

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 2, 2017

A Vertical and Horizontal Gospel

Luke 17:20-37

In last Sunday's sermon, I focused on what it means for us to be gospel people. In a world so full of bad news, we need to cultivate our identity as a community of believers who proclaim and practice good news. Of course, we shouldn't be surprised that in a culture where information and diversity abound, there are also varying opinions on what the gospel actually is. I'm sure that if I handed out pieces of paper and asked each of you to summarize, in a single written sentence, the content of the gospel, I would get a variety of perspectives. Hopefully they would all relate, in some way or another, to the saving power of God in Jesus Christ. As I stressed last Sunday, what we've received, what we believe, and what we preach is news about what God has done through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in order to forgive us and make us new.

It's one thing to get your theological terms in the right order and have your gospel elevator speech ready whenever a brief opportunity to speak the good news presents itself. But it's another thing to give voice to the gospel, and to live out its implications, in the extended, complex, and challenging circumstances of daily life. Most of the time, you can't just say, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again," and leave it at that. That's all true, but like many other summaries of the gospel, you have to take that kind of confession of faith and flesh it out in specific contexts, namely, your own life, the life of society, the life of the world.

Early in Luke's Gospel, Jesus begins his public work by preaching in his hometown synagogue. He announces the arrival of God's reign by quoting from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. . ." (4:18). From there, Jesus launches into his ministry of healing, feeding, teaching, and so on. By the time we reach today's text in Luke 17, Jesus is still in the midst of taking his core message of the arrival of God's kingdom and interpreting it into various life situations and settings. In this case, some Pharisees have asked Jesus when the kingdom of God is going to arrive. This was a common question in an atmosphere where all Jews, whatever their particular opinions about a Messiah, would have been longing for the coming full reign of God. And though the reign of God would have meant different things to different people, it generally would have conjured up ideas of freedom, justice, peace, and prosperity.

So the Pharisees aren't wrong to be looking for the kingdom. But they are wrong in thinking that its coming can be specifically calculated and precisely calendared. And what's worse, they can't see that the reign of God is right in front of them, in the form of Jesus. The presence of Jesus is the presence of the kingdom. The things he has been doing in his ministry are signs that the reign of God has come among them. "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation," says Jesus, "nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you" (vv. 20b-21).

Here's a spot where we need to be careful about how the original Greek terminology gets translated into English. In the NIV, Jesus' words are rendered as "the kingdom of God is *within* you." This translation conveys the idea that the kingdom of God is an inner condition experienced by the individual believer. In other words, the reign of God is more of an

inward, private experience that happens in the heart of a person who trusts in Jesus Christ. But that's not the only way to understand the terminology in this verse. The Greek word could also be translated as "the kingdom of God is *among* you." This translation is more consistent with other sayings in the Gospels where the kingdom of God is more of an outward, objective reality, and not simply an inward, personal experience. What's more, the pronoun for "you" in this verse is plural. It refers to a group or collection of individuals, and not just a single person. Taking these factors into account, it's possible to translate Jesus' statement as "the kingdom of God is *in the midst* of you."

So what is this gospel that Jesus preaches and embodies? Is it a message about individual change or about collective transformation? Is it good news about inward renewal or about outward reform? I believe that based on our text, along with the rest of the witness of the New Testament, the answer is yes. In other words, the gospel is both. It's good news about personal salvation and good news about social justice.

The relationship between these two aspects of the gospel, evangelism and social justice, has a long and varied history. Some portions of the church, especially the stream of the Christian faith that our congregation is part of, have stressed the necessity of every believer witnessing for Christ, so that individuals may come to know him personally as Savior and Lord of their lives. In this strand of the Christian tradition, the emphasis is on "saving souls." In other portions of the church, the emphasis has been more on addressing social ills, particularly the circumstances of the poor and the oppressed. In other words, the gospel calls for doing justice in our collective life, so that society is changed and remade in keeping with the priorities of God's reign in the world.

If we're going to preach and practice a holistic gospel, then we need to remember that our mission integrates both the personal salvation piece and the social justice piece. We preach a Jesus who saves individuals and who is also Lord of all creation. I know that as summer gets underway, we don't usually open our hymnals and start singing "Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come!" But we do need to remember some of its wonderful words: "He comes to make his blessings flow / far as the curse is found." And the fact is, the curse of our sin is found deep within our individual hearts and deep within the structures and networks of our existence as a society. Part of what makes the good news good is that the redemption God has accomplished in Christ reaches into your life personally and into our life corporately. As Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote, "Any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of (people) and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that can scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried."¹

In 1974, American evangelist Billy Graham and British clergyman John Stott convened an international congress on evangelization. The congress produced a document that called for renewed commitment to evangelism while also taking seriously the call to social responsibility and justice. In the document, Stott provided one of the best and most memorable definitions of evangelism when he wrote, "Evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world." The whole gospel means that what God has done in Jesus Christ is comprehensive good news, overcoming all the ways that sin affects and corrupts every dimension of human life—spiritual, physical, intellectual, relational, economic, political, religious, social, and so on.

Tim Keller tells a story that illustrates the importance of proclaiming comprehensive good news. He says:

Raymond Fung, an evangelist in Hong Kong, tells of how he was speaking to a textile worker about the Christian faith, and he urged him to come and visit a church. The man could not go to a service on Sunday without losing a day's wages, but he did so. After the service Fung and the man went to lunch. The worker said, "Well, the sermon hit me." It had been about

sin. "What the preacher said was true of me—laziness, a violent temper, and addiction to cheap entertainment." Fung held his breath trying to control his excitement. Had the gospel message gotten through? He was disappointed. "Nothing was said about my boss," the man said to Fung. When the preacher had gone through the list of sins, he had said, "Nothing about how he employs child laborers, how he doesn't give us the legally required holidays, how he puts on false labels, how he forces us to do overtime. . . ." Fung knew that members of the management class were sitting in the congregation, but those sins were never mentioned. The textile worker agreed that he was a sinner, but rejected the message of the church because he sensed its incompleteness.

The person who originally related this story, Harvie Conn, says that gospel preaching which targets some sins but not the sins of oppression "cannot possibly work among the overwhelming majority of people in the world, poor peasants and workers."²

By stressing how the gospel integrates evangelism and social justice, I'm not issuing a call for us as believers to rise up, go forth, and fix the world. The truth is, the rebellious human race, and God's damaged creation, need comprehensive reconciliation and restoration that only God can bring about. When we start reflecting on the social implications of the gospel, it can be tempting to think that our vision, our willpower, our economic plans, and our political agendas, will save the planet and all its inhabitants. But as the rest of today's text from Luke reminds us, our hope for the future, as individuals, as humankind, and as a planet, rests on God's faithfulness and judgment. According to Luke, Jesus shifts from warning the Pharisees that they're missing the "already" of the kingdom to reminding the disciples that they're forgetting the "not yet" of the kingdom. The Son of Man will come, says Jesus, and his coming will bring with it lots of sorting things out and setting things right. In fact, his arrival will seal the doom of everyone and everything that resists and rejects God's reign of righteousness, life, and peace.

So if you're longing for the arrival of God's reign in its fullness, in the assurance that Jesus is Lord, God's coming judgment is gospel, good news. As N. T. Wright puts it, "In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be."³ That's the gospel we've been sent to proclaim. It's a horizontal gospel. It's good news about how God's saving action in Christ sets right and transforms our relationships with one another in a lost and broken world, a world crying out for justice and peace.

But this good news is more than just horizontal. It's also a vertical gospel. It's news about how the God who is coming in saving judgment wants you to come into the reality of his kingdom, and to know him, personally and deeply. The vertical dimension of the gospel is an announcement about personal forgiveness, and about your need as an individual to accept Christ as your Savior and live under his lordship. Remember that the gospel doesn't just address social conditions. It also addresses the condition of the heart. Your heart, my heart. If you want to live a life committed to justice and peace, for the long haul, then you'll need to draw on the sustaining resources of a personal relationship with Jesus. Your pursuit of God's reign outwardly needs to flow from God's reign inwardly. In this way, you'll be part of the whole church bringing the whole gospel to the whole world.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Dream of a Common Language*. Quoted in *The Living Pulpit*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (January-March 1993) 31.

² Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Riverhead, 2010) 55-56.

³ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008) 137.