

THE “JESUS LOVES YOU” GOSPEL

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Some years ago I found that after having a bath I itched uncomfortably for about twenty minutes. I ignored it for a long time, until I finally spoke to a doctor who referred me to a dermatologist. After several appointments I was given a diagnosis. It seemed that I was suffering from a rare condition called “Aquagenic Urticaria”. Now the first word relates to water and the second simply means itching. I was informed what was wrong with me by the use of medical Latin which really just combined water with itching. Apart from antihistamines, there was no medical cure. Some years later I was sitting drinking coffee with my son and family in Wales, when suddenly I lost grip of the cup and spilt the drink. I ignored it, until later at a friend’s funeral I seemed to lose full control of one arm. Back to the doctor who referred me to the stroke unit at Heartlands. A CAT scan on my head found no trace of any damage, so it was uncertain whether or not I had suffered a minor strokes. About two years ago, following a routine blood test, it was discovered that I had too many red blood cells which made my blood too thick. I was referred to a Haematologist who took a blood sample and sent it off for analysis. That showed I had, what the medical profession call, a mutated Jak 2 gene which apparently provides instructions to cells for making the Jak protein. At last I had an accurate diagnosis, I had a rare blood cancer. After some bloodletting, I was finally prescribed a drug which is keeping my disorder in check. For this I thank God and our brilliant NHS.

Diagnosis is vital in the medical profession, indeed this must be the primary skill of any doctor. If they don’t know what wrong with you, how they can treat you. Imagine how many people would volunteer for surgery if they had no knowledge of their illness. A surgeon would be hard pressed to find patients for surgery without a prior diagnosis. This of course is obvious, but is it in relation to how often the gospel is presented. I think not for the following reasons.

Its seems to be the case that the gospel is often reduced to its lowest common denominator through the phrase “God loves you”. It then follows that conversion is

condensed to a condescension to “accept the love of Jesus” accompanied by the so called “sinners prayer” The question I want to address is, is that the gospel. I suggest it is not, nor does it bear any resemblance to the apostolic preaching found in the New Testament. You can read this in the Bible and make up your own mind, but I’m going to use a summary provided by a Welsh New Testament Scholar and influential Protestant theologian. He studied at Oxford and was ordained a Congregational minister in the early 1900’s Here is his summary of apostolic gospel preaching

1. The age of fulfilment has dawned, the “latter days” foretold by the prophets
2. This has taken place through the birth, ministry ,death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
3. By virtue of the resurrection Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of God
4. The Holy Spirit in the church is the sign of Christ’s presence power and glory
5. The Messianic Age will reach its consummation in the return of Christ
6. An appeal is made for repentance with the offer of forgiveness, the Holy Spirit and salvation

You will notice that apostolic preaching did not include “Jesus loves you” so how can this lovely phrase be a distortion of that early presentation of the gospel. I going to set out why in numbered paragraphs for clarity

1. God’s love and mercy can only be understood and appreciated when a proper diagnosis has been given and understood by the unbeliever. They must understand the righteousness of God and the sin of humanity, especially their own. They must understand that they are condemned. There must be conviction, otherwise the mercy and love of God has no meaning. There must be an acknowledgment of their sin through the mediation of the Holy Spirit before the medicine is applied and received. That is the very purpose of the law, it’s the schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.
2. Whilst the love of God is central to the gospel, it must have its proper place. If preached in isolation, it just affirms a sinner in their present state. It’s like the surgeon refusing to tell the patient how ill he is, and that would be cruel
3. The gospel begins with the law and our inability to keep it. Paul puts it like this in Romans 3:20 **“therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight for by the law is the knowledge of sin”**. The law

exposes us and leaves us without excuse. The unbeliever, when under conviction, must feel uncomfortable, this is the work of the Spirit. They will not feel this way if you begin with “God loves you”. Only when we feel the weight of sin and the wrath of God are we ready for the surgery. Now the surgery is good news indeed, a new heart.

4. Look at the first sermon by Peter in Acts. It left the hearers desperate and crying “what must we do” Peter said “repent” Repentance is Gods olive branch to the sinner. It results in forgiveness and reconciliation and peace with God
5. Why has the message been so diluted, so misrepresented? Perhaps the modern church is concerned that people feel affirmed. The true message might not go so well with, the so called church growth model, in which case the gospel is jettisoned in favour of successful church growth.

I hear an objection “what about John 3:16? Well let’s take a closer look at the verse, used more than any other for gospel presentation. The first thing to say is that no text from scripture should ever be wrenched from its context. The word “text” originally meant everything in a book, the whole book, but in Christian circles it’s come to mean a verse or a sentence by itself. So what happens is we take a verse and use it in a way never intended. This, I suggest, is the case in John 3:16 which most Christians can recite word for word **“For God so loved the world that He gave His own begotten son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”**. I learnt it at Sunday school as a small boy. My teacher substituted the name “Stephen” for the word “world” and so on to personalise the verse for me. Now the question is, how many people can quote, by heart, verse 14 or indeed other verses surrounding verse 16, not many I dare say. Yet those surrounding verses are vital to understand verse 16. Who would just snatch a sentence from a novel to explain the story, it would be absurd, yet that is what we do.

Let’s break up the verse and look more deeply.

First the word Loved “GOD SO LOVED”.

What does that mean to an unbeliever, how could he or she understand that word in our English language. They might begin by thinking God is attracted to them, they must be loveable, they must be special, but that would not be the truth, for that is not what the word means. As many will know there are three common words for love in the Greek language.

1. EROS which is the love of attraction, primarily sexual love between a man and a woman. God created this. God does not EROS the world. He has not fallen in love with us
2. PHILIA is the love of affection, more a love of the mind than the heart. You could easily substitute the word LIKE. God does not simply PHILIA the world His love is much more active and powerful.
3. AGAPE is the love of action centred in the WILL You might use the word “care”. We see this just now in care homes when workers, at least some, genuinely care for the folks in the home. They want to do something loving on their behalf. They respond to a need and do something about it. It’s centred in the will. God’s love is AGAPE love

Hence when Jesus was asked about loving ones neighbour, he told the story of the Good Samaritan who demonstrated Agape love. He saw a need, and by an act of the will, he did something about it. I have spoken about this on a number of occasions in the church. Because the love of God is centred in the will it can be commanded. This is what Jesus was saying in Matthew 22:34-40 **“But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ Then one of them, a lawyer, asked *Him a question*, testing Him, and saying, ³⁶ “Teacher, which *is* the great commandment in the law?”³⁷ Jesus said to him, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is *the* first and great commandment. ³⁹ And *the* second *is* like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”**

When I got married, the minister did not ask me if I was attracted to Sheila, or if I liked her, or if I was I in love with her. No, he said to me “WILL YOU love her,

comfort her honour and keep her in sickness and in health". My response was I WILL!!

Second the word world "GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD"

God loved the world, He loved the human race. The word world in the Bible connotes a bad image. It's a fallen and bad world, but was determined to do something in response to its awful need

Third the word believes "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN ME"

Not just to believe about Jesus but to believe in Him. I used to use that fascinating story of Charles Blondin to illustrate the difference between believing and believing in. He was a great showman who walked on a tightrope across Niagara Falls in the summer of 1859. Can you imagine a tightrope stretched over a quarter of a mile spanning the breadth of Niagara Falls? Blondin walked 160 feet above the falls several times back and forth between Canada and the United States as huge crowds looked on in shock and awe. Once he crossed in a sack, once on stilts, another time on a bicycle, and once he even carried a stove and cooked an omelette. He also walked backward with a wheelbarrow. He asked for some audience participation. The crowd could see he could do these things with ease, he had proven he could. However now he was asking for a volunteer to get into the wheelbarrow and take a ride across the falls with him. He asked this direct question of the crowd "do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow". "Of course" the crowd shouted, they believed alright, no question. Then Blondin posed the question "who will get in the wheelbarrow" Of course no one did.

Fourth the word So "GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD"

To understand the word "so" we must consider the context more closely beginning at John 3 vs 14 and ending at verse 17. Here it is

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in Him should Cnot perish but have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God **so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷ For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.**

To understand the context we must turn to Numbers 21. There were 600,000 men plus women and children (possible 2 million people altogether) in the desert with no food or water, and it was their fault. They were the people of Israel in the Sinai desert. They had met God at Mount Sinai, when they had been betrothed to Him in something akin to a marriage. Like me with Sheila and her with me, they had said "I will" and God had said the same. They were given the commandments and promised the land, which was about 10 days walk away. They arrived at Kadesh Barnea and sent in 12 spies to spy out the land. You know the story, we used to teach the children in a song "12 men were sent to spy in Canaan 10 were bad two were good" 10 spies were afraid and 2 said lets go in and possess the land .God promises He would take them in on His shoulders, but they decided not **to believe in Him** and stayed where they were. They wandered in the desert for 40 years and the only two who got in to the land were the 2 spies who were good. In spite of their disobedience God fed and watered them but they repeatedly grumbled missing the more tasty food they had eaten in Egypt. They could have gone into the Promised Land and had all the nice food they ever wanted but they did not so, it was their fault entirely. God sent venomous snakes among them, until the people realised this must be from God. They confessed to Moses pleading with him to ask God to take the snakes away. They said Moses we have sinned against you and God please ask God to take away the snakes. God did not answer in that way, but He provided a way of escape from death. God instructed Moses to make a bronze snake and attach it to a pole, go to a hill overlooking the camp, and put up the pole with the snake on it. Then He said tell the people, when you are bitten look at the bronze snake and you will not die. The word SO means, Just as God loved His people in that Old Testament setting He SO (that is in the same manner or way) loved the world in that this time instead of a bronze snake, He gave His son. The word SO is not a measure of the intensity of His love but a reference to the past. Sometimes I notice people in texts say Sooooo to demonstrate the intensity how much they feel not so for the word "SO" in John 3:16.

I wonder now if you were to explain to an unbeliever the context of John 3:16 they would be persuaded by preaching that "God loves you". Indeed they would have every right to question that statement, for without the true gospel being spoken they are not aware of their personal sin or the fact that they are already dead. Please have a look at the picture below and try to imagine the scene described earlier. You

are holding one you love in your arms, they have been bitten. What would you implore them to do? Well the following hymns gives us the answer. LOOK AND LIVE.

1. I've a message from the Lord, hallelujah!
This message unto you I'll give,
'Tis recorded in His word, hallelujah!
It is only that you "look and live."
 - *Refrain:*
"Look and live," my brother, live,
Look to Jesus now, and live;
'Tis recorded in His word, hallelujah!
It is only that you "look and live."
2. I've a message full of love, hallelujah!
A message, O my friend, for you,
'Tis a message from above, hallelujah!
Jesus said it, and I know 'tis true.
3. Life is offered unto you, hallelujah!
Eternal life thy soul shall have,
If you'll only look to Him, hallelujah!
Look to Jesus who alone can save.
4. I will tell you how I came, hallelujah!
To Jesus when He made me whole—
'Twas believing on His name, hallelujah!
I trusted and He saved my soul.

Ill finish now and ask a searching question. Do you believe Gods character has changed? Do you believe the God of the Old Testament is a different God from the new? Are they the same God? Is the God of Israel the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? I was in a house group in a meeting in a local church a few years ago when the leader of the group said this, and I quote "God may have shown anger in the Old Testament but He is no longer angry" She did not know that what she had said was a heresy hundreds of years old, named after the first man who taught it. His name was Marcion, and the heresy to this day is called Marcionism.

Is the first word of the gospel "God loves you" no it is not and who better we can turn to than Jesus and see what His first words were. **"The time has come he said the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news"** Mark 1:15

Look at the final words of Jesus before He left the earth found in Luke 24:46-47 **"Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, ^[1]and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance**

and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

A chilling quote from Spurgeon

“You are too delicate to tell the man that he is ill. You hope to heal the sick without their knowing it. You therefore flatter them. And what happens they laugh at you. They dance upon their own graves and at last they die. Your delicacy is cruelty, your flatteries are poisons; you are a murderer. Shall we keep men in a fool’s paradise. Shall we lull them into soft slumber from which they will awake in hell. Are we to become helpers of their damnation by our smooth speeches? In the name of God we will not

