

Acts 15:1-16:5 What is the Gospel?

On October 30, 1517 Martin Luther nailed to a door of a church in Germany a list of issues he had with the teaching of the church. It was the usual way of starting a discussion. A bit like posting a question on a discussion forum on a website. It was a crucial single event that became of immense importance. So much so that it affects the way we understand God and our relationships with him. The way we understand the Gospel. The good news of God to us in Jesus.

Luther was protesting against what he saw as the purchase and sale of salvation. The church was selling indulgences. Like a get out of jail free card. It would reduce the amount of time you would spend in purgatory. A place you would go if you hadn't done enough good works to make it to heaven. Here is the jingle that would be sung as they were being sold *"As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs."*

Luther had discovered through reading the Bible we could not save ourselves because of our sin. We could only be saved through the death of Jesus.

Reading through Acts we have seen Unstoppable Gospel moving forwards but there have been things happen that have been possible barriers. These have mostly been opposition to the messengers. In Acts 15 it is a threat to the **MESSAGE**. The worst of all.

The question I want to answer today is:-

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

The Gospel is that by grace alone through Jesus alone by faith alone we can be saved.

1. A DISPUTE

Read: 1-2

Luke tells us there was not only sharp dispute but also debate.

The word for sharp dispute is the word for a heated debate. Not talking about a couple people sharing their opinions. There were emotions running.

Clearly it is important to allow differences to surface between believers. It is crucial that those differences are expressed so solutions can be found.

Some church fights are worth fighting BUT it depends on the issue.

SO WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

2. THE ISSUE- THE GOSPEL

Read: 1, 5

A group is saying that Jesus is not enough. His death must be added to with circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses. Notice the difference a word can make. See in v.1 '**cannot**' and v. 5 '**must.**'

Jesus plus - Jesus circumcision - Jesus plus lawkeeping

They see the law as a **LADDER**. A ladder to climb to God. Rather than a way to express our love for God. They've got things around the wrong way. This is not trivial.

There are Closed hand and open issues. There are issues in that we hold in a 'closed hand' that we must not let go of. Issues like who Jesus is and that the Bible is God's Word and so the final authority on life and our beliefs. There are 'open hand' issues that we can be flexible with. Issues like when we have church, how we baptise and so on.

The Gospel is like the **captain of the ship**. It gives us our bearing and steers us the right way. Even a small change can result in a different destination. Turning the ship a few degrees at the beginning of the trip can mean the difference between arriving in England or Spain.

SO WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

3. THE GOSPEL IS...

Read: 6-11

The Gospel or good news is that by grace alone through Jesus alone by faith alone we can be saved.

Notice the grace in what Peter says. **V.6-8**

God made a choice - God accepted them - God purified their hearts.

It is all God's initiative. It is all of God.

v.11 It is through the grace of Jesus.

Then **James**:- God took the Gentiles as a people for himself.

Let me just tell what the Gospel is.

Firstly God made us. He made us to live for him and him alone.

We've sinned. Instead of living for him and him alone we live for ourselves. We swap God for us or stuff.

We turn good things in god but making them ultimate things. We have offended God. Our behaviour, our thinking, our speaking is offensive to God. A millions times over. So bad because we take everything we have from God to serve him and use it against him. This demands his righteous, just anger against us. There is no other right response.

BUT What does he do? He shows us GRACE. He gives us what we don't deserve. That is grace. Getting what you don't deserve. He sends His Son. Being fully God and fully man. God in Christ to earth. To deal with that anger. He dies and takes God's anger for us. He was a substitute. He took our sins.

He was buried and after 3 days **he rose again.** Showing his **victory over sin, satan and death.**

He ascended into heaven where he is ruling over all.

He will return to judge.

We have 2 options. To accept his gift of salvation and forgiveness or reject it face God in judgment for ever. That is the Gospel.

Hear what I'm not saying. I am not saying improve your life or become like one of us. Meet our standards. Live like us. Look like us. Dress like us. Or pull your socks up get your act together and you'll be right with God.

I am saying meet Jesus. Come and know him. Start a relationship with him. See your need for forgiveness because of your sin. Understand that through his death you can be forgiven now. Trust that his death was taking your sin.

You do get forgiveness, redemption, justification. But it is not the goodies that are the goal. Yes we get them and they are necessary. But the gospel is God in Jesus. We have a relationship with God in Jesus. We get a person. The forgiver. The redeemer. The justifier.

To worship God for the goodies is a bit like worshipping God like a dairy farmer likes his cow. He likes his cow for the milk it provides and so the source of income it is but he doesn't love his cow because he has a life giving, life transforming, hope giving relationship.

4. What THE GOSPEL IS NOT

The Gospel is not Jesus plus something.

There are some Jesus minus groups. Groups that taken a bit out of Jesus.

Jehovah Witnesses for example who take Jesus off the throne of God. He is not God.

Or Muslims who take Jesus off the cross.

The Jesus plus pattern is probably the most common. Who say **Jesus** isn't enough.

A group that has a Jesus plus teaching is the **Catholic Church.** Instead of teaching that salvation is a one off event based on the once for all sacrifice of Jesus they teach that salvation is a process. It begins at baptism and continues through religious practices called sacraments. Even at the end of life you are never necessarily completely forgiven. You may not have done enough. They are not satisfied with what Jesus has done. It is a denial of adequacy of the work of Jesus.

If you ever thought it was necessary to do something before or even after you are saved to be right with God just think about the **Thief on the cross**. He accepted Jesus for who he was and asked for salvation and Jesus promise it to him. Then he died. No chance of doing anything good.

One the most tragic parts of this Jesus plus teaching is that it robs you of any **ASSURANCE** of forgiveness. Any certainty that you have a relationship with God that will last for eternity.

The struggle to trust in grace along through Jesus by faith alone is as real today as it was in Acts 15 and at the Reformation. Not just for the organised church but for each of us every day. We ask, Isn't there something else I can do or be to be sure of God's approval? The struggle never ends. It's part of our inability to accept a gift. And even deeper than that: we want to be loved because of **what we do** for God or **how we feel**.

We often even rely on our **feelings** instead of trusting in the finished and so final work of Jesus. We trust in our fickle and subjective feelings. We make daily decision based on how we feel. We explain our decision in terms of our feelings. This would be ok if our feeling were reliable but they are not. We give our feelings final authority. So when we don't feel like we are closed to God we think we are not. Or when we don't feel like reading the Bible we don't. We drop ourselves on the emotional roller coast of life. We need to remind ourselves that our relationship with God is not based on our subjective feelings but on the objective truth of Jesus death. In response to hearing the Word of God we should ask – Do I believe this? Not how do I feel about this.

Or we trust in our **performance** instead of the performance of Jesus on the cross for us.

Have you seen people Spinning plates? They try and keep as many spinning as possible without them dropping to the ground and smashing. We can live our Christian lives like that. The plates we spin are different spiritual things or good works. If they crash we are hesitant to approach God. We don't think we are worthy to pray or read the Bible, come to church, wholeheartedly sing at church, tell others about Jesus. The flipside is also true. When we manage to spin a few plates we arrogantly boldly approach God .

Jesus came to save us from the tyranny of spinning plates.

If you are not a Christian – Will you accept the Gospel? Put your faith in the Gospel. Trust the Gospel. Come without any good works. Come without any religion. Come without fixing your life up first. Come with **ONLY** your SIN. That is all you have to offer.

This is not a **commercial transaction**. You are not coming to a **vending machine** where you put something and something falls out the bottom. It is a relationship. You are coming to a person – JESUS. Someone you have wronged. The only way back is to admit you've wronged him. Say sorry. Ask for forgiveness. Accept the gift of forgiveness. Then know you are forgiven through his death. Forgiven by grace alone through Jesus alone having put your trust alone in Jesus. Will you come?

If you are a Christian-

1. **Preach the Gospel**
2. **Learn the Gospel**
3. **Pray the Gospel**
4. **Study the Gospel**
5. **Live the Gospel**