

THIS IS THE
GOSPEL

How a deep understanding of the good news
helps you share the love of Jesus

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INTRODUCTION

At the heart of the Bible is “good news.” In the Old Testament, the proclamation of good news was declaring the reign of God over the earth. God ruled as king and His kingdom was all of Creation.

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" » **Isaiah 52:7**

The New Testament expanded the meaning and implications of “good news.” The Greek word *euangelion*, which most modern Bible versions translate as “gospel,” appears in various forms over six dozen times in the New Testament.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," He said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" » **Mark 1:14-15**

In the Roman Empire, when the emperor's wife had a baby boy, a messenger was sent out to tell others that the royal line would continue because of the birth of the king's son. This was *euangelion*: good news.

This royal announcement was a temporal picture of how God, the King of the Universe, sent His Son to dwell among rebellious and lost people, in order to establish and expand his kingdom in their hearts.

But there's more to the gospel than meets the eye. Read this brief explanation from David O'Hara, a gospel-loving professor at Augustana University:

Both the Latin "bonum nuntium" and the Greek "euangelion" mean something like "good tidings," "good news," or "good message." In both cases – in Greek and Latin – they use language suited to cultures with a strong sense of political life; announcements played a great role in Greek democracy and in the expansive Roman world. They kept people abreast of important news that affected everyone.

However, our word "gospel" is actually the descendant of the Saxon phrase "gód spel." The message of Jesus came more slowly to the Saxons, Northern

European coastal raiders who rebuffed (and often beheaded or impaled) missionaries sent to them. Romans looked soft and weak, and their religion, the Saxons thought, reflected that.

*What the successful missionaries discovered was that the Saxons were people of war, stories, and songs. The Heliand, an Old Saxon epic poem, cast the story of Christ into the form of an heroic song, or "spel," from which we get our word "spell," as in magical spell – an incantation, something chanted or sung. What the Greeks and Romans received as good **news**, the Saxons received as a "gód spel" or good **story**, told well in a form they recognized.¹*

Over the next few weeks, we'll examine the gospel both as good news to be heard and as a good story to be captivated by: the greatest story ever told. It's my goal that, like a multi-faceted jewel in which we can see depth and beauty, the riches of the gospel will cause us to say "Wow!" like never before.

Why are we doing this? Great question.

As you're probably aware, **Central Church exists to help you share the love of Jesus with your relational world.** And you can't share the love of Jesus if you're not experiencing it for yourself.

To know and experience the gospel is to know and experience Jesus. And to know Him is to love Him.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul spends two and a half chapters explaining the implications of the gospel in great detail. Then at the end of chapter 3, he expresses his prayer for the church, which I simply want to echo here:

I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God's love, and to know Christ's love that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. » Ephesians 3:17b-19

As you discuss this content with your LifeGroup and spend time reflecting on it individually, don't just gloss over this with a "been there, done that" mentality. Ask God what He wants to do in you and through you in the coming weeks. The answer just might surprise you.

» Neil Downey, Pastor of Community Life

WEEK ONE

UNDERSTANDING THE GOSPEL

“The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.” » **Timothy Keller**¹

So what, exactly, is the gospel? Is it the simple message of God’s love, our sin, God’s plan, and our response? Or is it an elaborate narrative involving the creation of the world, the corruption of this creation, and God’s eternal design for restoring everything back to its original purpose? Yes. And yes. Here’s why:

In order to really understand and appreciate this vital concept, it’s helpful to think in terms of both the essence of the gospel and the fullness of the gospel.²

On one hand, there is an essential core of the gospel that answers these basic questions: Who is Jesus? What has He done? Why has He done it? How do we know? How should we respond?

Let's look at a couple passages.

Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” » **LUKE 24:45-49**

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that

he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. » **1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-8**

How do these passages answer the following questions?

QUESTIONS	LUKE 24:45-49	1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-8
WHO IS JESUS?		
WHAT HAS HE DONE?		
WHY DID HE DO IT?		
HOW DO WE KNOW?		
HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?		

- ▶ How are these passages similar? Where do they differ?
- ▶ How effectively do they communicate the essence of the gospel?

But the *essence* of the gospel is not all there is to it. We should also consider the *fullness* of the gospel. Its truths, themes, and implications (like love, power, freedom, forgiveness, adoption, redemption, and reconciliation) are so vast that it will take a lifetime to explore and experience. Carefully read this synopsis of the gospel and answer a few questions:

*Most people view life through four lenses: **OUGHT, IS, CAN,** and **WILL**. We see this pattern in everyday life and in movies, novels, songs, and other forms of art. But this pattern is also found in Scripture.*

We imagine the way life **ought** to be because of **CREATION**. We feel that we're made for something better because we really were. God has "placed eternity in our hearts" (this longing for wholeness) as a reminder of his original intent for us: to be in perfect relationship with God, with ourselves, with other people, and with our planet.

We recognize the way life **is** (as not quite right) because of **CORRUPTION**; we live in a fallen, broken world. Our selfishness breached the relationship between God and humanity and corrupted every other type of relationship: people with people (war, murder, racism), man with woman (divorce, abuse), people with nature (pollution, species extinction), and people with themselves (guilt, shame, fear).

When we think about the way life **can** be, it's because of **REDEMPTION**. Deep down, we long for renewal, for freedom. Jesus—God incarnate—lived a perfect, sinless life and died on a cross in order to pay the penalty for our sin. And three days later, He rose from the dead, demonstrating his power to rescue us (and our world) from sin, death, and corruption. Through Jesus, God offers a solution for our fallen condition. Only He can give us true freedom and mend our brokenness.

And finally, we dream about the way life **will** be because of what the Bible calls **RESTORATION**. God promises to fix more than personal relationships. Someday He will restore everything in creation to its original intent, bringing true happiness, harmony, and peace. Once again, all will be "very good."³

- ▶ Which of these four lenses of the gospel resonates with you the most?
- ▶ How have you personally experienced brokenness? Where is it most prominent in the world today?
- ▶ Which of these lenses (*Creation, Corruption, Redemption, Restoration*) seems to be the most neglected in American church culture? Why might that be?

APPLY

- ▶ How has the gospel been "good news" in your life? What has Jesus saved you from? What has He saved you to?

(Take some time for each person to share a portion of their story. If you can't identify a specific point in time when you first believed the gospel, that's okay. Just share a brief story of when Jesus was real to you.)

REFLECT

The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news! » **MARK 1:15**

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'Repent,' he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance. –Martin Luther⁴

- ▶ Repentance is essentially turning away from sin and turning to Jesus. How often do you repent? How is this a reflection of your belief in the good news?
- ▶ What would it look like for you to live a life of repentance and faith every day?
- ▶ How can belief in the good news help you step out in faith?

OIKOS STEP

Because Central Church exists to help you share the love of Jesus with your relational world (aka “*oikos*”), each week we'll give you an action step to equip you with the skills and motivation you need.

This week, walk through the Thessalonians bible study on page 20 of this book. It's designed to take five days and to help get your head and heart even more aligned with the gospel. (Go ahead and turn there. Now set a reminder on your phone to read this every day for the next five days.)

WEEK TWO

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.” » **The Apostle Paul (Romans 1:16)**

The gospel is a powerful, divine message accompanied by the powerful, divine presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. It was, and continues to be, the most transformational force ever seen, radically changing individual lives and entire cultures. And there’s perhaps no better example of this power on display than the life of the Apostle Paul.

The story of Paul’s conversion on the Damascus road recorded in Acts 9 is pretty dramatic: the blinding light, the voice from heaven, the healing by Ananias. Paul encountered the risen Jesus and was never the same again. He was transformed from Christ’s enemy into Christ’s apostle. Even his name was (eventually) changed from Saul (the name of Israel’s first king), meaning “asked of,” to Paul, meaning “small” – which was fitting for someone who considered himself “the least of the apostles.” Augustine sums up the transformation well. He writes of the apostle, “When he was Saul, he was proud and exalted; when he was Paul, he was lowly and little.”¹

Throughout his ministry, Paul was never confident in his own oratory skill or wisdom. He placed his trust in the power of the gospel message because to him, the gospel was so much more than just words; it was the power of God.

One of the best things about the gospel is that it’s not a message of self-help. We don’t have to clean up our act in order to be acceptable to our Creator. Like Paul, we simply encounter Jesus and let him work in us and through us to make us into the people He has created us to be. God’s Word works in tandem with God’s Spirit and God’s people in order to bring about genuine life change.

But don’t forget that at the heart of the gospel is a person: Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. As we develop and deepen our relationship with Christ, granting him more and more access to every area of our life, He makes us more aware of His holiness and our brokenness, which makes the good news even sweeter and more powerful than when we first encountered it.

For centuries, the gospel has been turning the world upside-down through people sharing the love of Jesus with their relational world. Let's examine how the gospel has the power to bring salvation and transformation to individuals and entire communities.

READ ROMANS 1:16

- ▶ Why does Paul describe the gospel as "the power of God?" What does the gospel have power to do?

READ COLOSSIANS 1:3-10

- ▶ How was the gospel "bearing fruit and growing all over the world?" What was the evidence?
- ▶ Re-read verse 10. In what areas did Paul pray for personal growth and fruit-bearing? How was this connected to the growth and fruit of the gospel in verse 6?

READ COLOSSIANS 2:6-7

- ▶ How did we receive Jesus? How can we continue to live in Him that same way? What could/should be the results?
- ▶ Paul's letters weren't written to individuals but to churches: gospel-centered communities of faith. How is the gospel not just individualistic, but communal? What implications does this have for us?

APPLY

A few years ago, I asked my friend Aaron how he had seen the gospel growing and bearing fruit in his life. Here's his answer:

The gospel has been growing and bearing fruit in my life primarily through its power to cut away through lies. Whether these lies come from my flesh, Satan, or the world, doesn't really matter. Anxiety is a powerful sin in my life because it betrays a very deep pride, which at its root says, "I can do it. I don't need you, God. Why would you think I would anyway? Can't you see I've got this under control?" So, when the gospel is again proclaimed in

my heart by reviewing just the basic facts of what it is, it releases a power in my life, disarming this deep pride and instead fills me with the humble realization that I am nothing and He is everything.

It has affected how I love my wife, especially how we work through conflict. When I see my heart reacting out of anger or frustration to a comment she might have made about something that either I did (or didn't do), or something I said, I can then turn to the gospel, lean heavily upon the doctrine of self-suspicion and probably find something in my heart that I can take to the Lord in confession, which diffuses its power, and allows the strength of the gospel to fill my weakness and move out in a gentle strength toward my wife.

- ▶ How have you seen the gospel growing and bearing fruit in your life? (Take a moment and be specific.)
- ▶ How has the gospel displayed God's power in your relationships with other believers? With your family? With non-Christians?
- ▶ How are you different today than you were a year ago?

REFLECT

Many Christians live with a truncated view of the gospel. We see the gospel as the "door," the way in, the entrance point into God's kingdom. But the gospel is so much more! It is not just the door, but the path we are to walk every day of the Christian life. It is not just the means of our salvation, but the means of our transformation. It is not simply deliverance from sin's penalty, but release from sin's power. » Will Walker & Bob Thune²

- ▶ How have you been guilty of having a narrow view of the gospel? How has this impacted your walk with Christ?
- ▶ In what area of your life do you most need transformation? How might the gospel bring about real growth in this area?

WEEK THREE

DISTORTIONS OF THE GOSPEL

“If you believe what you like in the gospel, and reject what you don’t like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself.” » Saint Augustine¹

Thomas Jefferson is generally viewed with esteem: Founding Father, principal author of the Declaration of Independence, and third President of the United States. His face is on Mount Rushmore. He is a person who has earned a great deal of respect.

One seemingly uplifting quote attributed to Jefferson is “All the world would be Christian if they were taught the pure Gospel of Christ!”² Sounds good, right? Preach it, Tommy! But, upon further examination, Jefferson’s definition of “the pure Gospel of Christ” is an absolute perversion of the biblical gospel.

Jefferson admired Jesus as a great moral teacher, but didn’t believe He was God incarnate. In fact, Jefferson painstakingly edited the gospels, selecting verses he believed to be true about Jesus, in order to create his own version of the gospel entitled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (aka The Jefferson Bible). Of the editing process, Jefferson claimed he could differentiate truth from falsehood because the “authentic” verses were “as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill.”³

In the end, Jefferson removed Jesus’ miracles, all claims to His deity, and important supernatural events like the virgin birth, resurrection, and ascension. So Jefferson’s version of the gospel was really no gospel at all.

If Jesus wasn’t God incarnate – living a perfect life, dying for the sins of the world, and rising from the grave to conquer death – then His message and His model are the farthest things from good news. In fact, His standards are so perfect that it’s depressing, because we’ll never live up to them: We stand on the edge of the Grand Canyon, with no hope of making it across.

Jefferson was known to be a champion of democracy, tolerance, and liberty. But when it came to his view of Jesus (not to mention slavery), he was terribly misguided. I find it ironic that Jefferson himself once said the following: “It is always better to have no ideas than false ones; to believe nothing, than to believe what is wrong.”⁴

What we believe really matters. And in this week's session, we'll examine some distortions of the gospel in order to avoid believing and following counterfeit versions of the good news.

Context: Paul had established churches in the region of Galatia. But after he moved on, other people (called the Judaizers) tried to teach the Galatian Christians that, in order to truly belong to God's family, they needed to obey the Old Testament law. So the Galatians began to observe Jewish feast days and were considering becoming circumcised. Paul was deeply concerned that these young believers were beginning to believe a false gospel.

READ GALATIANS 1:6-12

Remember, this letter was written to an entire church, not just an individual.

- ▶ Why was the Galatians' acceptance of these false teachers a desertion of God's truth?
- ▶ According to verse 6, what had God previously done for them?
- ▶ Paul used very strong language to condemn the teachers of this "different gospel." Why did Paul speak and feel so strongly about these teachers?
- ▶ Read verse 12 again. Why is the divine source of the gospel so important? What is the proof that this message "came by a revelation of Jesus Christ?" (Couldn't anyone claim that their message was from God?)

APPLY

Here's a list of a few distorted versions of the gospel. Read them and answer a few questions at the end.

PROSPERITY

We believe that, in addition to salvation, God wants us to have health and wealth. Poverty, sickness, and suffering are merely symptoms of a lack of faith. Prayer and tithing are tools that we use to convince God to bless us with material compensation. If our church is huge and our pastor is rich, it's a sure sign of God's blessing. We aren't called to self-denial or sacrifice, but into a transactional relationship with God: He is our cosmic vending machine.

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

God has commissioned us to spread American values to the world. We ascribe biblical categories to America, which is the new Israel. We idolize patriotism and turn a blind eye to such national ills as racism, Manifest Destiny, and ecological recklessness. Just like it was our divine duty to defeat the godless Soviets during the Cold War, it is now our main priority to defeat the godless progressives in the culture wars.

THERAPEUTIC MORALISM

God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about ourselves. We put sins in a hierarchy, and tolerate some sins more than others. In church, we sing songs and pray prayers of praise, but not songs and prayers of confession. We use Bible stories to teach children to be good rather than to point them to a Savior.

EXPRESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM

We find our identity and purpose by looking within (self-discovery) and expressing what we find or feel (self-realization). We can only be authentic when we're free to act on our desires and chase our dreams at all costs (self-actualization). We tell our children that, despite what doubters and haters want you to do, "follow your heart," "listen to your inner voice," and "live your best life."

JUSTICE-BASED PROGRESSIVISM

We are solely focused on righting the wrongs of the world, not on walking with Jesus. Our only priority is treating people equitably, working for systems and structures that are fair, and looking out for the weak and the vulnerable. We view all people in either "oppressor" or "oppressed" groups and attempt to overthrow "oppressive" groups and structures in society.

"GET SAVED" DECISIONISM

Our primary calling is to get people into heaven, so we tell them about individual sin and personal salvation, inviting them to ask Jesus into their heart. We base our success as Christians on how many people make decisions for Christ. We don't prioritize doing good in the world, since Jesus is coming back any day now and it's all gonna burn anyway.

- ▶ Which of these false gospels are you most susceptible to? Why?
- ▶ It's not just individuals who get caught up in perversions of the gospel, but entire communities and cultures. Why does this seem to happen so easily?
- ▶ How can we prevent ourselves from believing distortions of the gospel?
- ▶ Once we've identified false beliefs, what can we do about it?

REFLECT

One of the most urgent tasks facing evangelical Christendom today [is] the recovery of the gospel...[The 'new' gospel] fails to make men God-centered in their thoughts and God-fearing in their hearts because this is not primarily what it is trying to do... it is too exclusively concerned to be 'helpful' to man—to bring peace, comfort, happiness, satisfaction—and too little concerned to glorify God.

The old gospel... was a summons to bow down and worship the mighty Lord on whom man depends for all good, both in nature and in grace. Its center of reference was unambiguously God. But in the new gospel the center of reference is man. » J.I. Packer⁵

- ▶ How can you center your thoughts on Jesus this week in order to recover the heart of the gospel?

OIKOS STEP

It's our prayer that you will get to share the gospel with your relational world. If that opportunity comes, will you be ready? This week, do some Google searching and some reflection. Then write out how you would share the undistorted gospel.

WEEK FOUR

SHARING THE GOSPEL

“Evangelism is not salesmanship. It is not urging people, pressing them, coercing them, overwhelming them, or subduing them. Evangelism is telling a message. Evangelism is reporting good news.” » **Richard Halverson¹**

When some people think about proclaiming the gospel, they might envision a pastor standing behind a pulpit, exhorting congregants to repent and come to Jesus. Perhaps they imagine people responding to the altar call at a Billy Graham Crusade, filing forward to the tune of “*Just As I Am.*” Others picture a campus chaplain sitting across the table from a college student, explaining the information in a gospel tract and challenging the student to pray and receive Christ. Or maybe they think of a couple moving to Africa, living in a hut, and translating the Bible into a new language.

All of these scenarios involve professional ministers—pastors, evangelists, missionaries—doing what they’re paid to do. But we tend to forget that every follower of Jesus is called to tell others about Him. Our intimacy with the God of the Universe should compel us to share His love with our relational world.

So how should I share the love of Jesus with my grumpy co-worker? My son’s soccer coach? The couple who just moved in across the street? Do I have to establish a relationship six months prior to having a spiritual conversation with the woman who cuts my hair? Should I pull out a tract and explain the gospel to the teenager who mows my lawn? There are plenty of books you can read about evangelistic theories and techniques. This is not one of them.

What is important to convey is this: If the gospel is both the greatest story ever told and the best news on the planet, we should keep looking for ways to invite others to connect with this story and experience this good news. We should want people to know and experience the love and grace of Jesus.

But we need to periodically examine our own hearts: Have we experienced the gospel in a way that is truly changing us, that is causing us to love Jesus more passionately and fully? If so, how can we possibly keep this to ourselves? How can we be silent?

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-5

- ▶ Paul was an expert theologian and could have been very self-assured. Where did he place his evangelistic confidence? Why is a polished and persuasive presentation of the gospel not important?
- ▶ How does our weakness demonstrate God's power?

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-20

- ▶ How does being an ambassador differ from being a salesman?
- ▶ In everyday speech, what do we mean by "reconciling" two people? What change does this bring to a relationship?
- ▶ Practically speaking, how can we communicate the message of reconciliation to people who are far from God?

APPLY

- ▶ How should being a "new creation" motivate you to share the gospel?
- ▶ What are some obstacles to you sharing the gospel? Here are a few ideas to get you started:

Approval/image issues: Not wanting to be labeled as a Bible thumper.

Fear of rejection: We like to be liked and generally try to avoid conflict.

Lack of natural relationships with non-Christians: We've surrounded ourselves with church people so we have no opportunities to engage with outsiders.

No overflow: We aren't experiencing a deep, intimate relationship with Jesus, so it's hard to talk to others about the difference He can make.

Not knowing how: We might have the desire to share the gospel but have no clue what to say and how to say it.

- ▶ What can you do to overcome these obstacles and engage in spiritual conversations with people?
- ▶ What else can Central Church be doing to help you share the love of Jesus with your relational world?*

**Note to LifeGroup leaders: Please record your group's ideas and share them with neil.downey@centralsf.org.*

REFLECT

*Successful witnessing is taking the initiative to share Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the results to God. » **Bill Bright**²*

- ▶ How could this definition of evangelism change your approach? Your attitude?

OIKOS STEP

Yes, our four-part series on the gospel may be over but this whole “sharing the love of Jesus with your relational world” thing doesn't end here. Here's a challenge for your LifeGroup:

Make praying for and sharing oikos stories a regular part of the rhythm of your group going forward. Use the oikos prayer cards provided to update the names of people in different realms of your life. Ask each other monthly how things are going with co-workers or teammates. All of these things will foster a culture of intentionally looking outward, living as sent-ones, and having life-giving conversations about Jesus—the author and object of the gospel.

Don't stop quite yet. Read the closing thoughts together.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

THE BIG PICTURE: KNOWING JESUS

On the basis of (Jesus') death and resurrection, the gospel promises a great salvation – eventual healing from disease and liberation from oppression, peace with God and others who believe, justification by faith apart from works of the law, forgiveness of sins, transformation into the image of Christ, eternal life, and the global inclusion of all people from all nations in this salvation.

(But) the best and final gift of the gospel is that we gain Christ... Focusing on facets of a diamond without seeing the beauty of the whole is demeaning to the diamond... If you embrace everything... about the facets of the gospel, but do it in a way that does not make the glory of God in Christ your supreme treasure, then you have not embraced the gospel... If we do not see him and savor him as our greatest fortune, we have not obeyed or believed the gospel.¹

As Jesus carried out his three-year ministry in Palestine, He proclaimed different aspects of the gospel in different places and with different people because the appeal and emphasis of the gospel was (and still is) dependent on the audience. “Come to me... and I will give you rest,” which was a facet of the good news that appealed to people who were “weary and burdened,” was a much different message than “repent,” which is what the self-righteous Pharisees needed to hear.

But no matter which facet of the gospel holds the most appeal for you – the removal of guilt, the promise of healing, etc. – please don't miss the point, the end goal, the ultimate gift of the gospel: God himself. The gospel is good because it gives us Jesus.

Knowing and loving Jesus Christ is the pinnacle of human existence. As I've studied the gospel, this has been the most important thing I've learned. And it is my prayer that you and I can honestly echo these words of Paul to the church in Philippi:

The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him.

» **Philippians 3:7-8 (The Message)**

If you haven't already, be sure to spend time on your own reading the next section. It contains both a 5-day personal Bible study and a list of additional resources (articles, books, videos, etc.) to help you dig deeper into the gospel goldmine.

DEEP DIVE

A STUDY OF THE GOSPEL IN 1 THESSALONIANS

Five sessions. Five bible passages. Fifteen minutes of your day.
Perspective for a lifetime.

INTRODUCTION

When it came to the gospel, the Apostle Paul was a guy who “got it.” His writings, his ministry, and his entire post-conversion life seemed to be saturated with the gospel. So what made him so different from us? What caused Paul to be so passionate about the good news? What caused him. . .

To proclaim, “*I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.*” » **Acts 20:24**

To become “*all things to all people. . . for the sake of the gospel.*”
» **1 Corinthians 9:22-23**

To confront Peter for “*deviating from the truth of the gospel.*”
» **Galatians 2:11-14**

To describe how he was compelled to proclaim the good news: “*Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel.*” » **1 Corinthians 9:16**

To declare himself “*a servant of the gospel.*” » **Ephesians 3:7**

To have the optimistic perspective that his imprisonment “*resulted in the advancement of the gospel.*” » **Philippians 1:12**

To invite Timothy to “*join me in suffering for the gospel.*” » **2 Timothy 1:8**

In order to gain some insight into Paul's zeal, it's time for a little Bible study. Let's examine the five times Paul uses the word "gospel" in 1 Thessalonians. These passages reveal so much about Paul's heart, his purpose, his reason for existence. And, hopefully, they'll help motivate and inspire you to share the love of Jesus with your relational world. But first, a little background: the book of Acts records that Paul's stay in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey was relatively short (possibly only three weeks, maybe a few months) and dangerous (hunted by a mob, escaped in the night). But it was also relatively fruitful:

As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. » Acts 17:2-4

Apparently, after Paul left town, the new believers in Thessalonica were persecuted by some zealous Jews and annoyed Gentiles, so Paul sent Timothy back to check on their status. When Timothy re-joined Paul, he brought encouraging news: the believers were not just surviving the persecution, but thriving in their new faith. The gospel had taken root in their lives and was growing. So Paul wrote a letter to these new Christians to encourage them and to reflect back on his time with them.

Okay, now that we know the backstory, let's take a look at those gospel passages. Here are a few tips before you begin:

- ▶ Don't try to read this all in one sitting. Take time to read and reflect on each session individually, letting the verses, commentary, and reflection questions marinate for a while.
- ▶ Take a minute to open your bible and read these verses in context. It will probably take you more time to find 1 Thessalonians than to read all of Chapter 1. You won't regret it.
- ▶ Ask God to give you insight into what you're reading, helping you apply it to your life and share it with others. And actually write down your thoughts and prayers so you can come back to them later.

DAY 1: POWER SURGE

...our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. - 1 Thessalonians 1:5

Paul's message to the Thessalonians was marked by the power of God (which is how he described the gospel in his letter to the church in Rome). The Holy Spirit had softened their hearts and Paul was convinced that the same gospel that had changed his life nearly twenty years earlier would also change theirs. Throughout his ministry, Paul was never confident in his own oratory skill or wisdom. He placed his trust in the power of the gospel message because to him, the gospel was so much more than just words.

A few years ago, *Campus Crusade for Christ, Canada* changed its corporate name to *Power To Change*. At first, I found this a curious choice for a name: it reminded me of an infomercial I once saw at 2:00 AM. But the more I think about it, the more I realize how the new name is relevant to the human experience. The only way people can change – really grow, really mature, really transform – is by the gospel: “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).

REFLECT

- ▶ Why is it important that the gospel comes with power and conviction?
- ▶ What is the relationship between the gospel and the Holy Spirit?
- ▶ How has the power of the gospel tangibly altered your life? What has been the biggest transformation in your character?

DAY 2: DOUBLE DOG DARE

We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. – **1 Thessalonians 2:2**

What makes people do dangerous things? Sometimes it's the adrenaline rush that accompanies cheating death. For others, maybe the promise of glory or riches awarded for bravery and valor. In some cases, it's sheer insanity or inanity. Let's face it, some people are just foolish. But I don't think Paul fits into any of these categories. He risked his life (and eventually gave his life) for something he deemed more valuable.

Paul's passion for the gospel and zeal for seeing God glorified in the lives of people drove him to do some treacherous stuff. He didn't exactly play it safe and he attempted some feats that I'm sure left his friends shaking their heads in disbelief. In fact, his life would be a great action movie.

But this life of courage in the face of danger wasn't one that he just fleshed out on his own. God provided Paul and his companions – and countless missionaries since – with divine boldness to declare the gospel. Paul wasn't afraid to take risks, to spiritually pioneer new areas, to dream big.

In my various roles and responsibilities in ministry over the years, I have tended to be relatively cautious, to be satisfied with mediocrity, to settle for the status quo – mostly because I was afraid of failure and of my image taking a hit. I can't tell you how many times I've had a chance to speak the gospel to somebody and totally wussed out. But the goodness and grace of God has also empowered me to "dare to tell" people the gospel in spite of (some slight and vaguely perceived) opposition. I pray that I will be sensitive to the Spirit's leading and strengthened by the Spirit's power in order to tell people the greatest news they'll ever hear.

REFLECT

- ▶ When have you "dared to tell" people the good news in spite of real or perceived opposition? When have you chickened out? What was the difference?

DAY 3: PLEASE PLEASE ME

For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. – 1 Thessalonians 2:3–4

I am a huge people pleaser, so I tend to be motivated by a desire to manage my image: Not saying “no” to enough requests, half-heartedly agreeing with people when I should be wholeheartedly disagreeing, saying things people want to hear instead of speaking direct truth. This is an area where I can – and must – learn from Paul. What was Paul’s motivation for “not trying to please men?” He was passionately in love with Jesus and wanted more than anything to please him. Paul realized that being “entrusted with the gospel” was no small thing.

Being God’s ambassador is an enormous privilege. He has transformed us from his enemies into his children. And He has entrusted us with being his representatives to a world that desperately needs to be rescued. So why do I still make decisions based on how it will affect my image and popularity instead of on trying to live for the One who loves me and gave his very life for me? The answer, I think, is simply spiritual myopia: I tend to be very shortsighted, focusing on here-and-now, day-to-day temporal things and unable (or maybe unwilling) to see the big picture of God’s calling and God’s kingdom. And the only cure for this nearsightedness is to daily fix my eyes on Jesus. As I look to him and I’m reminded of his sovereignty and his love, it’s my prayer that my people-pleasing tendencies will evaporate.

REFLECT

- ▶ What keeps you from wanting to please God instead of pleasing people?

- ▶ You’ve been entrusted with the gospel: What will remind you of its value?

DAY 4: SHARE AND SHARE A LIFE

We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. – **1 Thessalonians 2:8**

Some people view Paul as a ministry machine – and yes, he is probably the most influential evangelist, church planter, theologian, and author in the history of Christianity. But he wasn't just about cranking out the numbers. He displayed genuine care and compassion for people, and poured out his life for them. He shared the gospel with people; not just because it was strategic but mostly because he loved them.

One of the greatest benefits of doing college ministry for over a decade was the chance for my wife and me to pour our lives into young people. Students came to our house to eat with us, babysit our kids, help us haul furniture, play board games, do laundry – you name it. We laughed hysterically, cried deeply, listened intently, confronted lovingly, and counseled carefully. Over the years, we angered or disappointed some students by telling them things they didn't want to hear. And we, in turn, have been frustrated and saddened by the choices some have made. But this is what discipleship is all about: doing life together. And life can be messy.

Even though we're no longer doing college ministry, we've established an environment of grace and truth in our adult LifeGroup, made up of four other couples with whom we've become very close. We have seen people grow, while we have grown immensely ourselves.

The relationships that we've developed over the years help us to understand and appreciate the deep bond Paul felt with his disciples. From college students in the early 2000s to members of our current LifeGroup, they truly have "become so dear to us."

REFLECT

- ▶ What are the benefits of sharing life with other believers?
- ▶ If you're currently in a LifeGroup, how are you sharing life with them?
- ▶ What prevents you from sacrificially investing in the lives of others more than you currently do?

DAY 5: HARD WORKIN' MAN

Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you . . . We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith. - **1 Thessalonians 2:9; 3:2**

Paul was no stranger to the concept of hard work. In fact, he refers to himself (and fellow believers) in terms of labor quite often. Take a look:

Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. - **Romans 16:12**

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. - **1 Corinthians 15:58**

Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. - **2 Corinthians 8:11**

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.

- **Colossians 1:28-29**

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. - **Colossians 3:23-24**

We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. - **1 Thessalonians 1:3**

Paul didn't hang out with Timothy and Silas just to have good Bible study buddies. His travel around the Mediterranean region wasn't to sample the cuisine and culture so he could eventually write a foodie memoir. He knew that God had given him a job: missionary of the gospel. Sometimes he got paid for his labor. Other times he had to supplement his income by making tents. But nothing kept him from working hard for the Lord and encouraging others to do the same. He did this with pure motives; not in order to earn favor with God, but out of gratitude and love for him.

At a regional Cru staff meeting a few years ago, Pastor Bryan Loritts implored us (in a somewhat Pauline manner) to work hard. I'll never forget his words: "People in ministry are some of the laziest people I know." This should not be.

Now, I realize that some people in ministry (and nearly every other vocation) spend too much time working and not enough time enjoying and investing in their families and other important relationships.

But that's not how I typically roll. I occasionally need a kick in the pants, reminding me that I am God's bondservant – that he has the right to my life and I need to yield to his will and work hard for my master. When I'm breathing my last breath, I don't want to look back on my life and wonder how things would have been different if I had given it my all. I sincerely want the Lord to tell me, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

REFLECT

- ▶ What motivates you to work hard? What prevents you from working hard?
- ▶ How hard do you work for the cause of the gospel?
- ▶ Read Ephesians 2:8-10. How does this change your perspective about working for the gospel?

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