

YAMs

Summer Midweek 2010



The Gospel, The Culture and The Church:
a radical reformation



yams summer midweek 2010 | wednesdays @ 6 p.m.

Week Four:

Misperceptions: what the culture (wrongly) thinks about the gospel



covenant chapel

MISPERCEPTIONS:

This week we're going to talk about misperceptions: what the culture wrongly thinks about the gospel. Whereas last week we looked at some sad, yet accurate perceptions the culture has of the *Church*, this week, we're going to focus more on actual truths of the *Gospel* that are generally offensive and therefore are rejected by many people in our culture.

There are a lot of Gospel truths that can be misunderstood or offensive – too many to deal with at once. So we will look at a few of the major misperceptions:

Some of the biggest misperceptions:

- The Gospel is a crutch –a series of self-help prescriptions for weak people
- The truth of the Gospel is opposed to knowledge
- The Bible is a book of morals, but not the inspired Word of God.
- The God of Christianity, Islam and Judaism are the same god.
- A loving God could never condemn people to hell
- Jesus is just one of many ways to heaven
- The Gospel has no relevance for life in today's world

Though we could spend a week on each of these separately, let's look at each one a little more closely. And as we do, let's try to look at these things from the perspective of a person who doesn't have familiarity with the Church or the Gospel.

#1: The Gospel is a crutch –a series of self-help prescriptions for weak people

Short Answer: Contrary to popular opinion, the Gospel actually promises hardship in this life (John 16:33). Moreover, we are all weak people in one regard or another – even if the only thing we are willing to acknowledge is that we have weak bodies that will someday die. So since all people are weak, the Gospel is for all people. But the Gospel is less about prescriptions for weak people and more about a powerful God who saves. In response, the true Gospel is then a call to a much more difficult life including suffering, persecution, crises of faith, perseverance, hope and faith.

For an easy example, see Paul's words in **2 Corinthians 11:23-27**:

"I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the

country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”

In terms of power and strength and status, Paul was doing just fine before he met Jesus. It was after his repentance and conversion that his life was met by persecution and hardship.

There’s a common phrase about the Gospel that has circulated through the American Church – “even if I’m wrong, at least I’ve lived a good life.” But this is so contrary to what the Bible actually teaches. Paul says the following in

1 Corinthians 15:16-19:

“For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.”

Notice – we are to be pitied if we are wrong. Doesn’t that imply that the Christian life is difficult and uncomfortable? What would there be to pity if following Jesus was just about good moral behavior? Instead, we are to be people who proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus in all our words and actions.

#2: The truth of the Gospel is opposed to knowledge

Short Answer: While the gospel is ultimately based on faith, faith is not opposed to knowledge. Knowledge is not the opposite of faith; sight is. The true gospel demands accurate thinking, understanding and knowledge.

For example, **1 Thessalonians 5:19-22** says, “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. *Test everything*. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.

We are called to test everything – to seek truth. God would not call us to that if he wasn’t the source of all truth. In fact, religions that prevent or discourage people from asking questions and testing things are often afraid there is a greater, better truth to find. Do some research on the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Watchtower, its oversight organization, and you’ll see what I mean.

Unfortunately, Christians have made this same error countless times out of fear. Think Catholic Church circa 1500 after the printing press was invented. Christians have often opposed advances in knowledge for fear that advanced knowledge is opposed to faith. But as followers of Jesus, we need not fear knowledge. Instead, we should recognize that knowledge itself is a gift of God and therefore we should seek to think and know well and accurately.

Occasionally, people carry this misperception because of an incorrect understanding of the Fall in Genesis. But don't misunderstand the fall in the Garden – knowledge was not the sin, the desire to be equal or greater than God and the subsequent blatant rebellion against his command was.

Though true, we must avoid the “God said it, I believe it, matter settled” approach. (we usually do that out of frustration and not having a good answer or retort. Now it is very true that we cannot understand the full mind and plan of God, but we must seek to understand as much as we can and explain it to others.

#3: The Bible is a book of morals, not the inspired Word of God.

Short Answer: Jesus is either right in his teachings, or he's absolutely crazy. As C.S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*, he is Liar, Lunatic or Lord. There is no room for a strange middle ground here. We either have to accept his words or write them all off as the babblings of an insane man.

The Bible itself attests to the fact that it is the Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16). This was clearly the belief of the early Church and of the men the Holy Spirit inspired to write the words of Scripture. But there is also much external attestation to the historical reliability of the Bible:

- The historical and archeological accuracy of the Bible. Thousands of sites found that are referenced in the Bible. And nearly every objective archeologist will say that there has never been a find that has contradicted a biblical reference.
- The prophetic accuracy of the Bible. In addition to accurate prophecies about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there are prophecies about kingdoms and rulers fulfilled in years since.
- The longevity of the Bible. It has been preserved for generations without changing the content. Contrast the Book of Mormon which – after only 200 years – has changed content to remove some historical errors.
- Manuscript evidence. The Bible, and particularly the New Testament, has thousands of handwritten copies, far more than any other ancient books.
- Internal consistency. Jesus quoted the Old Testament as the reliable Word of God. The Old Testament points forward to Jesus. The New Testament is a record of the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection and the establishment of His Church. If we believe Jesus actually died and rose again, as the Bible teaches, we can trust his teachings and the rest of the Bible. If not true, the claims of the Bible are ridiculous.

Another great point (courtesy of Tim Keller): If the Bible were a moral book; a product of one culture's view on the best way to live, wouldn't there be at least one culture who was not offended by the Gospel message? The fact that the Gospel message in the Bible is offensive in some way to *every* culture is a strong

argument that the material included in it comes from a transcendent God is not a merely human product.

#4: The God of Christianity, Islam and Judaism are the same god – why all the fighting?

Short Answer: Historically this is essentially true. All three faiths trace their roots to Abraham. That's where Islam splits from Christianity and Judaism. Then Judaism and Christianity continue on until Christ becomes the divisive issue. But there is a huge difference between the God we worship and the gods those religions worship – especially in light of the Trinity. If we believe the Bible, Jesus is God. Orthodox Judaism and Islam do not believe that. So to say we worship the same god is not accurate.

With so many faith-based wars today and throughout history, many people are beginning to embrace this belief. The "Coexist" campaign and bumper stickers are one example of this. And it is true that we should learn to coexist with people of other religions and not aimlessly seek enmity with them. But it is important to not blur the lines here and begin thinking we have the same major beliefs with a few minor differences. That is not true.

The Bible teaches Jesus is eternal and equal in divinity to God (John 1, John 8, etc.). This is why it's important for people to consider Jesus and not just "God". "God" is far less offensive because people can read in their own interpretations. But the key issue, and what matters most in light of eternity, is what you do with Jesus.

So when you engage the culture with the gospel, don't speak abstractly using the term "God". You probably won't think of the same thing as the other person and you'll get lost in translation.

#5: A loving God could never condemn people to hell

Short Answer: In order to wrestle with this difficult truth, a person must accept and understand that man is not inherently good. Otherwise, he or she will never understand why God's holiness and perfection prevents him from tolerating or excusing sin without penalty. In reality, if we recognize the rebellion and sinfulness inherent to all men, it is far more surprising that God would *save* anyone.

The Bible teaches that all are sinful and without excuse in **Romans 1:19-21**:
"Since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without

excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

Because all are sinful and all are without excuse, God would be completely justified in condemning all people to Hell. But He doesn't do that. In love he saves some from this deserved destiny.

If not for Jesus, this misperception would have much more traction. Jesus is the answer to this seemingly dualistic nature of God: that He is perfectly loving and perfectly just simultaneously. Jesus was the only way a loving God could also be perfectly just. Jesus' death and resurrection offers salvation to all who would believe (God's love) meaning that those who do not are without excuse (God's justice).

On a side note, Christianity is the only religion with an answer for this seemingly dualistic nature of God. Apart from Jesus, it is impossible to have a God who is completely loving and completely just.

#6: Jesus is just one of many ways to heaven

Short Answer: In his own words and teachings, Jesus doesn't give people this option (John 14:6). Other religions might teach "all roads lead to God," but we should not impose that view to Jesus and Christianity when he clearly taught the opposite.

Jesus' teachings vary greatly from other religions and worldviews. You would need to radically alter his teachings in order to make them line up with other view what happens after death.

Some people claim that Jesus is one of many ways because that is a far less offensive belief. They claim Jesus is too exclusive if he is the only way. But the reality is that everyone, absolutely everyone, makes an exclusive claim that requires faith to believe. Even the belief that there are many valid beliefs is an exclusive statement requiring faith. It excludes the view that Jesus' exclusive claim is true.

So the issue then is not exclusivity, but the object of our faith. Since we all make an exclusive claim, we need to consider what we are claiming. In Christianity, we stake our lives and eternities on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

#7: The Gospel has no relevance for life in today's world

Short Answer: This objection might be the easiest to discuss without scientific or theological or philosophical background. You have hopefully seen the relevance of the gospel to your own life in things like: difficult circumstances, true joy, and teachings about marriage, raising children, interacting with other people, etc. Your life following Jesus is a testament to the relevance of the Gospel.

Open and honest dialogue about this topic will usually help people see that the gospel does have relevance in today's world. But something to consider as you do that: What do your examples communicate about the Gospel? If all your examples are about your great marriage, family, etc., you may communicate that the Gospel means Jesus gives you what you want. In reality, Jesus is not a means to another end. He is the end – the amazing hope and truth of the Gospel is that, when it's all said and done, we get Jesus.

So another incredibly relevant aspect of the Gospel is that it makes bold, exclusive claims about what happens at the end of life, the purpose of life and the principles of living life to the full (John 10:10). These are all questions people of every generation throughout history must wrestle with.

An important note about apologetics:

We often worry about having conversations about these topics for fear that we won't have the answers we need to "combat" other viewpoints. We put pressure on ourselves, incorrectly thinking that "if I don't have a good answer for this, I fail in this conversation." But we have to remember that we are not responsible for changing the hearts of others; God is. The Gospel message itself has inherent power to transform lives (Romans 1:16). We are to be faithful to speak the truth of the Gospel in love. God does the rest.

Several points about apologetics:

- It's OK not to have all the answers. In fact in some cases, it's better.
Most people in our culture assume all Christians are closed-minded know-it-alls. Almost always it will throw someone off if, when unsure of how to answer a question you're asked, you respond with something like, "you know, I'm not exactly sure on that – let me do a little studying and check on that and get back to you next time we talk."
- What about 1 Peter 3:15?
1 Peter 3:15 - "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

Notice in this verse it does not say "always be prepared to give an answer for everything you believe." People often misread and misquote this verse. We

are to always have an answer for why we have hope – because Jesus' life, death and resurrection means that what we see here on earth is not the end. We should seek to understand our faith, but it doesn't mean you have to be an apologetics scholar before you talk to other people.

- Test EVERYTHING – not just opposing viewpoints

Several years ago there was an email that got circulated about how scientists had discovered there was a "missing day" from the history of the world. The message went on to prove the missing day from Bible texts – talking about the day the sun stood still (Joshua 10). The problem is that this reasoning supposes we can actually determine the first day the earth existed. We would have to in order to calculate that a day was "missing." Though we can hypothesize, we cannot – especially to the day – determine that. When we cite this kind of false information as proof, we end up doing more damage to our credibility – making outsiders less willing and likely to listen to us as educated, intelligent people.

- Head follows Heart

Every single person who comes to have a relationship with Jesus does it first and foremost through their heart. Everyone. No exceptions. The mind, and knowledge always follow this heart change by the Holy Spirit. People with hard hearts will never be convinced to commit their lives to Christ by intellectual arguments. Think Pharaoh in Exodus 7.

Contrarily, think Paul's words in Ephesians 3 – "know this love that surpasses knowledge". The heart will always surpass the head when it comes to following Christ.

- Ultimately, it does come down to faith – and that's the point.

Matthew 13:14-16 (Isaiah 6:9-10) - In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.

Hopefully being aware of a few of the major misperceptions of Christianity will help you be prepared for conversations like this. And remember that the best context for these conversations is in a calm, non-hurried environment. Make sure you listen – really listen – to the thoughts and ideas of others.

Next week: Beginning Mission

Now that we've spent a few weeks seeking to understand our culture, we'll try to figure out what it looks like to engage people with the truth of the gospel. For next time, begin to think about opportunities to interact with people in our culture who don't know Jesus. What would that look like? Where can we begin?