

GOSPEL OF GRACE 9-7-14

(Acts 20) Before we read it, I want to ask you a fill-in-the-blank question. This is similar to what you might get on Family Feud. Fill in the blank. Gospel of _____. What would you put in that blank? There are several really good answers to that question and a number of them are found in the New Testament Scriptures But, we will focus on one of the best answers in our meditations today, as we let the word of the Lord lead us to the table of the Lord.

Just two weeks back we were in this same passage, but with a different focus. We read today from the speech the apostle Paul made to the elders of the church in Ephesus just before he departed from them on a missionary journey. **18-21** *"You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time,¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews;²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house,²¹ solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.* Now, in that last verse we gain insight on the content of the gospel that we who follow Jesus proclaim. This is the message, this is what we are calling folks to do: repent of their sins and put their faith in the person of Jesus Christ. That is very instructive, but not where we are headed today. **22-24** *And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there,²³ except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.²⁴ "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.* Then one other verse from Paul's speech **32** *"And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified."* Now, in both verse 24 and verse 32, you find the same prepositional phrase, which offers a description of the gospel, of the core message of the Jesus people. And both state that it is a gospel or a word of what? Of grace. Grace refers to unmerited favor, and, here, of the unmerited favor of the living God which he bestows on sinners. To the mind of the apostle, this was the nature of what God gave him to preach. And, in this, the apostle found also his motivation for ministry.

A woman came home and told her husband, "I've got some good news and some bad news." He said, "Yeah." She said, "the good news is – the air bag works." That was a sly way of approaching

the matter don't you think? You ever have to give somebody some really bad news? My fellow-pastor, Bobby Brown, in his labor as a Chaplain in the National Guard has had to inform parents and spouses of the passing of a beloved soldier. Few of us have had to deliver news that bad. Maybe you need to tell someone they have been let go by the company. Or someone they love has cancer. Or they have been selected for an audit. How do you feel about your news-bearing task? Not a good feeling is it? There is no eagerness to make the contact, to initiate the conversation. You have to make yourself do your duty. But, when the news is good, when your message is positive, then it is a pleasure to be the messenger. Well, where am I going with this one? You can see it can't you? Jesus tells his followers in Acts 1 that they are to be his witnesses. In Mark 16 he says we are to preach the gospel. And the word "gospel" means "good news." It is a positive message. Paul calls it a word about grace. We aren't called to tell men that there is no hope for them in their sin. We aren't called to tell folks that they had better start working hard to possibly make up for all their bad deeds. We are called to preach a message of grace, to tell people what Ephesians 2:8 says **8** *"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God."* I got an email message this week about some free gifts that were available to me if I went to a certain web-site, and for some reason I went there and wasted my time. Don't ask me why. Stuff like that makes us skeptical about the word "free" but when God says it God means it. If we grasp that, if we see and believe that we are called by a message of grace, and called to share a message of grace, there is nothing in this world that can shut us up. So, I ask you to ponder with me just how the gospel of Christ is a word of grace.

I have a Trinitarian outline and so we begin by showing that the gospel is a message concerning the grace of God the Father to receive us back home. Maybe the most famous of the Lord's parables is a picture of salvation for a wayward child who has rejected the rules and responsibilities of the Father's house for the frolic, "freedom" and frustration of life in the far-away country. In that story of the prodigal son there comes a point when the boy realizes what a mess he has made of his life. He remembers the good things that were his in the house of his father. He longs for those treasures once again, but he fears they shall never be his. He expects that he may have lost his high place and the love of the father forever. Now listen, we live in a world full of prodigals. We are such ourselves and we are surrounded left and right with folks who have gone their own way, wasted their wealth on the passing pleasures of sin, and are in some state or other of reaping the consequences. And there is nothing more important, nothing more positive for that prodigal to hear

than the news that his father still wants him back and stands ready to receive him. That's where you and I come in. As prodigals already received back by the Father, we are now appointed by our Father to wander the highways and byways to notify sinners of the readiness of God to receive them back home. Man that is good news! That is great news! Now, I grant you – for the better part of the story, the prodigal son would not have cared about that message, would not have welcomed the messenger. Just like for you, many of those you may tell about the love of an offended Father don't feel the importance of that for themselves. You may come with good news, with a message of grace, and become the object of their scorn. But that's okay. Some day down the road, when the gravy train of sin runs dry, that prodigal may take stock and remember the word that crazy Christian shared back then in 2014 about a God who waits with open arms to receive sinners to himself. That is good news, fabulous news, and is it a message worth telling the world?

Secondly today, lets see that the gospel is a message about the grace of the Lord Jesus to pay our debts. When we live the prodigal life in the far country we get ourselves into some big trouble. We stock up for ourselves some massive bills, some moral debts, that go way beyond our capacity to pay them off. And the Bible says that when you stand before the judgment seat of eternity and you owe a great debt of sin which you cannot pay there is only one possible destiny for you. Romans 6:**23a** *For the wages of sin is death.* Not just temporal death, but eternal death, the second death, the lake of fire. This is where people are living as sinners. The Bible says they abide under the wrath of God. And so great is the love of Christ for sinners that even though we did nothing for Him He came and took the punishment for us, paid the debt for us, laid down his life in our place and thereby set free every single person who believes in Him. Romans 6:**23** *“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* For whom? For all who believe. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him will not perish like they deserve but will have eternal life.

Do you understand that this is the message Christ has given us to tell? The Jehovah Witnesses are out there going door to door telling people they can work their way into heaven. Our sermon is so much sweeter. We declare Christ and Him crucified. Sure, we must talk about sin and what it deserves but then we get to tell folks about how God has supplied the perfect substitute and sacrifice in His very own son. We call them not to an elaborate set of rituals, or a course of studies that can solve their problems. We point them instead to a Savior, complete, strong and true. And announce that all His goodness becomes their goodness, all their sin becomes his sin, if they trust in

His name. Christ is the One who comes to be our Redeemer, our Ransom. It is our privilege to declare His grace in paying for all our debts at Calvary.

Thirdly, let's see together that the gospel is a message about the grace of the Holy Spirit to change our lives. Titus 3:**4-6** *But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, ⁵He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.* Man alive, if you have ever felt the weight, the burden of your own proud, selfish heart, and wondered what could be done about it – this is just about the greatest news you could hear. There is Someone in the business of cleaning dirty hearts, regenerating dead hearts and renewing broken hearts. He is the Holy Spirit of God who is part of the salvation that comes with Jesus. And whereas the blood of Christ is poured out for you to be forgiven of your sins, the Holy Spirit is poured out so you can be set free from the present and reigning power of sin. This too is awfully good news. You don't have to be stuck the rest of your life with the same deadly desires that drag you consistently into the nasty pits that Satan fixes up just for you. You can be free of all that. You can be delivered into newness of life. II Corinthians 5:**17** *Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.* And the primary thing that becomes new is your heart, the very seat of your motivations and desires. Romans 6:**17-18** *But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.* That is what happens for and to every believer in Jesus, when the Holy Spirit of God comes to take over our lives. We become different persons. That is why we say we have been born again.

There is a little bug known as the grub. It is like a June bug, but a little smaller. It crawls around in the mire and muck at the bottom of a stagnant pond. It is oblivious to the glorious sunshine above, the singing birds round about, the beautiful flowers on the hills, the green trees on the bank. But then one day a strange feeling possesses this odd little creature. It has an itching in its back and its whole body becomes restless with a strange desire to crawl to the surface. It laboriously makes its way up the stalk of some reed or weed until it nears the surface. There it pauses to rest a while. Suddenly, by a peculiar motion of its body, the skin or the shell bursts open and there emerges a new and beautiful flying creature known as the dragonfly. Its wings are as thin as gauze. Its colors like the rainbow. It flies about, like the sunbeam, flickering here and there. Now it scorns the muck.

It despises the darkened depths of the stagnant pond. It lives on a higher plan and enjoys the beauties of God's creation. The dragonfly is a picture of the great change brought about by the new birth of a soul. Up he comes, out of the mire of sin into the sunshine of God's love, where he is graced with the gifts of heaven. What a change! And the news we bring when we share the gospel of grace with others has the power to affect this kind of change. I have seen it! Paul tells about it! Romans 1:**16** *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone one who believes.*" Peter speaks of it. I Peter 1:**3** *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope.* My Christian friend, this is the dynamite with which we have been entrusted. God has taken His gospel, His power unto salvation and transformation, and he has given it to us not for safekeeping, but for widespread distribution. This is the gospel you really need to get familiar with. This is the gospel you get to hold out to others in your school, your workplace, your neighborhood. Paul said, *"this is the ministry given to me, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God."* Now, most all of you know that I will not be mistaken for a positive-thinking guru, but I do believe that the message of the church can, at times, be excessively negative, and miss the proper focus on good news. I agree with what E. Stanley Jones wrote in his 1942 book called, "Abundant Living." This doctor and missionary to India wrote: *"The early Christians did not say in dismay, 'Look at what the world is coming to' but in delight they declared, 'Look what has come to the world!' They saw not merely the ruin, but the Resource for the reconstruction of that ruin, They saw not merely that sin did abound, but that grace did much more abound. On that assurance the pivot of history swung from blank despair and fatalism, to faith and confidence that sin had finally met its match."* Look at what has come to the world! It is the grace of the Father to receive us home, the grace of the Son to pay our debts, the grace of the Spirit to change our lives. (prayer to believe, and tell)