

The Gospel Is Good

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 0 0] Well, I'd like us to turn back together to Matthew chapter 9. For the next half an hour or so, we're going to be thinking a little bit about this passage. Let me read again at verse 35.

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.

This morning we're starting just a short series that's going to be called The Good News of the Kingdom. And that title comes from a phrase that you can see in Matthew 9.35 and that you see in several other verses in the New Testament.

That word gospel means good news. And that message that Jesus proclaimed is the good news of the kingdom. And over the next three weeks, well we'll miss a week next week, but the next three services that I'm here in the mornings, I want us to use that title, The Good News of the Kingdom, to help us understand more clearly what the gospel is all about.

And this is so, so important because the gospel has been so frequently misunderstood and it has been so frequently misrepresented.

[1 : 1 4] It's been misunderstood by many people and usually that misunderstanding takes the form of some kind of legalism. The idea that you have to do certain things in order to reach a certain standard and make yourself good enough for God.

And legalism can come in lots of ways, but I guess there's kind of two main types. There's the naive type of legalism and there's the depressing type. The naive type of legalism tends to think, well, you know, we're not that far from God anyway, and there's not really much of a problem between us and God.

And I'm sure if we just put right a couple of things in our lives, everything will be fine. That's the naive type. The depressing type views Christianity as just this endless list of dos and dos.

And they are not achievable. They're not attractive. And in that kind of like Christianity just kind of comes across as this miserable, off-putting obligation that everyone just wants to avoid.

But all of that is to seriously misunderstand the gospel. Anything that smells of legalism is not the gospel. It is not the gospel because the good news of the kingdom is never ever about us earning our salvation.

[2 : 2 8] It's never about us making ourselves good enough. It's never about us reaching a certain standard or doing anything to make us acceptable to God. All of that is a misunderstanding of the gospel.

But not only is the gospel misunderstood, it's also frequently misrepresented. And that can happen in lots of ways and I'm sure every single person has experienced that.

Sometimes that misrepresentation can happen through the hypocrisy of individual Christians. And I'm sure everyone has seen that and I'm sure I've been guilty of it.

Where we say on a Sunday that we love Jesus and yet then during the rest of the week, our conduct and our behavior and our lifestyle isn't shaped by the gospel.

We want to honor him on a Sunday and then we're nothing like him for the rest of the week. And that's a misrepresentation of the gospel. Sometimes also the misrepresentation can actually come through the collective church as well.

[3 : 28] And you've seen that many, many times in history. You look back over hundreds of years. There have been long periods where sometimes the church can make huge emphasis on things that actually aren't part of the gospel.

And even in our own community, there are so many things in our community that have been wonderful in our history in terms of the gospel. But there have been times when there's been maybe a misemphasis on things and there's been maybe a big emphasis on things like what we wear to church or what we do or don't do on a Sunday or things like that.

And people have given the impression that that's what being a Christian is all about. Again, that's to misrepresent the gospel. And sometimes we can misrepresent the gospel by only having half a gospel where we maybe understand part of it.

But we don't understand the fullness of it. And a great example of that is when we think of the gospel as a kind of ticket to heaven where we think, well, okay, I must trust in Jesus because I know I'll need my ticket to heaven when the day comes.

But between now and then, I don't really want to have to think about him. That's a very truncated understanding of the gospel. It's misrepresenting it as well.

[4 : 42] All of these misunderstandings, misrepresentations highlight the fact that it's so important that we all have an accurate understanding of the gospel. That's crucial for everybody here, for everybody watching at home.

If you're a Christian, you need to know what you're following. If you're not yet a Christian, you need to know what you're rejecting.

So we're going to think about that a little bit more over the next three sermons. Each of these is going to look at an aspect of this phrase that makes our title. We're going to look at the fact that the gospel is good.

We're going to look at the fact that the message of the gospel is news. And we're going to look at the fact that the message of the gospel is about the kingdom. So this week we're focusing on the first one. The gospel is good.

And we're going to think about that under two headings. Heights of joy, depths of grace. So first of all, thinking about heights of joy.

[5 : 44] As we said, the word gospel simply means good news. And so that's straightforward, but anything straightforward carries the danger of that we can very quickly become too familiar with it.

So we might know the word gospel and it's maybe a word we've heard all our lives. And we might think that, well, yes, I know that this gospel is important.

I know that it's helpful. And maybe even you're aware that actually this is a really serious and urgent thing that does need to be thought about.

And all of that, I think, is true of many of us. We see those things and understand them. But I think that it's all too easy to forget that at the heart of Christianity is a message that is so, so good.

The gospel is grounded on news that is so good. In fact, that's really what the word means. It expresses the idea that word gospel expresses the idea of glad tidings, of momentous celebration.

[6 : 49] In other words, it's a message that is full of joy. And that's so crucial to recognize yet so easy to miss that word gospel, the word that Jesus chose to use to capture what his message is all about, is telling us that at the heart of Christianity is joyful news.

And that joyful news is grounded in the fact that God the Father has sent his son to be our savior that through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, he is building his family and his church.

And for everyone who trusts in Jesus, everything changes. And so for everyone who trusts in Jesus, death is no longer dominant.

Death is no longer the force that's ultimately going to win over you. Existence is no longer empty. We're not just cogs in a machine that came from nothing, heading to nothing, and we're just an accidental blip in the middle.

Truth is no longer guesswork. We're not trying to find answers somewhere. Hope is no longer fading as our lives tick by.

[8 : 08] Suffering is no longer pointless because it all comes under the sovereign purposes of God. God himself is no longer out of reach.

Precious moments that we have with one another are no longer temporary. And life is no longer slipping away.

For everyone who trusts in Jesus, everything changes. The gospel is all of that and it's so much more. It's all a reason to be absolutely full of joy.

And it's so important for us to recognize that, so important to think about that. I'm going to give you a little sort of slight history lesson that will either be fascinating or boring, but I hope it's helpful.

Because in preparing for this sermon, I read a couple of ministers who served in Scotland way back in the 1800s. So about 200 years ago, I was reading two men who were ministers in Scotland.

[9 : 12] The first was a man called John Cahoon, and he was ministered in Leith in the 1820s. And he described the gospel in these terms. He described it as, inestimable blessings from Father, Son and Spirit, fully and freely offered to be received and enjoyed by us as gifts that are entirely free.

And I thought that was a great summary, because it's teaching us that the gospel is fuller than we will ever grasp. And it is freer than we ever imagined.

And that is so important to recognize, because our hearts will instinctively both take away and add to the gospel. Our hearts take away and add to the gospel in unhelpful ways.

So we tend to take away from the gospel, because we take away from the fullness of God's love and his generosity, his commitment and his goodness. So we think that as we stumble along in our lives, God is gradually getting more and more fed up with us.

We think that God's commitment fades. So maybe once we had a chance with God, not now, too much water under the bridge, too much has happened, too many mistakes have been made.

[10 : 37] We think that if we stumble and fail, then God's just going to shut the door. We think that God's commandments aren't motivated by goodness.

Instead, it's more about kind of stifling us rather than giving us delight. We think that God's generosity fades. And sooner or later, he'll see that we don't actually deserve the blessings that he has on offer.

And maybe most of all, we tend to think that God's love gradually grows cold.

None of that is true. Everything that I have said is completely wrong. None of that is true.

And if you make God's love conditional, if you make his motives mixed, if you see his generosity as fading, if you think that his love for you can diminish by one thousandth of a percentage point, then you are totally wrong and you are taking away from the fullness of the gospel.

[11 : 49] And at the very same time, we add to the gospel. What do we add? We add a whole pile of requirements and conditions. So we think that we need to reach a certain standard to be acceptable to God.

We think that we need to have a certain knowledge in order to please him and to be useful. We need to think that we have to have certain remarkable experiences in order for us to be impressive towards God. And we need to think that we must make sure that we never, ever, ever stuff things up if we're going to follow Jesus in our lives.

We add all sorts of conditions, all sorts of expectations, all kind of bargainings between us and God. All of it is nonsense. None of it is the gospel.

None of it is the gospel. We add and we take out away and we take away. And whenever we do that, we're departing from the gospel.

And do you know what happens if we do that the moment we do it? Our joy evaporates. And we need to get back to the truth. The fact that the gospel reveals the inestimable blessings from the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit offered an uncompromising fullness.

[13 : 05] I love that word fully, fully offered to us. And it's all a magnificent gift that God wants you to receive and enjoy.

And please write those words in your heart. It doesn't say earn and endure. It says receive and enjoy.

That's what the gospel is all about. Through Jesus, we experience the greatest heights of joy. But you know, this statement from John Cahoon is fascinating.

But I think we can actually say a wee bit more that even John Cahoon said in this statement. Because I actually made a typo when I was preparing the sermon, which I thought was a mistake.

And it was a mistake, but it was actually a very helpful mistake. Because when I first written this quote, when I typed it up, I'm terrible at typing. My typing is nearly as bad as my handwriting. I had written in my notes, Inestimable Blessings for Father, Son, and Spirit, fully, fully offered, etc.

[14 : 13] And I kind of was rereading it and I saw my mistake and I was like, oh, far is wrong. I'll have to change it to from. And then I realized, well, actually, my mistake is capturing one of the most profound truths of all.

Because the Gospel isn't simply Inestimable Blessings from God. It also reveals Inestimable Blessings for the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

Because in the Gospel, the Father sees his beloved Son willingly obey him, going to the point of death, overcoming sin in total victory.

The Son comes and takes delight to do the Father's will. And he endures the cross because of the joy that is set before him. And the Holy Spirit bursts forth from the Father and Son in glorious power, enabling the incarnate Christ to perform miracles and preach and heal and resist Satan's attacks, raising Jesus from the dead and now coming to endow the hearts of all believers as a new humanity created in Christ.

In other words, in the Gospel, it's not just our super joys. It's the triune God himself. And we need to remember that our joy is always, always catching up with his joy.

[15 : 44] And so you see this amazing, amazing reality of joy at the heart of the Gospel. The other minister I was reading was Thomas Chalmers. You might have heard of Thomas Chalmers.

He was very famous and an important figure in the history of the Free Church. Fascinating figure because Thomas Chalmers became a Christian, long after he became a minister. So he was a minister for years before he actually came to really understand what the Gospel was about.

And when he wrote about his conversion, he said that when we believe in Jesus, joy and confidence entered our hearts and a new principle and power transforms our lives.

And that's another brilliant statement because it captures something that lies at the very heart of the Gospel. Chalmers recognized that in the Gospel, joy and power go hand in hand.

And you see that so clearly in Matthew 9. Look at the power that was displayed in that passage that Thol read for us. You've just got a miracle after miracle after miracle.

[16 : 48] You've got the paralytic, Jesus says get up and he rose up. You've got the woman suffering a discharge of blood for 12 years. She touches Jesus's garment. She's healed. The little daughter who's died, Jesus takes at hand, raises her to life.

Blind men crying out for mercy, Jesus opens their eyes and mutes demon possessed man unable to speak. Jesus casts the demon out. The power is utterly astonishing.

And just imagine the joy. Imagine the joy for that man who could walk, for those guys who could see, for that woman who was finally healed.

And the whole reason the Gospel can lift us to the heights of joy is because behind the Gospel, there is so much power. Chalmers also spoke about a new principle transforming our lives.

If you're ever reading theologians from long ago, you'll see this word again and again and again. They love this word principle and they'll always talk about different principles. And one of the ways in which they use that word is to talk about fundamental truths that shape all the details of life.

[18 : 08] So like a fundamental principle is that Carlyway is the best village in Lewis. So every other village you go to is just compared to Carlyway. And not as good.

So there's a principle for you. Many others, they're used a lot in theology. And often it'll be described in terms of first principles, that there's a fundamental truth that never changes.

And we are being reminded today that our first principle of Christianity is that we have immutable reasons to be joyful.

And that emphasis on joy and power hand in hand is so important because we have got to keep these together. So often in terms of religious convictions, faith, whatever, people choose one or the other.

But joy with no power is actually just an illusion. And power without joy is just intimidation.

[19 : 15] In the gospel, joy and power stand side by side. And they're a key part of what makes the gospel so, so good. And one of the wonderful things you see in Matthew 9 is that that joy is experienced individually.

It's also experienced collectively. You look at all the individual lives, the paralytic who got up, the woman who was healed, the family whose daughter was raised, the blind men who could see, the mute who was able to speak.

All of these individual lives were transformed. And all the time there was a crowd marveling. And early in the chapter you have this beautiful description.

After Jesus called Matthew, he brings all his friends, tax collectors and sinners collectively gathering around Jesus, having a meal with him. It's all emphasizing the fact that in the gospel, in the gospel, we discover a personal knowledge and experience of God.

And we enter into a collective joy in the Lord. In other words, the Church of Jesus Christ is united by joy, a shared joy in the Lord.

[20 : 25] And of course, all of that arises from the joy that exists forever in God himself, Father, Son and Spirit. And there's a couple of important lessons for us there.

Joy and power, these should be the greatest influences on our worship every Sunday. And so we come rejoicing, singing, delighting in everything that God has done for us.

And at the same time, we stand in reverent awe before the all powerful God, who's revealed himself to us and saved us.

Joy and power, rejoicing and reverence, that is exactly what every Sunday morning should be shaped by. But these are also the great principles that get us out of bed every day.

Because if you are a Christian or if you become one, then you get up every morning this week with reason to rejoice. And you go into a new day in his power, sustained, held, transformed by him at every step you take.

[21 : 39] Joy is at the very heart of the gospel. The gospel, the word, that's what the word means, it's joyful news.

The gospel makes joy absolutely fundamental and running out of time, so I need to whiz on to my next point, which is going to be much shorter. We need to think not just about heights of joy, we need to also think about depths of grace.

Because as we seek to draw attention to the joy of the gospel, one thing that we have got to make sure we never forget is that the joy of goodness, the joy of good news, arises out of a situation of desperate need.

And you see that all the time. So the joy of peace in conflict arises from the fact that war is so desperate.

The joy of being told all clear is rooted in the fact that cancer is a diagnosis that we're all terrified of. And the joy of coming home arises from the pain and longing of homesickness.

[22 : 44] The greatest joys that we experience all arise from the midst of pain and suffering and fear. And this means that if the gospel gives us joy at its greatest height, it's because sin has left us in the lowest and darkest depths.

And that's why the joy of the gospel is never superficial, it's never naive, it's never just a kind of nice lifestyle advice. It is far, far deeper.

And the reason it's so deep is because the gospel always recognizes the seriousness of sin and the sadness of humanity and the brutality of death.

And we must never underestimate or play down these things. Sin has left us alienated from God, separated from the one who made us. Our connection to our life giver has been broken.

And that explains why everyone's dying. And the impact of that sin has caused deep and profound sadness for so many people. You see the sorrow of conflict, the pain of illness, the frustration of disappointment, of life not going the way you wanted to go, the horror of injustice, the grief of people when those we love are torn from us in death.

[24 : 04] And all of it is reminding us what we already know, that death is a merciless and brutal enemy. And this is where we discover that the gospel doesn't just rejoice, it also rages.

It rages against the pain and sorrow and rebellion against God that sin has caused. And so sin has taken humanity to the depths, to the depths of pain and suffering that a broken world inflicts on us and on people.

The depths of conflict and tension and hurt when people just do awful things to one another. The depths of confusion and emptiness as people, all of us turn away from God, we follow after idols of our own making.

And most seriously of all, sin has taken us to the depths of inescapable guilt before God. Our sin is a rebellion against him.

We've disregarded his authority, we've shunned his generosity, we've squandered our opportunities. We were made as the most advanced and capable and beautiful creatures in all the universe, we've used all that ability to spit in God's face and tell him that we don't want it.

[25 : 21] And that stain of sin makes it impossible for us to approach God. It leaves our compatibility with God in tatters. It's left us chasing false gods and all the time provoking the righteous wrath of the One, True and Holy God.

Sin has left us in the darkest of depths and it is there, there in those desperate depths that the grace of God in Jesus Christ reaches us.

And that is what makes the Gospel so, so amazing. Remember, I said that the Gospel is never legalistic. So legalistic is the idea that there's like a kind of ladder or steps that you can climb up to make your way up to God.

You can self-improve and you can make yourself better and you can impress God. The Gospel is never, ever, ever legalistic. We can never, ever contribute to our salvation. We can never take a single step of self-renovation that's going to bring us closer to God.

In other words, we can't climb, we can't climb one inch, we cannot climb one inch out of the depths that sin has left us in.

[26 : 38] And that is why in the Gospel Jesus always, only and forever meets us in those very depths.

And that's why the heights of joy that we experience in the Gospel are all the result of the immeasurable and astounding depths of His grace. And oh, this is what makes the Gospel so, so good.

Because no matter how much we have messed up, no matter how guilty and helpless we feel before God, no matter how much we doubt and are unsure of things, no matter how much the devil accuses us and brings up in our minds all the things that we've done, that we wish we hadn't done.

No matter how much we feel that we have fallen and let God down, His grace reaches us. Because His grace reaches to the very depths.

Sin has caused so much damage and pain, but sin can never, ever take you to where God can't reach you.

[27 : 46] And that is the amazing reality of His love and grace. Couple to that is a very, very solemn truth. It's pressing on to us the fact that if we don't experience the healing and saving power of Jesus, it's not because He can't reach you.

It's because you're pushing Him away. The Gospel is a message of astounding joy all because Jesus has come to meet us and save us from the very depths.

And if you're not yet a Christian and especially if you feel like you have stuffed up in your life, you need to know that His grace is deep enough. Oh, you need to know that His grace is deep enough to reach you.

And from that moment where Jesus meets us in the depths, He begins a beautiful work of restoration. We're forgiven, justified, adopted, and the Holy Spirit comes to begin a work of sanctification.

That just means making us more and more into the people that God made us to be. That work will not be complete until we're with Jesus in the new creation, but the process starts now. And today, and in all the days ahead, Jesus is gathering and restoring His church, building a new humanity that stretches across all the nations and all the generations.

[29 : 13] And you see the benefit of that in all the interactions that Jesus has with people. We see that in Scripture, we see that in our lives, we see it in this very chapter. Jesus healed the suffering.

You see the woman who was made well. She ate with sinners, you saw that after Jesus called Matthew. He has compassion on the crowd. You see it in verse 36. He commissions us to go and work and serve in His harvest at the very end of the chapter.

And that's why the Christian church should make such a positive difference in our nation. And if you go back 200 years to the guys I was reading about, that was their vision.

Thomas Chalmers spoke about the Christian good of Scotland, and that motivated him and his colleagues to establish schools, to provide relief for the poor, to campaign for the abolition of slavery, to reach out to those in the grip of addiction.

It's all reminding us that the Christian church, us, we should make such a positive difference to our homes, our schools, our communities, our nation. How do we do that? We do that by living lives shaped by the gospel, lives that overflow with joy, and lives that are ready to reach people who are in the very depths, and to show them the same grace and love that Jesus has shown to us.

[30 : 36] The gospel is such good news. Jesus takes us to the heights of joy, and it's all because of the astonishing depths of His amazing grace.

I have two questions as I finish. But anyone here who's not yet a Christian or not sure, anyone watching at home who's not yet a Christian, do you know this?

Do you know how good this is? And if you think that the gospel is not good, if you think it's going to spoil your life, if you think it's not worth it, if you think it's rubbish, if you think it's better left till you're older, you don't understand the gospel.

You don't understand it. Because it is so, so good. Every single Christian in here today will tell you the best thing that has ever happened to me is that I came to know Jesus.

And to do that, all we have to do is just say, Lord, I want to follow you, please save me, and I'm going to need your help every step of the way. That's all you need to say, and He will keep His promise.

[31 : 43] So to those who are maybe not yet a Christian, do you know this? And my last question is to those of us who are Christians, we do know it. Do we show it?

Because everybody around us needs to see it. Amen.