. We get stuck in our Christian lives. We don’t really do things we wanted to do. Sometime, we say this doesn’t work and abandon our faith.
- Jesus didn’t come to add to our paradigm. He came to blow away our paradigm and give us a new one. He wants to destroy your grid and give you a new one. Our freedom will come from destroying our paradigm and taking on the gospel-centered paradigm. The power to live will come from destroying our paradigm and taking on the gospel-centered paradigm.

- What we are going to do in this series is to take an old paradigm that we have, dissect it, blow it away, and then replace it with the new paradigm that Jesus gave us, the gospel-centered paradigm.
- We are going to start out by looking at Galatians 2.

II. Before we read the passage for today, let me give you a brief context. Let's go to Galatians 1.

- Right after the greeting, Paul gets right to the point in verse 6:
 "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel which is really no gospel at all."
- He says in verse 8:
 "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!"
- He feels pretty strongly about this issue!
- Now, where did he get the gospel? Authority?
- Look at verse 12:
 "I did not receive it (the gospel) from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."
- Then, he tells us that the pillars of the church—James, Peter, and John—affirmed the gospel and *added nothing* to it.

Now, what is this gospel that Paul preached? That's what Paul goes on to answer, the passage today give us an introduction to it.

11 When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. (Paul felt so strongly about this issue that he confronted Peter—the leader of the church--about it.) Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. (If you kept all of the clean laws of the OT, you couldn't eat with Gentiles; so, this meant that Peter stopped keeping the clean laws of the OT. He stopped being kosher. This happened through a series of events

chronicled in the book of Acts, but suffice it to say that the Lord revealed to him that God welcomes all people without regard to their race and nationality....) **But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. (His racial pride and cowardice led him to this action.) The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”**

Skipping down to verse 21: **“I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”**

- There’s a lot of stuff to unpack here. But, I’d like to focus on: (1) the breadth of the gospel; (2) the content of the gospel.

The Breadth of the Gospel

In Galatians 2:14, Paul lays down a powerful principle. He deals with Peter’s racial pride and cowardice by declaring that he was not living **“in line with the truth of the gospel.”**

- Remember, Peter is a Christian; in fact, the letter is written to Christians.
- Paul’s saying that the gospel is not only about becoming a Christian but also about living a Christian life.
- From this we see that the Christian life is a process of renewing every dimension of our life--spiritual, psychological, corporate, social--by thinking, hoping, and living out the “lines” or ramifications of the gospel. It changes the paradigm of our lives. The gospel is to be applied to every area of

thinking, feeling, relating, working, and behaving. The implications and applications of Galatians 2:14 are vast.

- Belief in the gospel is not just the way to enter the kingdom of God; it is the way to address every obstacle and grow in every aspect.
- The gospel is not just the “ABCs” but the “A-to-Z” of the Christian life. The gospel is the way that anything is renewed and transformed by Christ—whether a heart, a relationship, a church, or a community. The gospel transforms our hearts, our thinking, our approach, and our paradigm to absolutely everything.
- I am going to be expanding more on this line next week and looking at some of the implications of this. So, I want to leave this thought here and continue.

The Content of the Gospel

- Let’s look at verse 16 and see what phrase Paul keeps repeating:
 - we know that a man is not justified by observing the law but by faith in Jesus Christ.
 - He says this again: we have been justified by faith, and not by observing the law
 - And again: by observing the law no one will be justified.
- Then in verse 21: I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.
- The gospel says that we are justified by faith in Christ.
 - The gospel of justifying faith means that while Christians are, in themselves still sinful and sinning, yet in Christ, in God’s sight, they are accepted and righteous.
 - Martin Luther said: we are simultaneously sinful and righteous.
 - So, we are more wicked than we ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted in Christ than we ever dared hope—at the very same time.

- This creates a radical new dynamic for personal growth. It means that the more you see your own flaws and sins, the more precious, electrifying, and amazing God's grace appears to you.
- But on the other hand, the more aware you are of God's grace and acceptance in Christ, the more able you are to drop your denials and self-defenses and admit the true dimensions and character of your sin.
- The gospel also says that righteousness cannot be gained through the law.
 - What does it mean to try to attain righteousness through the law?
 - When we talk about righteousness, a lot of people these days sort of turn off their ears. They think it's kind of a thing that ancient people cared about. Who cares about being righteous now?
 - In fact, for most of us, that word has a negative connotation. Being righteous is equated with self-righteousness or a holier-than-thou attitude.
 - Generally, though, the word means being good.
 - But in the Bible, the term righteousness is in the context of a relationship; it means to be right with someone. It means to be accepted or approved by someone.
 - And, we are all seeking acceptance and approval. We are all seeking some sort of validation. It's like a need that is deep inside of our hearts.
 - In some ways, since the fall of Adam and Eve, everyone is born into the world, knowing that they are not acceptable, lovable, valuable, and they'd better find a way to make themselves so.
 - Of course, family has a lot to do with the sense of how loudly this sense of unrighteousness rings in our ears as we grow up.
 - And all of us try to attain that sense of righteousness by trying really hard. That's what it means to attain righteousness by observing the law. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* calls it

self-improvement or trying really hard to be good. Pastor Tim Keller calls it Self-Salvation Projects.

- Whether we are Christians or not, we all in one form or another still engage in self-salvation projects. Let me give you some examples.
 - Chariots of Fire (1981): -the story about two Olympic sprinters: Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams. While Abrahams said that he had 10 seconds to prove the reason for his existence, Liddell raced with his head up, saying, “I feel God’s pleasure when I run.” Abrahams was trying to save himself through running and winning, while Liddell was already saved and was doing this simply because he felt God’s pleasure.
 - The Devil Wears Prada (2006): Meryl Streep (Miranda) played the most powerful person in fashion business—her whole existence was validated by her career, and she was willing to do whatever it took to keep her job, including stabbing a friend in the back. Her career was her self-salvation project.
 - If you get your ultimate value as a person from being a successful career person, you are going to do whatever it takes, whether it is ethical or not, whether it destroys your marriage and your family life or not, or whether it is healthy for you or not. But if you get your ultimate value from God, that he loves you and thinks that you are beautiful, acceptable, valid, righteous, then your work is put into its proper perspective.
 - In many ways, when I was practicing law, I was engaged in a self-salvation project. I wanted to be successful so badly because, whether I admitted it or not, I was getting my ultimate value as a person from how smart I was, how successful I was. Success was so important to me that there were many times when I knew I was walking on the edge of the line: like being tempted to misrepresent facts, be manipulative, do those CYA

memos, tempted to cross ethical boundaries, tempted to inflate billable hours.

- Why did I do all that? Because in many ways, I was engaged in a self-salvation project. I think I tried to say, No. Don't do that. It's wrong. But, the root of the problem that caused the temptation was a self-salvation project. I was trying to get my ultimate value from my career success, and not from God.
 - Even as a pastor, I still engage in self-salvation projects. I decided to go into full time pastoral ministry without knowing whether I could preach. I sensed from small group Bible Studies that I led that I loved teaching and leading small groups, but I didn't know I would be good at preaching. I remember realizing in a conversation with Grace one day that I was putting so much value into being a good preacher, that I was at the edge of determining my ultimate value by how good of a preacher I was. What I realized then and continue to realize is that if my preaching becomes my self-salvation project, my self-validation project, I am going to have a hard time and maybe even become bitter if my sermons flop. I need my posture regarding preaching to be in line with the truth of the gospel.
 - If your job is not a self-salvation project, even if you lose your job unfairly, you will still be able to go on. I am not saying that we should become robotic and not feel anything. It's okay to feel depressed after you get fired from your job or after they pass you up for a promotion.
 - But, if you see that you have this bitterness, a sense that you want revenge, or an unforgiving heart, you have to ask yourself whether your job has been a self-salvation project for you.
- For many of us, our self-salvation project is our relationships. Getting people to like you and approve of you. Getting someone to love you.

Your total self-value is dependent on whether what others think of you. So, you become like a wave tossed back and forth without an anchor. The reality is that we do need someone to love us. We do need someone to say we are okay. You can't just live your life saying I don't need anyone to tell me I am okay. I am just going to internally generate it. But, that can be pretty pathetic as well. We do need someone outside of ourselves telling us we are okay; and the only one person can give us the approval, the righteousness. That's Jesus.

- For some of us, our self-salvation project is in our families. Sometimes, mothers (especially stay at home mothers) can get all of their value and self-worth from being a good mother. I know being a good mother is a good thing, but watch out. Trying to follow the laws of the OT to be saved was also a good thing, but that didn't work. If your children rebel against you or you find that you are not as good as you thought you were as a mother, it's going to devastate you. We need to get our righteousness, our value and validation, our worth and beauty from God. He says you are loved and more beautiful than we could believe.
- Even marriages. Singles trying to get married and dating people who they know are not good for them or are Christians.
- Even sex. Let's say you agree with the Bible and believe that sex outside of the context of marriage is wrong. But, why are you still engaged in it? Maybe it has to do with a self-salvation project to get her to fall for you physically (because you're such a man!) or a self-salvation project to receive affirmation and love and feel loved (because you're a beautiful woman). We need to make sex in our lives in line with the truth of the gospel. The gospel tells us that you are beautiful even though you are sinful, and you don't have to seek self-validation or approval through sex.
- For some of us, we try to save ourselves by trying to be really really good. The problem is that we have a hard time doing it with a pure

motivation and from the heart. The only way to do it often is to create external rules that tell us that if we do XYZ, then we are good and righteous. That's what the Jewish Christians who were distorting the gospel were doing. If we don't get drunk, if we don't cuss, if we don't smoke, if we stay out of clubs. Whatever. If you don't do this list of bad things, you look down upon others who do and commit the sin of arrogance and if you do do the list, then you feel like you're a failure.

- Jonathan Edwards: two reasons why people are virtuous. One, they do it out of fear (don't lie or you will face the consequences) or pride (you don't want to be like those liars). There is something inherently instable in this. You have restrained the heart but you have nurtured the sin. Fear and pride can bend the heart but it will snap back.
- The other reason to be virtuous is the gospel. In order to have your heart transformed, you deepen your understand of what Jesus has done for you. The more you get to know God, more you realize his majesty and holiness, and the more you realize your sins and messiness, and the more you deepen your understanding of what Jesus has done for you. Then, even when you sin, your instinct is not to go further away from God, but to get back into fellowship with Him. When you are convicted of sin in a gospel way, you will turn back into a relationship with him.
- Then, he will change your heart and transform your life.
- There are so many ways in which we seek self-salvation, we seek righteousness, we seek self-validation, acceptance, worth and value, in things other than God.
- I am not saying that we have to stop all the self-salvation projects to be saved. It is by grace alone. But even after we are saved, we need to apply the gospel to our self-salvation projects.

- The gospel frees us from all of these things that enslave us, and says to us, you are loved far more than you can imagine; you are so beautiful to me, you are so righteous. God sees the beauty of Jesus in us. He sees the righteousness of Jesus in us. This, despite the fact that we are ugly, we are needy, we are sinful, we are insecure, we are manipulative, we are weak, and we are messed up.
- You are far more wicked than you ever believed and you are far more accepted and loved than you ever hoped.
- That is the gospel.
- I pray that the old paradigm of self-salvation projects will be blown away and replaced with gospel salvation.