

Why Don't We Share the Gospel? We Don't Know It

1 Corinthians 15:1-8
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One week removed from Easter, it is very appropriate that we begin a three-part series that is focused on the Gospel. This series is a bit different than you might expect, beginning with its title: "Why Don't We Share the Gospel?"

The inspiration for this series comes from a *USA Today* article now more than a year old, but as relevant today as it was when it was first published. The headline made me do a double-take: "Southern Baptists Urge Their Members to Evangelize More."

The accompanying article shared a very frank assessment of Southern Baptists' efforts—or rather, lack thereof—to share the Gospel with others. Ed Stetzer, the director of Lifeway Research, which is affiliated with Southern Baptist denomination, had this to say: "Baptists like to talk more about evangelism than to actually do it."

The article also revealed the results of some research Stetzer's group had done regarding the ways in which people were willing to receive information about Jesus. According to the study, there were only two ways that a majority of people were willing to hear about Jesus: 1. In a personal conversation with a family member (63 percent) and, 2. In a personal conversation with a friend or neighbor from the church (56 percent). What's more, 13 other ways of sharing information about Jesus—including things like print advertising, notes on the door, billboards, radio and television advertising, and high-tech online efforts "were clearly rebuffed."

The moral of the story is that there are people who are more than willing to hear about Jesus from us, but we don't seem to be willing to share. And that got me wondering why. Why is it that we don't share the Gospel? (You now see where the series title comes from.) And through my own unscientific methods of deduction and prayer, I came up with three answers to the question, and we'll be dealing with the first of them this morning.

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you didn't know what you needed to know, and it caused a big problem for you? Well, Charles Wright can relate. Wright, working as an Adair County, Ky., deputy, had the privilege of staffing the county's brand new judicial complex last month on the first day it was open to the public. Apparently, though, there were some very important things that Wright did not know. For example, Wright wasn't familiar with how the holding cells in the basement of the new facility worked, and accidentally locked himself inside one. Wright also did not know that he could call for help. Since he suffers from claustrophobia, Wright began to panic. He was discovered by fellow deputies after he tried to shoot his way out of the cell. Wright is now a former Adair County deputy, and must pay for the damage he caused to the cell. His new nickname around town is "Barney Fife."

We can all relate to Charles Wright to some extent when it comes to life in general: we didn't know something we either should have or really needed to in a particular situation. If we're honest, I think

we'd probably say the same is true in regard to faith. One of the reasons we don't share the Gospel is because we simply don't know it.

Now you might think by saying that we don't know the Gospel, I am trying to shame or embarrass you. That isn't the case, though. I am simply giving a truthful answer to the question this sermon series presents. At one time or another, we have all found ourselves in a situation where we were faced with a question or opportunity to share about Jesus and we didn't know what to say. We didn't know.

At the same time, I don't want you to think I am minimizing the issue. It is important that we can and do share the Gospel with others. But if we cannot articulate the Gospel to others, or if we refuse to share it because we are unsure of what it is, it might be fair to ask if we've actually believed it. In other words, can we truly believe something we don't really know? When it comes to the Gospel, knowing is believing.

Interestingly enough, the Apostle Paul addressed a similar situation with the Corinthians. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 15:1-8.

15 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. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After 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. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

I taught a men's Bible study that met Thursday mornings during the school year at 6:30 a.m. The study generally attracted about 20 guys, and most of them were retired. (Only retired people and seminary students get up early enough to be at a 6:30 a.m. Bible study.) As you might imagine, many of the men gathered had been Christians for some time, but they still looked forward to digging into God's Word on a regular basis. It was a good group of guys.

Before I started teaching them, I asked if they had any suggestions for topics that they wanted to investigate, and one of the subjects they all wanted to know more about was sharing the Gospel. So, on the first Thursday morning of the group, we started a teaching series called "Back to Basics" and the first thing we did together was open to 1 Corinthians 15 and read the same passage we've just looked at this morning. When we were finished, I said to the guys assembled, "This is the Gospel."

And they were stunned.

I remember one guy saying, "Wow! I guess that's true." Other men offered up similar statements, and they generally expressed a sentiment of relief.

Why were the men so moved? Let's look again at the passage to maybe see what they saw that morning.

Beginning with v. 3, Paul provides a distinct outline of the Gospel which seems to naturally fall into three parts. In vv. 3-4, he gives us the first part of this important message: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures," and "he was buried." Though brief, this section says a great deal. First, it affirms the death of Jesus: "Christ died." This is a direct contradiction to those who have said over the years that Jesus did not really perish on the cross. The spear that pierced his side and revealed a flow of blood and water proved his death (John 19:34). Moreover, Jesus' death wasn't meaningless, nor did he die because he was a political opponent or rabble-rouser. Remember, Pilate could find no legitimate reason to crucify him (Luke 23:22). Instead, he died for our sins, receiving the just punishment that we deserve in our place. Not only that, Jesus' death was planned well in advance—it was foretold through the writings of the Old Testament (Isaiah 53)—as God revealed how he would intercede on our behalf. And, Jesus was buried. They did with his body what they would normally do with every other body: they placed it in a tomb.

In the second half of v. 4, we find the second part of the message: "he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." This section begins with probably the boldest claim of all: Jesus rose from the dead. The stone was rolled away and the tomb was empty. The grave wrappings had no one to cover. Jesus conquered both sin and death, and in rising from the dead his identity as Savior and Lord is confirmed. And just like his death, Jesus' resurrection wasn't a random act, but was spoken about hundreds of years beforehand through God's prophets (Isaiah 53:11).

Finally, in vv. 5-8, Paul gives us a laundry list of people Jesus appeared to after his resurrection: Peter, the Twelve, more than 500 people, James, the apostles, and then to Paul himself. We might think very little of this list, but it is as important as the other two parts of the message because it confirms eyewitness accounts of the risen Christ. These were people who said, "I saw the resurrected Jesus, and you can quote me." Note how Paul takes special care to note that most of the group of 500 was still alive. Paul's invitation is clear: "If you don't believe me, you can talk to any one of these others, and they will confirm what I've said." We don't have the luxury of being able to speak with living eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus, but we do have some of their writings here in the New Testament, and we have other, non-Biblical sources that talk about Jesus and his followers.

So why were my Bible study friends so stunned and relieved? In their desire to share the Gospel, they had actually forgotten it. They, like many of us, had gotten caught up in how they were going to convince their listeners, or when the right time was to share. They were looking for that foolproof method of winning someone to Christ. But what came as relief to them—and should to us as well—is that our faith isn't based on an emotional appeal or a strong-arm tactic. Becoming a follower of Christ has nothing to do with following a particular method of evangelism. Being a Christian means believing the truth about Jesus because the Gospel is historical fact. And while there may be things we could add as we share the Gospel with someone else—that God loves us, or how God has worked in our lives—the heart of the Gospel was, is and always will remain this: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and was buried. He rose from the dead on the third day according to the Scriptures. And he physically appeared before many eyewitnesses who went on the record to say they really did see him. We don't have to tweak it, dress it up or sugarcoat it. It stands on its own.

Understanding that the Gospel is, in fact, fact, we can now figure out why Paul places such an emphasis on having the Corinthians *know* the Gospel at the beginning of this passage. Since the Gospel isn't an opinion or a feeling or a method, we can't take it lightly or make it up as we go along. We need to know it, because knowing is believing. That's why, in v. 1, he tells the Corinthians he wants to remind them of the Gospel. Paul sharing the Gospel with his readers does not mean they aren't Christians—he definitely believes they are because he addresses them as “those sanctified in Christ” at the beginning of the letter—but the Gospel is too important to read once and think you have it. And if Paul is reminding them, it probably means that we need to be reminded of the Gospel as well. The good news about Jesus is not something we can become too familiar with.

There are other things in our lives that we need to be reminded of, even when we think we know them. We might easily list phone numbers and addresses here, but I'm thinking of things much deeper and more important, the kind of information that truly shapes our lives. For example, I know that my wife, Sara, loves me. When she first told me that she loved me, it was good news to me. We have been married now more than 15 years, have gone through the ups and downs nearly every couple goes through, and my wife still tells me that she loves me. And the fact that she has weathered 15 years with me and still loves me is probably better news now than when she first told me. But what if my wife went two or three days without telling me that she loves me? Well, I'd probably still believe that she loved me... But if it dragged on for a week or more, I'd probably grow more and more unsure of whether Sara actually did love me, in spite of a track record of 15 years of loving me. I need to be reminded. And if we need to be reminded regularly that our spouses or our parents or our kids love us, then how much more should we be reminded of the Gospel?

Paul continues to make a case for why we should know the Gospel in v. 1 when he says the Gospel is that “on which you have taken your stand.” The Gospel is our foundation as Christians. The truth that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, rose again according to the Scriptures, and was seen by many has—or at least should have—an effect on every area of our lives. Trusting in these historical facts is not only the basis of our faith, but it is what sets us apart from the rest of the world as well. For Paul's original audience, this would have resonated with them particularly, because being a Christian in the first century was a dangerous thing. In recognizing Jesus as the promised one of Scripture, they were acknowledging him as Lord. This made them an enemy of the Roman state, which said that Caesar was lord. It also made them the enemies of the Jews, who thought Christianity was a perversion of Judaism. And it set them at odds with those who worshiped the gods of Greek and Roman mythology.

But it wasn't just this life that came into play for those early believers. Believing the Gospel meant that they were staking their eternities on Jesus as well. When they chose to follow Christ, the early believers were not only choosing a faith that was essentially illegal, but they going against the grain of the world they lived in and rejecting all of the other “accepted” religious options out there. They were saying that Jesus was the one, true way in the face of great opposition. In the first century, being a follower of Christ was not for the faint of heart.

It shouldn't be for us today, either. Even though we face very few threats to following Christ here in the United States, it does not mean we should overlook the consequences of trusting him. When we believe the Gospel, we are declaring that Jesus is Lord of our lives, and rejecting the counterfeit gods of our culture, such as fame, money and materialism. We are also rejecting the pluralism of our

society as well: all roads do not lead to Rome, and only one of them goes to heaven. And if Jesus is Lord, then it means we are to obey him, not follow an ethic of personal choice or convenience. With all of this hanging in the balance, do we dare not know the Gospel?

Paul closes his argument for why we should know the Gospel with a warning in v. 2: "By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I have preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain." Commentator Leon Morris explains it this way:

If people profess to believe the Gospel, but have not given due consideration to what that implies and what it demands, they do not really trust Christ. Their belief is groundless and empty. They lack saving faith.

It is said that two of the most serious (and often-times stressful) things we can do in our lives is buy a home and take a job or change jobs. Have you ever heard of someone buying a home without knowing at least a little bit about its condition, or signing purchase papers without knowing what's in the agreement? I'm sure it's probably been done, and that John Rockey could tell us some stories, but if you knew someone who did that, you might tell them they were crazy to their face. Would you take a job where you did not know what you were going to be responsible for doing or how much you would be compensated? Not likely. We would probably never take either of these things lightly. Now, mentally, compare following Jesus on the serious scale with homes and jobs. Compare eternity with something you might sell or quit. Would you stake your very life on something you really didn't know? We need to know the very heart of our faith. We need to know the Gospel. Because knowing is believing.

Back in December, in the 33 AD Sunday school class, we started the morning by asking a single person if he or she knew the content of Gospel. On that particular morning, the person could not answer the question, so we turned to 1 Corinthians 15 and reviewed the Gospel. Then I asked the group to put themselves in the shoes of a non-Christian, and asked them what their reaction would be if they approached a person who identified him- or herself as a Christian, but could not share what he or she believed. Courtney Callender raised her hand and said, "I would think that person didn't take his or her faith very seriously."

Let's not allow that to be us. Let's, as Paul said, "hold firmly" onto the Gospel. It is too important for us to treat it lightly. Let's remind ourselves of it, live according to it, and commit to knowing it, because knowing is believing.