

I. Intro

A. A few years ago, I got a call at 2:15 in the morning. Since calls at that time of day seldom bring good news, I wasn't surprised when the caller didn't introduce herself and simply said, "Miss Lilly wants to see you right away. Can you come?" I assumed minutes counted, dressed quickly and raced out the door.

1. Miss Lilly (not her name) was a ninety-year-old widow in failing health. Which isn't a great description of her, because it leads you to believe she was frail, and you would never use the words frail and Miss Lilly in the same sentence.

2. She was a very wealthy, very opinionated, spunky – even sassy - southern-born force of nature. She was never not in charge. But her health was failing, and she was a Christian, and so - I thought - I was being called in for her final moments. I expected to find her weak and in bed. She'd open her eyes briefly. Smile. I'd assure her of God's love. We'd pray together, I'd step out, and sometime in the next day or two she would pass away.

B. That is not what happened. Let me back up.

1. I first met Miss Lilly when she joined her son for an Easter service a couple years earlier. A few days after they attended, he called me and said, "My Mom's not very interested in spiritual things, but she enjoyed the service. Would you stop by and talk with her? She needs the Lord. Maybe she'll listen to you."

2. I get requests like this from time to time. They seldom go as hoped. Things with Miss Lilly were a bit different. They were even worse than normal. She knew why I was stopping by and expertly blocked every effort I made to talk about spiritual things.

3. If our conversations were a chess match – and they felt that way – I was in check-mate in about four moves.

4. On one occasion, Sheri and I were having dinner with her and one of her friends, a woman named Carter (which Miss Lilly pronounced Cah tah). When I attempted to turn the conversation in a spiritual direction, she replied, "Michael" (My-cal), I believe I've had a crush on you since the moment I saw you. But I declare, you act like a Baptist evangelist as soon as I drop my guard. It's too much." She then turned to her friend and said, "Cah tah, I'm redirecting this conversation. Do tell us more about that third husband of yours," All I could do was laugh. I was no match for Miss Lilly.

5. And then she surprised us all by surrendering her life to Christ. A physical therapist who was caring for her (who attends this church) shared the plan of salvation with her, and she asked Christ to be her Lord.

6. The next day she called me in a panic. "I have gone and done something! Oh my, oh my, I must have lost my mind. I need to see you right now."

7. When I got there, she reported, "I prayed a prayer and I believe it took. I have no idea what got into me. What did I do? Can you believe it? Did I do the right thing? Do tell me what you think!"

8. I told her that if she meant it, she had been reborn, and that God was now at work in her heart.

9. Over the next few weeks, we talked off and on. It was obvious that Christ was working in her life. It was also obvious that she was declining. And then I got this call at 2:15 in the morning. And as I said, I hurried over, hoping to arrive before she slipped away. I needn't have rushed. When I got there, I was escorted into the parlor, where I found Miss Lilly - in a dress - sitting at a table and scribbling notes on a pad of paper.

10. "So good of you to stop by," she said. "I hope you weren't busy. I thought we might talk about my funeral. I've decided you'll do the service. I want to be sure you say the right thing. Let's get to work. Would you like some tea?"

11. For a moment, I didn't move. Instead I glanced at hospice worker, the nurse and Miss Lilly's other staff – trying to understand what was going on. Their sheepish looks said, "We know it's 2 AM, and we know this could have waited until the morning. But have you ever tried to reason with her?"

12. And so I sat. It turned out her chief concern was that I might not be bold enough in what I said at her funeral. "I want to be sure you tell them that I'm in heaven," she said, "but not because I was nice. You might find this hard to believe but I have not always been nice. You need to make it clear that I am in heaven because of Jesus. You need to be sure you tell them about Jesus."

13. Miss Lilly wanted to be sure I shared the Gospel.

14. Which is assumed in Psalm 103, our passage today.

II. Last week was Psalm 1, which I argued was both an introduction to the Book of Psalms, and a meditation on meditation.

A. By the way, I got a few requests this week to talk more about meditation, so I have posted a few things in my Friday Email. If you do not get that you can go to Mike Woodruff.org and sign up or give me your email address.

B. At a high level I argued that the Book of Psalms is a collection of prayers God gives us as prayers to pray and models for how to pray. If you have not read them – and prayed them – you are in for a surprise. They are not vanilla platitudes. They are surprisingly real and raw and take us deeper into our own hearts than we'd ever go on our own.

C. I also noted that Psalm 1 makes it clear that we need to drive God's word deep into our heart where it can change us. Simply knowing the right thing is not enough. We need to drive the truth into our heart via the disciplines, such as Christian meditation.

D. Today we are looking at Psalm 103. You have heard it read and sung. I am particularly interested in verse 7, but let me start with one.

III. **V1: Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—**

A. Like Psalm 1, Ps. 103 is not a prayer. What we find here is King David – the author of this Psalm and many other Psalms - directing his thoughts. He is not praying to God, he is talking to himself, and telling himself how to think. He is speaking forcefully to his own heart and directing it, rather than simply following where it leads. This is not generally how many live today. We do not challenge our feelings, we validate them.

B. This is an example of meditation. Biblical meditation is not a relaxation technique. It is an effort to drive the Word of God deep into our heart where the Spirit of God can remake us. It is actively deciding what I am going to think about. David is saying, “OK, soul, marvel at God. Remind yourself of His attributes. Focus on his character and nature until it takes your breath away.” If we see God, we worship.

C. It is an example of our ongoing need to keep our perspective – to rehearse our blessings now and those to come (to cultivate a grateful attitude and an eternal perspective).

IV. **V3: Who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s. V6 The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel: The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.**

V. This is where I want us to focus.

A. V7 is a quote from Ex. 34:6, where Moses is receiving the Ten Commandments. **The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.** But here’s the thing. The very next verse in Exodus reads: **Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.”**

B. However, the very next verse here – in Psalm 103 – is: **He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.**

C. So, which is it? Ex. 34:6 says: **He is slow to anger and abounding in love, BUT he does not let sinners go unpunished. And in Ps. 103 says: He is slow to anger and abounding in love AND he separates us from our sins as far as the east is from the west.**

D. How can Moses say God will punish sin and David say He will not punish us as we deserve? From a high level it seems like the Bible is contradicting itself. What gives.

E. How do we explain the discrepancy? The answer: the Gospel. The very thing Miss Lilly wanted to be sure I talked about.

VI. What is the Gospel?

A. Today the term is used to refer to everything from narrow specifics about salvation to just about anything that can be linked to Jesus.¹

B. I am sympathetic to those who want to see the Gospel defined in a big way, because so many today wrongly think of Jesus in a very small and personal way. He is going to forgive my sins and grant me eternal life. And do not see that following Jesus is a lot bigger than that. However, at this moment I want to focus on precise definition of the Gospel – one that pivots around three big claims: 1) That Jesus Christ is our rescuer. He is the God-Man; the promised Messiah, our Lord and the Savior of the world; 2) hat by his death and resurrection, Jesus broke the back of evil, paid our moral debt and secured our justification; and 3) that Jesus offers us reconciliation with God as a free gift.

C. Think of the Gospel as the proclamation that even though we are more broken and needy than we dare admit, that His love and provision is more wonderful than we ever hope.²

D. And on top of all of this I will say, the Gospel is one of the most misunderstood truths out there. It's my experience that many people who think they understand the Gospel but do not. After thirty years as a pastor, I've come to assume that unless I hear differently, those who identify as a Christ-follower are still trying to earn God's favor.

1. It's not that surprising that we do not get it. It's certainly not the way life works. The broken world in which we live in famously offers no free lunches. We not only don't get what we do not pay for, sometimes we do not get what we do pay for. So we are to be forgiven for thinking that the offer of a free eternity is too good to be true.

VII. Titus 2:11 reads:

A. For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people (offers it not just to Jews but to all). It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

VIII. There are two concepts you have to get to understand the Gospel.

A. The first is grace. Justice is getting what we deserve – you are doing 37 in a 30 zone and you get a ticket. Mercy is not getting what we deserve – you are doing 37 in a 30 and you get a warning. And grace is getting something wonderful we do not deserve. You are doing 37 in a 30 and the officer gives you a million dollars. Paul highlights its critical nature in Ephesians 2:8.

B. The second is justification. Which is the concept that was the breakthrough for Martin Luther – who like other people (like John and Charles Wesley) was already a pastor and was teaching the Bible but was still missing this central point. They all thought, if I become good enough, God will love me and I will be rescued. Luther was a Bible teacher. He had already taught through the Psalms. He was now lecturing on Romans. As he went to the Greek he realized that the Latin translation he had been looking at had the wrong term. It was not “to become righteous. It was, to declare righteous. And the point was not that we are good enough on our own, but that we are given Christ's righteousness.

C. Everything changed for him when he realized that God doesn't make us perfect, he declares us forgiven. Becoming a Christian is not a process, it's an event. Our sanctification doesn't lead to our justification, but our justification leads to our sanctification. And our justification is something God does in a moment.

D. We do not become a Christian like we learn to read – starting slowly and mastering it over time until we have our balance. We are justified in an instant. God’s righteousness is not *dribbled* into us; it is *imputed* or credited to us.

E. Martin Lloyd Jones – one of the great preachers of the last century, said he could tell someone didn’t have a clue about the Christian faith if, when he asked them, “are you a Christian?” they said, “I’m trying to be.”

F. This is why Luther famously coined the phrase that Christians are *simul iustus et peccator* – that is, simultaneously righteous and a sinner.

IX. Three Things You Need to Know About the Gospel

A. It’s Unfair

1. There are lots of things that ought to shock us, starting with about half of the parables.

2. Think about the parable of the workers in the vineyard – in Matthew 20 – where all are paid the same amount.

3. Or the Prodigal, where you think the point is that bad people need to turn their life around. No! It’s about the older brother who thinks he earns God’s favor.

4. Men and women – some of you are prodigals. Many of us are elder brothers. The prodigal is on the one who gets it right. He needed to own up to his sin and stupidity. But the self-righteous older brother needed to repent of thinking he was better than his brother. He was a greedy, selfish man who thought the way to get ahead was stay at home.

5. If you think God should love you because of how good you are – how hard you are trying, how much smarter or better or more generous you are than others – you are a Pharisee. It’s not anymore unfair for God to treat others well than it is for him to treat you well.

6. What is unfair is the way Jesus is treated. The principal way the Gospel is unfair is the way it treats Jesus. This is the reason Psalm 103 says God punishes sin but doesn’t hold us accountable. It’s because Christ paid that debt.

7. I sometimes hear people suggest that God should just forgive sins, as if he could look away.

a) Being a just God, this is not possible. Forgiveness always comes at a cost to the one granting forgiveness.

b) Think about it. Let’s imagine that you invite me over for dinner, and that while I am visiting, I break a lamp. I feel horrible and immediately promise to pay for it. You say, “No, no, no. Think nothing of it. It was an old lamp. Let’s enjoy dinner.”

c) In other words, you act graciously.

d) But in the end, someone has to pay for the lamp.

B. The Gospel is Fragile: When you add something to it, it doesn’t get better, it falls apart. It in purest form is as good as it gets.

1. The Bible applauds our efforts to live well – especially those that include loving others and caring for the poor. In fact, it expects them. But it declares that our best efforts fall far short of God’s holy standards. We are not able to be good enough. Fortunately, while we were yet sinners – that is, while God could expect nothing from us except hatred and rebellion - Christ died for us. God reached down. He is the hero. And He does it all.
 2. All we need is need. And all we bring to the party is sin.
 3. He reaches all the way down and He does it because He is good not because we are.
 4. And when we fail to get this – when we think we have contributed in some small way, we destroy the whole thing. What we want is a mutual fund faith – we want to diversity our risk, hedge our faith a bit. We believe in God and in us.
 5. Illustration / diagram with painting.
- C. Finally, the Gospel is a message I have to repeat to myself every day:
1. There are other points to make here. Such as the fact that the Gospel is news. It is not insight. It is not advice. It is not a discovery we make in a lab or intuit by looking deep inside ourselves. It is news that must be announced.
 2. The Gospel changes prayer.
 - a) One of the most basic things that the Gospel does is change prayer from mere petition to fellowship and wonder at his glory.
 - b) One of those who had deep insight into the Gospel and prayer was Jonathan Edwards. And he notes that the most essential difference between a Christian and a moralist is that a Christian obeys God out of the sheer delight in who he is.
 - c) The gospel means that we are not obeying God to get anything but to give him pleasure because we see his worth and beauty. Therefore, the Christian is able to draw power out of contemplation of God. Without the gospel, this is impossible. We can only come and ask for things — petition. Without the gospel, we may conceive of a holy God who is intimidating and who can be approached with petitions if we are very good. Or we may conceive of a God who is mainly loving and regards all positively. To approach the first “God” is fearsome; to approach the second is no big deal. Thus without the gospel, there is no possibility of passion and delight to praise and approach God.³
 3. But I want to highlight the fact that the biggest problem with the Gospel is not defining it. It’s getting anyone to believe it – starting with me. In a world where only the naïve believe in a free lunch, believing that someone has offered to assume your moral debt and transfer their infinite resources into your account doesn’t pass the smell test.
 4. As a result, the battle to shape our hearts with the truth of the Gospel is never over.
 5. It seems to me that many treat the Gospel like training wheels. It is something we need when we are getting started, but not once we get the hang of it.

6. My experience is that it takes a while to settle into it. Our defenses are working so hard that we cannot see ourselves very accurately.
7. And so we have to keep rehearsing the Gospel – preaching it to ourselves.
8. Note that the Book of Galatians was written to Christians and it is all about the Gospel.

¹ The term gospel is also used to refer to the first four books of the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Though when it is used this way the “g” is capitalized.

² See Tim Keller; *The Meaning of Marriage*. Also, another way to think of the Gospel is: In four words the Gospel is: Jesus took my place; in three words the Gospel is: Him for me; in two words the Gospel is: substitution alone; and in one word: grace.

³ This is from Tim Keller, *Principles of the Gospel*.