

(Sunday – 01/22/2006) – Mark 1:14-20 – What is the Gospel?

*‘Repent ye, and believe the Gospel’* – verse 15

Picture, if you will, a convict on death row, pacing around in his cell marking the hours until his time of certain execution when he must pay the ultimate debt for his heinous crime, one in which there is no doubt of his complicity. He may attempt to fill his thoughts with other things, go about doing normal functions such as eating and shaving and reading magazines, momentarily escaping the reality, the gravity of his situation, when he sleeps, but there is always that nagging pull deep in the pit of his stomach that it is only a matter of time until the end of his life is before him; and so it continues day after day, week after week, month after month. Then one day he hears the cry of one coming towards his cell, calling out ‘I have good news for you!’ Eagerly the condemned man responds; ‘What is it?’ The messenger replies, having just left a conference of bishops and elders, ‘keep doing good works and everything will be okay’. Now there’s not one iota of good news in *that* message, not one element of truth, and yet that is what we hear being proclaimed as the modern day gospel, the good news, from so many pulpits to sinners who likewise are under the sentence of eternal death.

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So what is, the Gospel? What is this good news? When we consider all that surrounds us, the animal realm, the mountain peaks, the undulating oceans, the multitudinous insects, the countless stars, all that our 5 senses allow us to perceive, if we’re honest with ourselves, we must recognize that there is a Creator with ultimate power behind all of it, and that there must be more meaning to this existence than just our three score and ten here on this planet earth. However, we do not encounter the Gospel by looking to the stars in the heavens. We cannot look to the created order of nature and find the Gospel - it is not to be found there. Of a surety, wonderful and marvelous things can be seen there; verily the very handiwork of God itself, but the Gospel cannot be found there. So, I ask again, what is this Gospel that Jesus tells us to believe?

In order to be able to understand what the Gospel is, there is a ‘ground zero’, if I may use that term, which one *must* start from. If we believe not in an initial act of creation, of God creating man in His image, then

the Gospel will not be rightly received nor understood - for it declares that our being made from the very elements of this earth establishes the foundation of our responsibility before God; it asserts that He made us for Himself, and that the *refusing* to accept this fundamental relationship of man, the created, towards God, his Creator is the very essence, the core, the nucleus of what is called sin. Yes, sin - a word that is slipping from the collective vocabulary of our society. Not immorality, malicious deeds, deviant behavior or the like. Not what one does, or doesn't do towards his fellow man, or even themselves, for that matter. Not good or bad, right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable mores. Look past the symptoms to the cause - 'S' - 'I' - 'N', sin. It's as simple as this - do you accept that God has a claim, an entitlement, a right to require of you the proper relationship to Him, or not? The Gospel that Jesus commands us to believe addresses the root of our dilemma; by nature and free choice we are alienated from God, justly condemned, without hope in this world, unless God Himself delivers us. But the world, that is, the society that men and women have built for themselves, has been pulled over our eyes to blind us from this truth of our predicament. In fact, everything that the world produces, in one fashion or another, even much of it's religion, has this fundamental design and motive underlying it - that it masks the truth that all is not right between God and man, for it is an elaborately planned façade that has been developed since the beginning of mankind to replace a God that it wants to keep at a distance.

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The Gospel is not rightly understood by so many because in today's self-absorbed, self-important, insatiable society God is so often not properly represented. God is portrayed in the image of man, rather than the other way around. Most men want to hear nothing of absolutes, of eternal consequences, of unrelenting ramifications as a result of relegating God to the background of their lives, of placing anything, everything before God. In talking about God, there is a woeful, lamentable lack of proportion as the mercy of God is made far more prominent than His holiness, and emphasis is placed on His love but none on His wrath. It is as true of God today, as it was when it was first penned thousands of years ago by the Psalmists, that *'He hates all workers of iniquity, that He is angry with the wicked every day, for in his pride the wicked does not seek God, in all his thoughts there is not room for God'*. (Psalm 5:5, 7:11, 10:3). The Gospel is not a separate provision,

something that has been offered outside of God's given Law. It is not something independent of the prior revelation and commandments of God's Law. It is not an announcement that God has relaxed His justice or lowered the standard of His holiness. Quite the contrary, for when rightly explained, the Gospel presents the clearest demonstration and the ultimate proof of the absolute necessity of God's justice and of His infinite abhorrence of sin.

Notice the ordering of Jesus' words for it is of paramount importance – first repentance, *then* belief in the Gospel. Jesus did not say, once you believe the gospel you will repent - for without repentance, one cannot understand their need for the Gospel. No, the order is manifestly clear – repent, and then believe the Gospel. The Gospel never makes light of sin, but rather it thoroughly reveals unto us how unsparingly God deals with sin. It reveals to us the terrible sword of the Father's justice smiting His beloved Son in order that atonement might be made for the transgressions of *His* people. The Gospel does not set aside the Law; rather it fully exhibits in full sight of all, hanging from the cross as a lamb brought to the slaughter, the Savior enduring the curse of it. The cross of Calvary reveals the most solemn and awesome display of God's hatred of sin that time or eternity could furnish. The Gospel presents Jesus, the Son of God, not as our savior from the torments of Hell, but rather as our savior from the penalty of sin. There are multitudes who wish to escape the Lake of fire but who have no desire to be delivered from their carnality, their worldliness, and their love of self. Christ is a Savior for those who realize something of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, who feel the awful burden of it on their conscience, who loathe themselves for it, who long to be freed from its terrible dominion; and He is a Savior for no others. The more bitterness we taste in sin, the more sweetness we shall taste in Christ. The more one knows of Christ's love, the more will one hate himself to think that he has sinned against such love.

Repentance is absolutely mandatory if the sinner is to make peace with God, for repentance is the casting down of all rebellion against God. Be assured, repentance, in and of itself, does not save - but no sinner ever was or ever will be saved without it. None but Christ saves, but an unrepentant heart is incapable of receiving Him or understanding the Gospel message and the centrality of the cross. A sinner cannot truly believe the Gospel for it will make no sense to him, *until* he repents.

When one repents, one experiences a different attitude regarding sin for true repentance is the *recognition* of the sense of sin, of the evil nature of our indwelling sin and the exceeding sinfulness of it, of experiencing a godly sorrow for that sin because it is committed against a God of purity, and holiness; repentance is a loathing of sin and ourselves on account of it, of a *desire* to forsake it, to be freed of it's grip.

Salvation is truly a free gift, but an empty hand must receive it, not a hand which still tightly clenches unto sin or a heart that delights in a world that crucified the Son of God, a world that so blatantly continues to reject Him! Repentance is more than remorse or regret. Repentance is a pure grace of God and is the entranceway into the understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Law of God, that which we place ourselves under if we are not hidden in Christ, knows nothing of repentance. The Law requires personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience. Obedience or a curse – for as St. Paul said, '*Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them*' (Galatians 3:10). The Law does not say, he that obeys not all things, let him repent, but, let him be cursed. Repentance is a grace of God that has come in by the gospel. Christ, and Christ alone, has purchased the salvation of the souls of repenting sinners by His shed blood. *That* is the Gospel, plain and pure. *That* is the message that frees the captives, that is capable of pardoning each and every one of us, once we realize that we are indeed on death row. Repent, and believe the Gospel.

... The Rev. Paul G. Stanley†