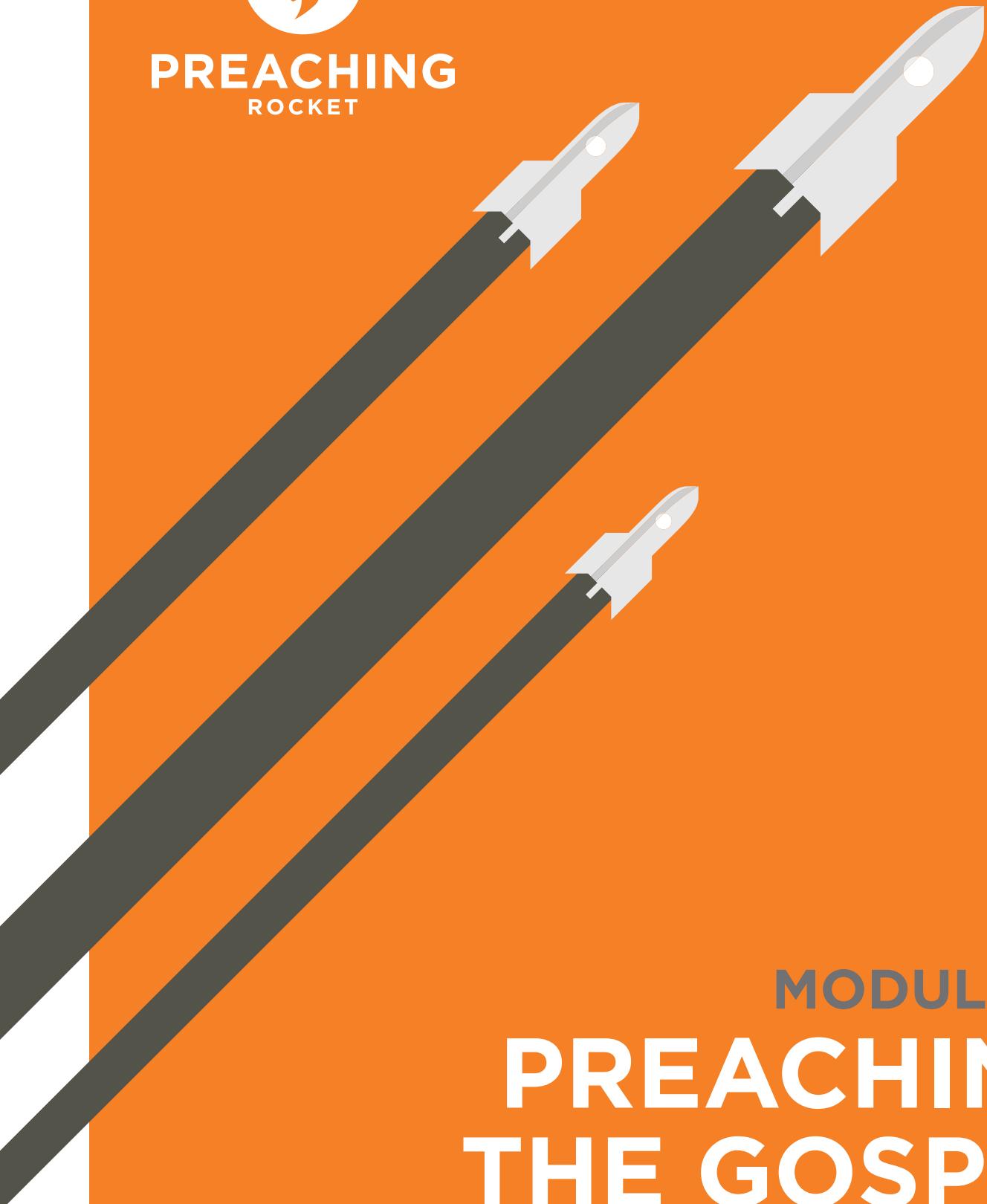




PREACHING
ROCKET



MODULE #8
PREACHING
THE GOSPEL

This module was written by Rodney Anderson, the Singles Director at Buckhead Church and frequent Preaching Rocket contributor.

For the Apostle Paul, the gospel was actually all that mattered in his preaching. In his letter to the Corinthian Church, he wrote that when he preached, he decided to “forget everything except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

Now, I don’t think Paul meant that his form, his words, the passion with which he preached, and the application that he gave didn’t matter, but simply that they take a far back seat to what was central in his preaching, the message of the Gospel. It was the heart of his preaching.

It would seem that making the Gospel the heart of our preaching would be a no brainer. It would seem like that would be the first thing to include in a message. But it’s amazing how often the Gospel is either unintentionally left out of preaching or it’s relegated to a place or point in the message that renders it ineffective. So how do we change that? How do we make sure the Gospel is central? And how do we make sure it’s used most effectively?

To answer those questions, I think you need to first answer these two questions: What is the Gospel? And who is the Gospel for?

The Gospel is the good news that everyone is saved by grace and grace alone. And that grace comes to us in just one way, through faith in Jesus Christ. The Gospel is all about what Christ has done and that we don’t need to do anything to gain acceptance. You

don’t need to give a certain amount, pray a certain amount, sign up for a discipleship class, be in a small group, stay sexually pure, be sober, or volunteer in the children’s ministry. All those are good things, great things actually, and they will all make your life better if you do them, but they have nothing to do w/ God’s love and acceptance of you. That’s the gospel. That we are saved by grace and not by works. And

that is a scary thing to preach sometimes, it’s a scandalous thing to preach. But that is the Gospel.

J.I. Packer says the central truth of the Gospel is : “God saves sinners.” He explains:

GOD

“God – the Triune Jehovah, Father, Son and Spirit; three Persons working together in sovereign wisdom, power and love achieve the salvation of a chosen people, the Father electing, the Son fulfilling the Father’s will by redeeming, the Spirit executing the purpose of Father and Son by renewing.”

SAVES

“Saves – does everything, first to last, that is involved in bringing man from death in sin to life in glory: plans, achieves and communicates redemption, calls and keeps, justifies, sanctifies, glorifies. Sinners do not save themselves in any sense at all. Salvation, first and last, whole and entire, past, present and future, is of the Lord, to whom be glory for ever; amen.”

SINNERS

“Sinners – When we are born, we are dead,

condemned, depraved, corrupt, perverse, sinful and completely unable to save or even lift a finger to enable salvation (Rom. 2-3; 6:23). This vile sinner doesn't even know he is dead. The law of God exposes the extent of our wickedness (Gal. 3:24)."

The grace of God extends down to us, not because we deserve it, but even as we do not deserve it (Rom 5:8). Our works, even attempts at good works are not adequate to contribute to our salvation or sanctification. Once the Spirit regenerates our dead souls, we by faith receive the completed work of Jesus who accomplishes our justification—a declaration of his righteousness on us. As his grace continues to work in our lives, the gospel comes to fruition (Col. 1:6; 2 Peter 1-3-9) in every aspect of our life.

And who is the Gospel for? Well, the Gospel is for *everyone*. And even though you may know that, in my experience it's one of the easiest things to forget.

When I grew up in church, my understanding of the Gospel was that it was for non-believers. The Gospel was always given at the end of the message, so that the sleepy, unbelieving souls could have a chance to respond to it. Or it was advertised as a special day that we were supposed to invite our family, friends, neighbors and pets to. And once we would get them to church, the pastor promised he would give them the gospel. And while those things aren't bad, it gave me an incomplete picture of what the gospel was. It made me think it was simply the basic ABC's of Christianity, the minimum truth required to be saved, and then you simply move past the gospel and get down to the real meat of living the

Christian life. Even today, when I hear the gospel was given, I assume that it was being preached to unbelievers.

But we know the Gospel is for everyone. The Gospel is not only the way we receive salvation, but also is how we grow, change, overcome and advance in every stage of the Christian life. The Gospel is for justification and sanctification.

Paul preached the Gospel consistently to Christians! He understood it was Jesus' death and resurrection that solves every problem and every issue. And if we are to make the Gospel central in our preaching, we have to remember this. When we forget, the Gospel becomes simply the fringe we tack onto the end of our preaching and it loses so much of its power and its effectiveness. It has to be the main thread that we weave throughout our entire messages. It has to be what we point every person, Christian or non Christian, toward.

God reveals Himself in the Scriptures. The Bible isn't a textbook about ethics or a manual on how to solve personal problems. The Bible is a book about God. When you study a biblical text, therefore, you should ask, "What is the vision of God in this passage?" God is always there. Look for Him. At different times He is the Creator, a good Father, the Redeemer, a rejected Lover, a Husband, a King, a Savior, a Warrior, a Judge, a Reaper, a vineyard Keeper, a banquet Host, a Fire, a Hen protecting her chicks and so on. – Hadden Robinson

PREACHING RELIGION

Now, I believe the reason Paul was so passionate about reminding Christians of the Gospel and preaching the Gospel again and again, not just to unbelievers, but to Christians is because of the danger of preaching something else. Namely the gospel of religion. Christians have an uncanny tendency to forget the Gospel we first heard and turn to a different one. We love to turn from the free grace given to us in Christ Jesus and run right back into law, religion and morality.

Paul was so frustrated at preachers who were preaching something other than the Gospel of grace. And I think, if we aren't careful, we can easily find ourselves doing the exact same thing, unintentionally preaching religion and morality to our congregations. And religion and morality are the easiest ways to make sure the gospel message is nowhere near our preaching.

"Moralistic sermons are often sub-Christian. Oprah Winfrey could preach some of them." – Tony Merida

"Without grace, our message ultimately is no different from that of the Rabbi or Imam." – Leslie Holmes, Erskine Theological Seminary.

Why do we do this? Well, the simple answer is that it's easy to preach religion. And what makes religion easy to preach is that people love to hear it as much as preachers like to preach it. Religion makes us feel bad, it makes us feel guilty, it makes us feel like something tangible is happening. But I think the number one reason we like religion is because it

makes us feel like there is still an element of control over our lives. If there is something to do, then there is something to control. All of us want to hold on to some control of our lives. So it's easy to preach it because we know people like to hear it. We also like to preach religion because, as one preacher, put it, "it gives us an element of control over our congregations". If they need us to tell them what to do, then we can control what they do and where they go.

We like to preach it, they like to receive it. But it's killing our preaching because it's the exact opposite of the message of Jesus. The Gospel is all about us losing control and giving it over to Jesus.

Now, before I give us some application on this subject. I want to give you the three main ways we will tend to preach religion: And they all start with C: Cult, Creed and Conduct.

CULT

Cult is any ceremonial nonsense that we add into our preaching to tell people what they have to do or need to do so that God will be happy with them or so that God would accept them. This is money they need to give, prayers they need to pray, friends they need to invite, or programs they need to attend.

There is no ceremony you can perform to earn God's acceptance. Now, this isn't to say that ceremony doesn't have value. Reciting the Lord's prayer, taking communion, and practicing confession, tithing are all incredible practices. But they are only good to celebrate what Christ has already done, not negotiating with him to get him to do it.

Preaching morality without the gospel forces people to give up or trust in their own goodness for salvation. You are not transformed by trying harder. And while guilt is a good short-term motivator, it's no substitute for understanding and living the gospel.

CREED

Creed is the 2nd one. It's kind of the intellectual name-brand of religion. This is when we preach to our people the doctrines they need to believe and the heresies they need to avoid. Preaching doctrine is a great thing, but if we aren't careful, doctrine becomes another way of gaining control over our people.

Preaching the gospel is preaching the way Paul said he preached in 1 Corinthians, "I'm preaching Christ crucified..." If we begin to tell our people that there are certain other truths you "have" to believe in order for God to accept you, we are preaching religion.

Preaching morality without the gospel forces people to give up or trust in their own goodness for salvation.

CONDUCT

The 3rd C is probably the most dangerous, it's Conduct: This is hands-down the prizewinner in how we preach religion instead of the Gospel. To teach that their morality, their good behavior, their decency, their responsibility somehow endears them to God is to preach against the sacrifice Jesus

made on the Christ. You know why we love to preach conduct and morality? We love to preach it because it gives our preaching the appearance of effectiveness.

It makes us believe we are accomplishing something to see the moral uprightness of our people. But the gospel tells us that isn't the measure that God uses, and we shouldn't use it either.

All of those can be good things, ceremonies to perform, correct theology, and good moral behavior, all of those are good things and can be great applications to great messages, but we can't, under any circumstances, if we want to preach and stay true to the Gospel, communicate that our acceptance in God has anything to do with any of them. So how do we keep that from happening? How do we keep from slipping from grace back into religion?

J.D. Greear writes in *Gospel*: "Growth in Christ is never going beyond the gospel, but going deeper into the gospel."

Tim Keller adds, "Gospel believers obey God to get more of God."

Well, up to this point, we've talked a lot of theory about the gospel and hopefully some of it has been helpful. And my assumption is that most of us, at the very least, agree intellectually with everything we've said. Now, how can we help you preach the Gospel at all times, to all people, in all of your messages without slipping back? Let me give you a great question to ask every time you finish your

sermon prep:

WHY DOES JESUS MATTER?

Every time you finish making a point, expounding on a moral principle, or simply giving good advice, ask: Why does Jesus matter?

Because if Jesus and what he did on the cross doesn't matter to whatever you happen to be preaching, it may be a great sermon, but it won't have the gospel in it. Every message, or at the very least, every message series, should somehow be clearly explaining why what Jesus did on the cross is pertinent to your content.

And if you find that Jesus isn't pertinent to your content, you are probably teaching a great sermon on parenting, or giving, or moral uprightness or some needed act of service, but it isn't a gospel message. It's simply teaching people to try harder, to better follow this rule, and you can be your own savior. The truth of the gospel is without Jesus, we have no hope of accomplishing anything.

Tim Keller wrote that before he understood the importance of understanding why Jesus matters in every message, his sermons followed this approach:

- Here is what the text says
- Here is how we must live in light of that text
- Now go and live that way, and God will help you.

Over time, he realized that he was indirectly and unconsciously teaching religion. He was employing preaching to trick the heart instead of reorienting

the heart toward Jesus. Here is his new outline:

- Here is what the text says
- Here is how we must live in light of it
- But we simply cannot do it
- Ah—but there is One who did!
- Now, through faith in him, you can begin to live this way

This is a great outline. And it's a great way to determine that your message is one that can't be heard in any corner synagogue. Jesus is what sets our points and our sermons apart. He isn't just the person we tag onto the end of our sermons, his work on the cross is the only way we can do anything.

See every moral principle should end with our people saying "that's impossible." And we should agree with them! But let them know that because of Jesus it is possible. He did it for us.

In *Prodigal God*, Keller challenges to preach the gospel in every sermon, because it's a part of the DNA of the local church. Pastors should move beyond Biblical principles to the gospel, bringing every message back to Gospel and Jesus. The reason people don't give or have great marriages is because they don't believe the Gospel.

Let me give you a few examples:

Earlier this year I preached a message on coveting from the story of Naboth's vineyard found in 1 Kings 22. I talked about the moral dangers of coveting and what it can lead to in your life. The bottom line was 'what you covet is what controls you.'

I explained that if they want to start monitoring their desires, they need to start monitoring their emotions. They needed to simply look for the presence of misery in their life and the absence of gratefulness.

I could have easily stopped there and given a very moralistic sermon on coveting w/ a very practical and doable application. But it wouldn't have uprooted the problem in their heart to continue to make an idol out of everything.

So I finished w/ explaining that this is possible only by us turning our eyes onto Jesus and what he did for us on the cross. He literally gave up everything in order so he could gain everything. Only when we see the beauty of what he did, will our hearts have something to focus on more attractive than anything we could ever covet.

I simply got to the end, had a great sermon, and asked the question, "why does Jesus matter?"

And if I can borrow an example from Tim Keller, used the example of David and Jonathan to talk about friendship. His main point was that friends always let you in and never let you down. He said if you end the sermon there with a "go and do the same", you've preached a moralistic and religious sermon. So he ends his message by asking "how can I be a friend like that?" Only through seeing Jesus as the ultimate friend and by looking at the cross as the ultimate act of friendship. Jesus "let us in" He was vulnerable on the cross and his arms were nailed open for us. Only when we grasp what he did will we ever be a friend like that. Only the cross gives us the security to open and vulnerable to others.

Every sermon you preach, if it's to have the gospel of grace in it, needs to be able to answer the question, "why does Jesus matter." The sermon is either going to be about what they must do, or what has already been done.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Now, let me give you one final thought on how the gospel can be more effective in your preaching. Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:21 said:

"Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe."

The root of preaching the Gospel in our messages is what it was for Paul: having a passion for the passion. Like Paul, each week, we have to get up in the church and decide to "forget everything except Christ crucified." If we have that, we won't ever have to worry about useless life improvement programs passing our lips, no empty threats about what will happen to your people if they don't improve. You won't ever have to tell them love will make their lives soar, if only they'll work harder at it. You won't have to warn them that they must stop sinning if they want God to like them and you will never have to tell them they need to be morally upright to earn God's favor.

If you can make up your mind, when you go into the pulpit, to forget everything except Jesus Christ and him crucified, you've have nothing to give them but Good news.