

Study 8. What is the Gospel?

Becoming a Disciple Series

Warm-up Question: So that we can quickly do this in ten minutes, take one minute each of you to share the age that you first responded to, or were influenced by the gospel and how it came about.

When Do Most People Hear the Gospel?

According to statistics in 2004 from the Barna group, nearly half of all Americans who make a profession of faith and acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Savior do so before reaching the age of 13 (43%), and that two out of three people who profess that they are born again Christians (64%) made that commitment to Christ before their 18th birthday. One out of eight born-again Christians (13%) made their profession of faith while in the age range of 18 to 21 years old. Less than one out of every four born-again Christians (23%) embraced Christ after their twenty-first birthday. □

Of the Christians who embraced Christ before their teen years, half were led to Christ by their parents, with another one in five led by some other friend or relative. Comparatively few accepted Jesus in response to a minister's prompting (7%) and only one out of eight cited a special event as the turning point in their journey. Among those who mentioned events, about half identified a church service. Just 1% said media evangelism or other particular situations as being responsible for their conversion. □

Among people who accepted Christ when they were age 13 through 21, the process was much more diverse. One out of five credited a friend with bringing them to Christ, and a similar proportion said their parents were responsible for their decision. One-fifth also recalled an event as the trigger for their commitment. One-sixth of people who made their decision for Christ as a teenager (16%) listed a relative other than their parent as the primary influencer. Only one out of every ten Christians who accepted Christ during the 13-to-21-age bracket cited ministers as the influencer.

Adults who accepted Christ as their Savior generally responded to different stimuli than did younger people. The most common precipitant was a friend (19%), followed by mass media experiences (14%), a live event (14%) or a relative (13%). Ministers were responsible for leading one out of every ten adult converts to Christ while parents of adults were named as the evangelistic influence by one in twelve (8%) of these believers.¹

In the last two studies, we have learned that the work of sharing the gospel of Christ is something that all the Church is called to be involved. So as we think of sharing the gospel, the most important things are: 1) Begin praying for the individuals that are on your heart 2) Get some training in what to say and what scriptures to use 3) Ask God for His heart of concern for your friend, your son, daughter or relative. The chances are low that bringing them to church to listen

¹ https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/196-evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids#.U4Xn5txYx_Y

to the pastor will bring them to Christ. Most adults come to Christ because of a friend sharing the gospel with them.

Faith in Christ Comes as a Result of the Word of God Being Preached

There have been times in my life, usually in times of beautiful worship, when God has drawn close, and His presence seems to be heavy in the room. Have you ever been to a meeting like that? Imagine what it would have been like to experience that type of a meeting with Jesus present in the flesh:□

They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick (Luke 5:17).

When we have experienced the presence of the Lord in a meeting, we often think to ourselves, “if only my friend had been there and experienced the closeness of God, he would have given his life to Christ!” However, people need more than an experience, as we see when we examine the ministry of Jesus and His disciples. The scriptures do indicate that people became very open to the Lord after seeing the power of God at work. Let's observe what happened in one of Peter's ministry trips:

³²As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the Lord's people who lived in Lydda. ³³There he found a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years. ³⁴“Aeneas,” Peter said to him, “Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and roll up your mat.” Immediately Aeneas got up. ³⁵**All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord** (Acts 9:32-35).

What was involved in the people turning to the Lord? The event of a miraculous healing drew the people and convicted their hearts, however, they still needed the understanding to connect to God for themselves. People need to understand what is taking place and count the cost of their commitment. There needs to be an understanding of the finished work of Christ on their behalf. Paul, the apostle, said, “**How shall they hear unless a preacher is sent to them**” (Romans 10:14). The clearer the explanation of the Cross of Christ and what Jesus accomplished, the higher the chance that the individual will come through trials and difficulties in his or her life and experience a real heart change and be born again of the Spirit. It is also essential for them to be able to share their faith effectively and pass on the truth of the gospel. Paul explained the importance of the Word of God in the process of conversion.

Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ (Romans 10:17).

Peter was the first of the apostles to preach the gospel publicly. God gave him this great honor on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit had just manifested with tongues of fire appearing, and the believers were speaking in other tongues. People heard the Word of God being proclaimed in their languages, even though they knew that these men were “simple country folk,” mostly from Galilee. A miraculous event drew them, but Peter still needed to make the Word of God clear to them. Upon hearing the gospel clearly, it was then that they cried out: “What must we do?” They

needed more than an experience; the experience got their attention. They responded to the clear message of the Gospel. They were cut to the heart. That is what the Word of God does.

We may come across people who are hardened to the Gospel. Perhaps they have even grown up in church hearing the Word of God, but for some reason or another have set themselves against it. A person can become vaccinated by religion, and that shot of false truths keep them from the truth found in Christ. When someone has become apathetic, how can we engage that person in a conversation about spiritual things? Depending upon how well you know someone, you may start out talking to them about something that you know is of concern to them, something that helps you to get beyond the surface level of conversation. I have offered some suggestions below for starting conversations. You can use these ideas or perhaps they will spark your ideas for how you can approach spiritual topics. If someone is in need, we can often meet someone at that particular point of need and then go on to point him or her to Christ.

Example of a Possible Conversation with a Religious Person

"Do they speak much about heaven in your church?" "No, they don't speak much about heaven." "Well, what do you think heaven is like? Do you imagine heaven to be a perfect place?" "Yes, I would say so." "The Bible says that it is, but if heaven is a perfect place, would you say you are perfect?" "Oh no, I'm not perfect." "Well, do you believe you'll go to heaven then?" "I hope so." "Well, either heaven has got to change, or you have to change, and I guess heaven is pretty stuck in its ways, so God is expecting you to change if you are going to go to heaven because heaven can't be perfect with imperfect people in it." "I never thought of it like that before." "Would you like me to share with you about the gift of God and how you can become perfect in God's sight and receive the change of heart that you need to go to heaven?" □

Questions to Stimulate Interest

Most people have difficulty in bringing up the subject of the gospel with their friend or relative, so asking a question can be an excellent way to bring up the issue. We can learn from Phillip's conversation with the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:

³⁰Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. **"Do you understand what you are reading?"** Philip asked. ³¹"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³²This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ³³In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." ³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" ³⁵Then Philip **began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus** (Acts 8:30-35).

Did you notice how God had prepared the situation ahead of time? Phillip arrived at the exact time that the Ethiopian was reading Isaiah's prophetic word about the suffering servant of God in Isaiah 53:7. It is such a joy when you see God working on a person ahead of time so that when you arrive on the scene, their heart is prepared for the sowing of the seed of the Word of God.

Notice too, that Philip asked a question to stimulate interest based on something that the Ethiopian was doing at the time. When Philip had his attention, he then helped him to understand the Scriptures as to the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work on the cross. What kinds of questions can we use in transitioning the conversation to bring up the subject of the work of Christ? Here are a few that you could use. With some of them, you may need to know the person somewhat before you have earned the right to ask such an intimate question.

- 1) If someone were to ask you “what is a true Christian,” what would you answer?
- 2) Have you ever thought about becoming a real Christian?
- 3) Are you interested in spiritual things?
- 4) Have you ever personally discovered Jesus Christ, or are you still in the process?
- 5) Have you ever seriously considered Christ’s claims on your life?
- 6) Do you think it is possible to know for sure before you die that you are going to heaven?
- 7) What would you consider man’s greatest spiritual need to be today?
- 8) Has anyone ever told you about the gift of God?
- 7) How did you personally give your life to Christ? (To ask a person who says he is a Christian, but you sense he does not have the life of Christ in his life).
- 8) If you were to die today, where would you spend eternity?
- 9) Someday when you stand before God if God should ask you why He should let you into heaven, what would you say to Him? (Diagnostic question to give you an idea as to what the person is trusting in).□
- 10) If you were able to ask God one question, what would you ask Him?

Just a little while ago I had a meeting in Panera with a couple that was engaged and asking me to officiate at their wedding. The lady already knew the Lord, but the gentleman was a religious man. Religious people are difficult to lead to Christ because often they are trusting in their religious tradition and good works to gain them entrance into heaven. I started the conversation by just getting to know them. I could not “pick on the man,” but felt led to converse with both of them the same. It is wise never to presume a person is born again (John 3:3), but to present the gospel and let the Word of God do its work of touching the inner soul. Let them tell you what they are trusting in as the conversation develops.

After 5 minutes of just chatting about how they had met and some of their history, I began by sharing my sordid tale of life before I met Christ. This approach usually has the effect of making me very vulnerable before them and getting the conversation below the surface level. I wanted them to know that even though I am a pastor, I am just like them, in need of a Savior. It was then that I asked permission to share with them just what I saw as a Christian wedding. I told them that by officiating at their wedding, for me, it was more than just saying words; I felt a responsibility toward them to help them understand the difference between a Christian marriage and one without having the Lord as the third strong cord of a healthy marriage: □

¹¹Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone?

¹²And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. **A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart** (Ecclesiastes 4:11-12).

I had earned the right to share heart to heart with them both because I had already been very vulnerable with them. I started by asking them if anyone had ever told them about the gift of God. From that point my presentation was the basic gospel message that you will read further down, interspersed with different illustrations and clarifying specific terms such as repentance and sin—we live in a time where those concepts need to be clearly explained, especially among the young. □

Six Crucial Elements to a Gospel Presentation

1. Salvation is a Gift
2. All Have Sinned
3. The Wages of Sin
4. Substitutionary Death of Christ
5. Repent and Receive Christ
6. Assurance of Salvation

1) Salvation is a Gift

I often start a gospel presentation by talking about the concept of salvation being a gift. For many people, they have been brought up thinking that they have to earn their right to gain a place in heaven by their good works. The enemy suggests to them the idea of a set of scales making them think that their good works must outweigh their bad practices. These kinds of thoughts come from the pit of hell. □

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, **it is the gift of God**; ⁹not as a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Jesus answered her, “If you knew **the gift of God** and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water” (John 4:10).

He saved us, **not because of righteous things we had done**, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5).

To use an illustration of a gift, I sometimes talk about a child that has done wrong the day before Christmas where traditionally, in the Western world, we give gifts to one another. (If you do not celebrate this holiday, think of another time when gifts are given). I ask them if they would still give them their Christmas gift on Christmas Day, most people answer, yes. I remind people that when a gift is given, it is not because of anything the person has done to deserve or not deserve it; it is based on the heart of the giver, who in this instance is God Himself! The gift of God is given to us when we receive it by faith; works has nothing to do with it.

2) All Have Sinned

Before they can receive the gift of God, we must bring up the problem of sin. What is sin? The concept of sin seems like an outdated concept to some that have grown up being educated primarily through media. If someone does not believe in God at all, the idea of sin is sometimes very foreign to him or her. I will always make sure that they understand that I am not singling them out, or commenting on their lifestyle, etc. All of humanity is in the same boat. We all need

forgiveness. We all do things that we regret or feel bad about. The Greek word that the Scripture uses for sin is *Hamartia*. It is an archery term that means, “to miss the mark.” It is like aiming for the center of the target and finding that we continually miss it. God’s standard is perfection. There is only One who has ever met that standard and His name is Jesus. “Which of you can truthfully accuse me of sin?” (John 8:46). Sometimes people have said to me that they have never sinned. I usually ask them if they knew what the greatest commandment is. I have to tell them most of the time. Jesus said that it was, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’”³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 27:37-40). I ask them if they have ever kept that commandment before telling them what James said:

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it (James 2:10).

It is of paramount importance that the person sees him or herself guilty before a holy God and that if he or she has committed one sin, they have need of their sin to be forgiven. I often ask them how many murders does it take before a person becomes a murderer, the answer is simple—one! How many lies does it take before a person is guilty of being a liar, again, the answer is simple—one! How many sins does a person commit before he or she is a sinner—one! God knows our condition is one that has affected all the race of Man:

...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6).

When the person admits his guilt before a holy God, we must tell him or her the real state of the predicament we are all in. Sin is rebellion before a holy God and must be judged accordingly. Tell them, "Before I can tell you the excellent news, I must tell you about the justice of God toward sin."□

3) The Wages of Sin

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

The concept of wages needs to be explained. A wage is something that we deserve after our week or two weeks of work. Our life of sin deserves payment for what we have earned, death. This death is not just physical death, that is obvious, but the death we are talking about is separation from the author of all life—God! Spiritual death is a place of separation from all that is good and holy, a place called hell. If you would like to explore the topic of hell, I would encourage you to visit groupbiblestudy.com and find the series called “*Insights into Eternity*” and download the third study called, *The Truth about Hell*. At the point of physical death we face judgment before God:□

Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

This judgment is a terrible prospect for those who do not obey the gospel of Christ:

⁸dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to **those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus**. ⁹These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9).

You may be reluctant to talk to a person about hell, but did you know that there are more instances in Scripture that record Jesus talking about hell than about heaven? If someone seems to have something in their way preventing him or her from responding to the gospel, they may be convicted of a particular sin. You may be able to pray with them right there about whatever it is that is holding them back if they are willing. It is possible that unforgiveness or bitterness holds them back. Be open to the Holy Spirit and ask them if it is ok to pray for them. Sometimes people will come up with reasons why they cannot accept Christ. This is usually due to guilt. The enemy does not want to see people set free from guilt and condemnation! You may also find that the person wants to talk about the thing that is holding them back. Be a listener. You cannot decide for them, but you can only lead them to the place where they hear the truth and can decide for themselves. If you have come this far in the conversation, then you can rest assured that God will continue to speak to their hearts by His Holy Spirit.

The fourth crucial element is:

4) Substitutionary Death of Christ

We are now getting into the good news itself, and this truth must be explained so that people can settle the issue of righteousness once and for all. If a person feels unworthy, they will never approach God. Trying to live the Christian life on our merit and effort is impossible. We need the life of Christ living in us to live the Christian life! Period. There is a reason why Jesus had to suffer on the cross, and this is the crucial thing that people need to understand:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, **the righteous for the unrighteous**, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit (1 Peter 3:18).

Jesus did not die the death of a martyr but the death of a substitute. What do we mean by a substitute? In his book *Written in Blood*, Robert Coleman tells the story of a little boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. The doctor explained that she had the same disease the boy had recovered from two years earlier. Her only chance for recovery was a transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the disease. Since the two children had the same rare blood type, the boy was the ideal donor. "Would you give your blood to Mary?" the doctor asked. Johnny hesitated. His lower lip started to tremble. Then he smiled and said, "Sure, for my sister." Soon the two children were wheeled into the hospital room--Mary, pale and thin; Johnny, robust and healthy. Neither spoke, but when their eyes met, Johnny grinned. As the nurse inserted the needle into his arm, Johnny's smile faded. He watched the blood flow through the tube. With the ordeal almost over, his voice, slightly shaky, broke the silence. "Doctor, when do I die?" Only then did the doctor realize why Johnny had hesitated, why his lip had trembled when he'd agreed

to donate his blood. He thought of giving his blood to his sister meant giving up his life. In that brief moment, he'd made his great decision. Johnny, fortunately, didn't have to die to save his sister. Each of us, however, has a condition more serious than Mary's, and it required Jesus to give not just His blood but His life. He took the just punishment that you and I deserved upon Himself so that forgiveness could be given to us freely as a gift.

"He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24).

he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5).

The issue of sin had to be dealt with. God sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, to be born as a man and overcome sin and death. When He died on the cross, He died as our substitute. This is the best word I can think of to describe what Jesus did by dying in place of you and me.

Let's illustrate it further with this story. In the book, *Miracle on the River Kwai*, Ernest Gordon tells the true story of a group of Prisoners of War working on the Burma Railway during World War Two. At the end of each day, the tools were collected from the work party. On one occasion a Japanese guard shouted that a shovel was missing and demanded to know which man had taken it. He began to rant and rave, working himself up into a paranoid fury and ordered whoever was guilty to step forward. No one moved. "All die! All die!" he shrieked, cocking and aiming his rifle at the prisoners. At that moment one man stepped forward, and the guard clubbed him to death with his gun while he stood silently at attention. When they returned to the camp, the tools were counted again, and no shovel was missing. That one man had gone forward as a substitute to save the others. In the same way, Jesus went forward and satisfied justice by dying in place of us. □

5) Repent and Receive Christ

Repentance is from the Greek word *metanoia*; it is made up of two words: *meta* and *nous*. *Meta* means "change," and *nous* is the Greek word for "mind." It means to change your mind, and therefore a change of direction towards God. If we say we change our mind about something and then do not change our actions accordingly, do we believe? If you believe the good news, it will change your life. "I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds" (Acts 26:20). There must be a willingness to believe and to turn to the Lord.

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that **your sins may be wiped out**, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord (Acts 3:19).

"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. **Repent and believe the good news!**" (Mark 1:15).

This turn of the direction of your life is toward Christ and away from serving self and Satan. When you believe and place your trust in Christ, the Spirit of God comes to live at the very core of your being. When we believe the gospel, we become a child of God:

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12).

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me (Revelation 3:20).

⁹If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved (Romans 10:9-10).

After sharing these scriptures, you can then ask the person, "do these thoughts make sense to you?" Listen to him or her to see if they have grasped the truth of the Word of God and are open to receive the gift of life. You could ask them, ☐

Would you like to receive the gift of eternal life, which Christ is offering to you? Tell them that there is no better time than the present.

For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2).

You could ask them the question "Is there any reason as to why you should not place your trust in Christ now?" At this point, you do not want to push them, but you should also realize that the enemy is more than likely giving them a hard time and a spiritual battle is taking place inside the person's mind. You might want to ask if that is what is going on. Bring it into the light by telling them that this is an awesome decision the person must make. Ask them as to whom they are going to listen. Encourage them to take the step of faith. ☐

A Typical Prayer of Salvation

Dear God in heaven, I come to you in the name of Jesus. I am a sinner, and I am sorry for my sins and the life that I have lived; I need your forgiveness. I believe that Jesus shed His precious blood on the cross at Calvary and died in full payment for my sins, and I am now willing to turn from my sin. You said in Your Holy Word, Romans 10:9 that if we confess the Lord our God and believe in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead, we shall be saved. Right now I confess Jesus as the Lord of my soul. With my heart, I believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. This very moment I accept the gift of God and invite Jesus Christ to come and live in me according to His Word. Thank you, Jesus, for your unlimited grace which has saved me from my sins. Lord Jesus transform my life so that I may live for you and bring glory and honor to you. Thank you, Lord, for dying for me and giving me eternal life. Amen.

6) Assurance of Salvation

After a prayer of salvation, I usually tell them that heaven is rejoicing at the moment and that I want to welcome them into the family of God. Shake their hand; give them a hug, whatever in your culture communicates congratulations. □

"Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24).

I now tell them: "You have heard His Word and placed your trust and belief in Him, and by God's Word you now have, present tense, not will have, but have eternal life. You will not be judged on that day as to your sin, but have crossed over from death to life."

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

²⁸and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹"My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father's hand. ³⁰"I and the Father are one" (John 10:28-30).

It is imperative that a new Christian understands that their righteousness comes from what Christ has accomplished for them. They also need to realize that the Holy Spirit will help them. Encourage them to read John's gospel and to approach God in prayer and thanks for all that He has done. I would ask them if you could stop over to their house and pick them up and take them to church, house church, or small group, whatever your situation is in the country where you live. Their greatest need now is for fellowship with other Christians who will be their friends. You might want to give them a book that will encourage them or a radio station or podcast or website where they can hear good Bible teaching. Remember that the enemy will try to snatch the seed from their hearts before it is rooted in God's love and grace: "When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path" (Matthew 13:19).

If you have the privilege of sharing the good news of the Gospel with someone, it is one of the greatest joys you can experience. You have just been instrumental in delivering to someone words of Eternal Life. If you can only share a small part, pray that whatever you were able to leave with them will grow in their heart and bear fruit. God can use other people, circumstance, or even the words they have heard to continue to speak to their heart. "One plants, another waters, but it is God that gives the increase" (1 Corinthians 3:6). We are given the privilege and the opportunity to work with the Holy Spirit in the harvest. Some people are living lives that are empty, people who are depressed and searching for meaning in their lives. Jesus was moved with compassion for the multitudes, and He is looking for us to help Him touch people with His love, mercy, and grace. May the Lord give you a heart for the harvest! □

Prayer: I pray, Father, for all those that read these words of life. Grant that each would know the presence of your Spirit upon them as they share your word with a hopeless world. Give them your heart of compassion for those that are without you. May they know joy flooding their lives as they reach their friends for Christ. Amen!

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