

The Message of Our Mission

Sunday AM Message WBC

September 21, 2014

Romans 1:16-17

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. ¹⁷ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

We at Wheelersburg Baptist Church have a mission; to make disciples. If you are a member of this church and a disciple of Jesus Christ, you share this mission with us. This morning, I want to help you in the fulfillment of our mission, specifically by challenging you, encouraging you, and equipping you to undertake an active role in this mission with your family, friends, neighbors, work associates, and community.

An essential ingredient to successfully executing this mission is understanding and communicating the right message. That message is the one and only true gospel. The question I am asking of you this morning is do you know how to clearly communicate that message? If you do, then you have the power to fulfill the mission. If you do not have the message, or you don't know how to clearly communicate that message, you will be impaired in the execution of the mission.

We have a mission field. It includes the whole world. However, I want to talk this morning about the specific mission field of the greater southern Ohio/TriState area. To effectively fulfill our mission regionally, we must understand our regional culture. This is where we live, and I see huge opportunities for our church. As I consider our region, I am also burdened, at times to the point of tears. Over the last twenty or so years, I have had countless spiritual conversations with people that live in this Tri-State area. Many of these conversations happen in the context of my role as a Biblical Counselor. Others have occurred from my interactions with people as a consultant and business coach. Some others have been with family and friends. I have had countless discussions with people about spirituality, theology, Christianity, and church related matters. My burden from these conversations is the reason I chose this topic for this message today.

This is where we live; Wheelersburg, Scioto County, southern Ohio, the TriState area. Here's a synopsis of these conversations. The majority of people that I talk to in this area believe in God. Most would identify that God as the Christian God – the God related to Jesus Christ and the Christian Bible. Many have a loose association with a church of some kind. If they are not personally active in a church, they usually have family members or friends that are active participants in a local church. This area is rampant with people that attach themselves to some version of Christianity. It is a significant part of our regional culture. I know there are also many that know very little about church, the Bible, and Jesus. However, it is my impression that most people that have grown up in this area generally hold some basic beliefs about God, Jesus Christ and Christianity.

This is the challenge in the fulfillment of our regional mission. We are surrounded by people that are familiar with a Christian words and phrases, but often have no understanding of what it all means. As a result, they have a form of godliness, a veneer of Christianity, but no power, no true connection and relationship with the living God. They have religious information and experiences, but lack true transformation. This is because they have accepted a substitute gospel; an insidious counterfeit message that parades as the truth. On the surface, it looks and sounds like the real thing. However, when you take a closer look, and ask questions, it in fact is a message of religious works and self-righteousness, devoid of true grace, that keeps people deceived into a false hope and feeling that they are probably ok. They are trusting in a religious decision they made in the past, an aisle that

they walked, a prayer that they prayed, a feeling they have, or a church affiliation. They profess a belief in Jesus, but sadly it is a Jesus of their own making. This Southern Ohio cultural Christianity is often tied to family church and tradition, so it feels right. Although different churches have different versions, each carries an insidious deadly message of human effort devoid of the saving grace of God.

I want to also affirm that I have met many strong believers in this area that trust in the saving grace and work of Christ for their salvation. Sadly, these folks are the exception.

So now I want to ask you a question that I have posed to many people over the last twenty or so years. I have asked many, and now ask you, why do you believe you a Christian? Why do you believe that God accepts you as His child? I believe I am a Christian and God accepts me because _____. Take a minute and fill in your answer. In fact, if you have a pen or pencil handy, I would like you to jot down your answer to that question. Now I want to share several responses to that question that I have heard over the past years:

I believe I am a Christian and God accepts me because I have always believed in Him. I was raised to follow and trust God and Jesus and the Bible. I go to church, I've been baptized, and I prayed and asked Jesus into my heart. I pray often and ask God for His forgiveness and help, and I try my best to live for Him.

I believe I am a Christian and God accepts me because I have decided to follow Jesus. I do my best to love my family and other people and even my enemies. I always ask what would Jesus do, and do that. I am a Christian because I follow Jesus.

I believe I am a Christian and God accepts me because I try to live right. I stay away from alcohol, and have quit smoking. I'm not perfect, but when I mess up I ask God to forgive me. I don't go to church real often, but I pray all the time and ask God for help. There are people that go to church and call themselves Christians, but they still drink and cuss and don't live it.

I believe my son is a Christian and God accepts him because he went forward in church and gave himself to God and was baptized. Right now he's not living for the Lord, but I am praying that God will bring him back to church.

I believe I am a Christian and God accepts me because I try to walk close to Him every day. I repented from my sins and now I try to live for God. I worry that I won't be able to keep it up, and I know the devil is there to bring me down, but right now I'm doing pretty good. I go and pray at the altar all the time and ask God to keep me strong so I won't fall back into the world and my old ways.

I believe God will accept me into heaven because He is loving and forgiving and understands that no one is perfect. He knows that I have a good heart, and that I do love Him and other people and try to follow what the Bible teaches. I do more good than bad, and what matters is that I love Him and other people.

I believe I am a Christian and God accepts me because I feel the spirit. I sense His presence in my life. God speaks to me and leads me when I ask Him. There are special times when I feel really close to him, like when I sing his praises, and when I pray. I know I am a Christian because I have Jesus in my life. He is my best friend and I can feel His presence.

I believe I am a Christian and God accepts me because I attend mass, am a member of the true church, take communion, and regularly confess my sins to a priest. Being a Christian is following the teachings of Christ's church, doing good, and loving people.

I believe I am a Christian and God accepts me because I have His Spirit and speak in tongues, I praise Him, have repented of my sins, and have been baptized.

As you listen to these responses, how well do you believe that these individuals understand the gospel? What is the gospel that they have received, and is it the true gospel? As I talked with these folks, many of them were familiar with gospel phrases, like saying that Jesus died for sins, and that the blood of Jesus washes away sin. Most of them had heard John 3:16. They believe in amazing grace, probably because they had sung the song! Yet, when I asked them what it means to be saved, and why did Jesus have to die on the cross, and what is justification, or why did John the Baptist refer to Jesus as the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, in 30 some years of conversations I can count on one hand people that responded with a clear understanding of basic gospel concepts. They were familiar with the rhetoric and the phrases, but had little to no understanding of the substance and meaning.

Do you think that I am being unkind and judgmental? Is it loving and appropriate for us to question someone's Christianity? Who are we to set ourselves up and question other's personal faith and belief? Those are legitimate questions. We are not the judge. We do not know the hearts of men. However, I believe the fear of being unkind and hurting feelings has kept many of us from asking other people difficult uncomfortable questions.

How did you feel when I asked you to write down why you believe you are Christian and accepted by God? I am first of all questioning your belief and understanding of the gospel. It is imperative that each of us gain crystal clarity on this message before we try to help others. I am calling on you as my brothers and sisters not to be ashamed of the gospel. The gospel message is the power of salvation to those who believe. The true gospel is the one and only message that can reveal the means for a person to obtain the righteousness he or she needs to be accepted by a holy God.

The reality is the eternal destination of human lives is at stake. Their relationship and standing before a holy God is the issue. As the church of the living God, we hold in our hands the keys to unlock the door to the kingdom of God! We have been given the message that God uses to produce saving faith. My first question for you is do you know and understand this message, and secondly, are you confident and ready to communicate this message to others? How would you respond to the comments that I have heard from these folks?

The apostle Paul wrote the letter to the Romans for this very reason, to clearly expound this glorious gospel. It is perhaps the clearest exposition of this message. For the remainder of our time together, I want to take you through an overview of the fundamental components of the gospel. For many, this may just be an encouraging review. But I'm not naïve. There may be several people here this morning that have never heard or understood this transforming message. And all of us must keep this message fresh and new so that we are ready when the opportunity comes.

To fulfill our mission, we need to have a thorough understanding and ability to communicate the message of the gospel. Let's look at some basic gospel doctrine.

First, let's consider "What is the gospel?" The Gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ, the eternal righteous Son of God, came to earth, lived a perfect life of obedience, died upon the cross of Calvary for sinners, and rose again from the dead. Through his work, Jesus Christ alone provides both forgiveness from one's sins and presents one as righteous before God the Father.

The classic passage on the gospel can be found in I Corinthians 15:1-8:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.

Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Note that the gospel is the good news concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, and what He has done to save sinners. It is the work of God. The message of the gospel is objective factual truth that is distinct from our response. The gospel is all about Jesus Christ and His work. As the gospel is proclaimed and explained, the Spirit of God quickens those that the Father has chosen from eternity past, and in a moment, that spiritually dead person is brought to life, and they are enabled to understand that they are a sinner, and in need of a Savior. They understand the significance and purpose for what Christ did. When they understand that He died for their sin, in simple trust and believe they call on Him and are saved. And for us participate in this amazing ministry, we must understand the gospel so that we can clearly proclaim it.

To help you do that, I want to take a brief look at five elements as they relate to the gospel. They are the doctrine of God, the doctrine of Christ, the doctrine of man, the doctrine of sin, and finally the doctrine of justification. This is by no means comprehensive. It is a basic overview of some of the essential elements of the gospel message.

The first essential element for a true understanding of the Gospel is a Biblical concept of the nature and person of God. A sinner needs to understand that God is not just a bigger version of himself (the man upstairs), but that He is transcendent. He must understand that God is the creator and sustainer of all matter and life, and therefore has the right to demand and require the creature's obedience and loyalty. Revelation 4:11 states it this way:¹¹ *"You are worthy, our Lord and God to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."* We must help people understand that because God is our Creator, He is worthy of our obedience and life. They must also understand that God is perfectly righteous and holy, and that to have a relationship with Him, we must be righteous and holy. I often take people to the Sermon on the Mount to help them come this realization. As I take them through the teaching of Jesus, they begin to realize that God's requirement and standard is Himself. They see that God requires a righteousness that is well beyond their ability. If you have unjust anger, God judges you as guilty of murder. If you have lustful desire for a person that is not your spouse, you are guilty of adultery. If you don't love everyone, including your enemies, you fall short of the standard of perfection, which is the requirement to be righteous before a perfect God. He can accept nothing less than perfection. We must also help them see that Jesus referred to God as Father – a Father that seeks and saves the lost.

This understanding of the true God leads to understanding the person and work of Christ, which is the essence of the gospel. Christ is the perfect and true revelation of God. He is eternal, and co-existent with the Father and the Spirit. Christ took on humanity, and laid aside His divine prerogative. He never ceased to be God, but took on the form of a man so that He could bear the penalty for our sin and be the sacrifice needed to satisfy the righteous requirements of God on our behalf. He is fully man and fully God. The very core of the gospel is Christ's redemptive work, that Christ died to redeem the elect of God. Through His death, Christ paid the penalty for sin, not His own, for He was sinless, but the sins of all those who put their full faith and trust in Him. His death satisfied the righteous requirements of the law. In His death, Christ took the place of sinners.

Their sin was imputed to Christ, and Christ's righteousness was imputed to them. II Cor 5:21 sums this up well: ²¹ *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God;* Finally, the Scripture assert that Christ is coming back, and when He returns He will judge every man according to his works.

I want to take a break here and ask you to be real honest. Do you understand what I am saying, or is this a bit difficult to comprehend? Many of the folks that I speak with that profess to be Christians do not understand this information. That is why it is so important for us to be patient, and listen, and meet people where they are. This is what is lacking in our region...the careful, kind explanation and exposition of these life changing truths.

This next concept is where you really need to slow down and engage. This is where many so-called churches miss it. It is understanding who we are. What do the scriptures teach about man? The Bible teaches that Man is God's creation. (Genesis 2-3) Man is finite, limited, and weak, as opposed to God who is infinite and omnipotent. Man is flesh (out of the dust of the ground) as opposed to God who is spirit. Though man is flesh, he has a spirit, being created in the image of God (Gen 2:7). God breathed life (spirit) into man's body that was made from the dust, and man became a living soul. Because he is in God's image, he is distinct from the animal creation. As such, man is moral, that is, he has a conscience and an understanding of right and wrong. He can reason, and has the ability to make moral choices. Man's ability to choose makes him morally responsible. The first man, Adam, chose to disobey God, and became a sinner and guilty of God's judgment. This sentence of judgment is passed to Adam and his descendents is physical and spiritual death. All men thereafter, as descendents of Adam, are sinners by nature and born into this world under God's judgment. This sinful nature (total depravity) manifests itself in sinful actions, motives, and choices. Apart from God's grace, no person seeks God, but each one is totally consumed with themselves and their selfish desires.

This leads us to another key concept, the doctrine of sin. Sin is the root of all of man's problems. Man is a sinner by nature (through Adam) and a sinner by choice (the outward actions based on that nature). Sin needs to be understood as an offense first and foremost to God. It is a falling short of God's standard. Because of our sin, we are guilty before a holy God. We need to help counselees understand that sin is at the heart and root of man's problems. For the counselee to change, he must first see the need for change, and understand where he has missed the mark. To confess sin is to agree with God concerning sin. It is an admission of guilt. But we don't need to despair. God has provided the remedy for sin, which brings great hope. In fact, we can joyfully proclaim that God the Father laid on Jesus Christ the guilt and punishment for our sin if we belong to Him and trust Him for salvation and forgiveness. And Christ not only has taken the penalty of sin through His substitutionary death, He stands ready to help us in our struggle with temptation and sin. Sin needs to be exposed, confessed, and forsaken.

This brings us to the premier doctrine of salvation, the doctrine of justification. The doctrine of justification answers the question, "How can a sinner be righteous and therefore accepted and in fellowship with a holy God." Here is a definition for justification: Justification is that act whereby God, on the sole basis of Jesus Christ's redemptive work, declares sinners not only as forgiven, but also as righteous before God. READ ROMANS 5:1-2; 6-11

To be justified is to have a right standing before God. It is being counted righteous and without sin. The Scriptures assert that the sole means of obtaining this type of righteousness is through faith in Christ. Because we are sinners, we are spiritually bankrupt. We have nothing good to offer to obtain righteousness and merit God's favor. All of our good works and religious effort are filthy rags. Our only hope of being right before God is to have the righteousness of Christ credited to us. That transaction of being declared righteous by God

happens only when we abandon all of our own efforts to be righteous, admit our guilty and helpless state, a cry out in faith to God for mercy, trusting only in the death and resurrection of His Son.

In this tri-state area, there is much confusion concerning sanctification and justification. Both are the work of God, but are different aspects of our salvation. Justification is all of God. We have no part in our justification but to believe. And according to Ephesians 2:8-10, even that faith does not come from us, but is a gift of God's sovereign grace. Justification is a one-time act of God that occurs the moment we believe in Christ.

Positionally, we are also sanctified at that same moment. To sanctify is the set apart. We are set apart from the world, and effectually called to God, being redeemed and purchased by the work of Christ on our behalf. Being justified and set apart, then we begin the process of spiritual growth, which is an on-going outworking of our salvation. We are conformed outwardly more and more to the inward reality that has already taken place.

READ ROMANS 12:1-2 This progressive sanctification follows justification, which is evidenced by faith and repentance. The believer must understand that this putting off of sinful habits and putting on of righteous behavior does not merit God's favor, but is rather enabled by His favor which was a free gift that He chose to bestow upon us. Even the ability to grow and change comes through the power of the Holy Spirit and is a gift of grace, not just mere human effort. We are not saved by good works, but rather, we are saved by grace to do good works. Ultimately we will be totally sanctified when we see Him. We will be changed to be like Him when we see Him. Wow!

So this brings us full circle to our mission and our mission field. Here is the application of this message for you.

1. Perhaps today as you have considered this glorious gospel, you have come to an awareness that you have been trusting in something other than the work of Christ for your salvation and acceptance by God. My instruction to you is quite simple. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved. Believe in His life, His death, and His resurrection. Believe and trust in this holy One of God who came to rescue sinners. Believe in this One who gave His life as a ransom payment to free sinners from their bondage and bring them back to God. Believe in the One who was spit upon, and cursed, and rejected, and despised – not because He deserved such treatment, for He was sinless and perfect – but rather because He accepted such treatment as the just punishment for our sins. Cry out to this One who died for sinners, and ask Him to rescue you from your sins. Surely He will hear and answer and save!!! Lay down your proud and pathetic efforts to please and appease your Creator. He will only be satisfied and pleased with the performance of One, His Son.
2. Now to those who are trusting in Christ alone for your salvation, to those who have abandoned all their feeble and impotent works, and now are clinging only to the righteousness that comes by faith alone, to you I give this advice: Immerse your thoughts, your life, your passion, your purpose, everything you have, everything you are, with this message and this mission. I exhort you to take up a vigorous and passionate prayerful study of Jesus, our beautiful Savior, the One who came and gave His life for sinners, the One that alone stands in the gap, and is worthy of praise and honor and glory. Is He not worthy of our attention? Should we not dedicate the fullness of our thoughts to understanding and comprehending who He is and what He has done and what He will do? For His sake, for His plan, for His church, and for His purposes, I implore you, my brothers and sisters, to begin a fresh study to show thyself approved, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, to be one who can rightly divide the Word of God. I call you to love the truth, to cherish the understanding and meditation of the Scriptures, the Word of God that shows us Jesus. I call you to love the Lord with your whole mind and intellect. I am persuaded if we will be filled with mind of Christ, there will be abundant opportunities to speak the truth in love, to proclaim the wonders and glories of our Savior, to speak clearly and passionately to other of

His deep, deep love and mercy.

3. Finally, to you who are thinking, that sounds wonderful, but I look at myself, and my weakness, and my lack of ability to reason and to speak, and I am overwhelmed and intimidated by such a call. Brothers and sisters, I recognize that we are all gifted differently, and that God uses each of us in our giftedness to fulfill our mission. With that said, I think that it is important for each of us strive to fully embrace and understand the message of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. For sure, some among us are more gifted in the explanation, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel. Perhaps you just don't feel like you are able to explain this message well. I would say that there is still much that you can and must do in the execution of this mission. Don't talk and think about what you cannot do, but rather, ask the Lord what you can do. You can bring thirsty souls to the water hole!! There are many here that would be glad to answer questions and engage in spiritual counsel with those who are seeking. Invite your friends and family to come to the body of Christ, and receive the grace that comes from His church. Bring them to your Sunday School class. Ask a brother or sister if they would come and meet with you and your friend or family member for a conversation. In other words, all of us must open our eyes, and see the opportunity, and bring the hungry to the food, and the thirsty to the water. "Would you like to know more?" is the only question you need to ask. What can you do? You can pray for the Lord of harvest to send laborers into the field. What can you do? You can reach out and love people in Jesus' name, and then bring them to hear the words of life, the very words of this gospel. Brother and sisters, we have been give the very words of life. We have the way the truth and the life. Let's love and appreciate it. And God forbid that we keep it to ourselves and not share it with others.