

3. A Life-Changing Sentence

When I graduated from seminary I was placed in a congregation outside the city of Philadelphia. I taught a Sunday morning bible class before our worship service, presenting a lot of biblical material with the zeal of the newly ordained. I soon realized that not everyone knew some of the ideas and concepts with which I assumed all Christians were familiar. One Sunday, at some point during the class, I thought to ask a basic question. What is the Gospel?

I heard many different answers. “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you,” for example. We know that as the Golden Rule, and it is a clear teaching of Jesus and recorded in Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31. It was also taught by the Lord to Moses, and a similar saying is recorded in Leviticus 19:18: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (ESV). In fact almost all world religions have some version of this rule. It's a basic command, one with which most people would agree. But it's not the Gospel.

Another answer was John 3:16. This is closer to the idea of the Gospel. Jesus says to Nicodemus that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (ESV). It's not a rule or command, something that we should do. But it does leave some questions unanswered. How is God giving his Son an act of love? In what way does or did God give his Son? What does it mean to believe in him?

The word “gospel” means “good news.” It’s an old English word that translates the Greek word *euangelion*, from which we get our words evangelism and evangelical. A *euangelion* was a victory announcement delivered from a far away field of battle. In the days before the internet people wouldn’t know the outcome of a war unless someone physically delivered the news. It’s telling that the evangelists and apostles called the news about Jesus a victory announcement. We, as Christians, are called to continue sharing that victory announcement, that *euangelion* or Gospel, with the world. But can we, quickly and without thinking, tell someone what our “Gospel” is?

I suggested to my class a nineteen word sentence that summarizes the Gospel pretty well. It doesn’t confuse what God has done in Christ with what He asks us, His children, to do for him or for others. It explains who won the victory, how, what the victory was won against, and what the result of that victory is. The sentence I gave was this:

**Jesus Christ died on the cross for the sins of the world
that all might be saved through him.**

Remember earlier when we talked about elevator speeches? This sentence, or something like it, is what we want at the heart of every elevator speech. Every opportunity to share our faith should share this life-changing sentence in some form. Look back to the introductory dialogue between Joe and Bob. Suppose it had gone like this instead?

Bob How 'bout that big game Sunday morning?
Joe Missed it. Went to church instead.

Bob I didn't know you did religion. What does your church believe?

Joe That Jesus Christ died for our sins on the cross, that God gives us eternal life because of what he did.

Bob So because of that you have to go to church every Sunday?

Joe (Chuckle) No, no, not like that. I go to hear from the one who gives without strings attached, you know. That's how I've come to know God. Maybe you should come sometime.

Let's quickly unpack how every part of that sentence says something critical about Christianity, without us having to give a ten minute sermon.

Jesus

The sentence starts with Jesus, because it is through Jesus' works and words that we really come to know God. Jesus is also the most controversial part about Christianity. As long as we are talking about a God "out there" that anyone can describe however they want to, all is fine and good. But when we say God is "like this, and only like this," that's where we run into controversy. It's also where we find salvation and truth. It's where we leave the realm of the flying spaghetti monster behind, and enter into the realm of history and science.

In all three of the great western Christian creeds there is one other historical figure mentioned besides Jesus, and that is Pontius Pilate. Someone once quipped that an agnostic could accept every word of the Christian creeds except for one line: "crucified under Pontius Pilate." That line grounds our Christian beliefs in real life, in real history. You can't get around it. At such and such a time, under a

real Roman politician, these things happened. So any talk about the faith has to include Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary. It needs to anchor our beliefs in the real world.

Christ

But the great confession of the *Christian* faith is that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, is unique in all of history. He is the Messiah, the Anointed One, the one promised by God. In Deuteronomy 18 Moses, the greatest of all human prophets through whom God has spoken, addressed a concern of the people. The concern was that no one wanted to see God *as God* anymore. That seems odd, given that most people in our day and age complain that God *doesn't* make himself more visible. Isn't that human nature? The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. When God is hidden, we want him to be more showy. When God appears as God, we want him to disappear.

Moses reminds the people of their complaint: "Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die" (Deuteronomy 18:16, ESV). God manifested himself in sight, sound and smell to the Hebrews rescued by Moses from Egypt, and they found Him *terrifying*. So God promised that the next time He visited the people intimately, it would be as one of their own. "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen... I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (Deuteronomy 18:15, 17, ESV).

At Jesus' transfiguration, as recorded in the three synoptic Gospels, a voice spoke and identified Jesus as his Son, and said "Listen to him." In other words, this is the man – he is the Anointed One sent to be God in our midst. Not with flashy thunder and lightning or writing in the sky, but as a man. This Jesus of Nazareth is also the Christ.

Died on the Cross

Most of us have either lived through, or know someone who has lived through, a great tragedy. Maybe it was the death of a young child from disease or in an accident. Maybe it was the loss of a job when other less capable people kept theirs. We watch the natural disasters that seem to strike regularly around the world, terrorist attacks, and senseless murder, and wonder "Where is God?" How can a good God allow so much suffering to continue on earth? Why doesn't he do something about it? Canadian rock band Rush asked that question in their song *Roll the Bones*:

Faith is cold as ice
why are little ones born only to suffer
for the want of immunity or a bowl of rice?
Who would hold a price
on the heads of the innocent children
if there's some immortal power to control the dice?

This is the problem of evil. The fancy theological term for it is "theodicy." If there is an all powerful God, and he is perfectly good, why does he allow evil to continue? Why doesn't he just use his power to get rid of all evil, once and for all?

The Christian answer to the problem of evil is the crucifixion of Jesus. Anyone who wants to share the Christian faith with a non-Christian must include Christ's death on the cross. Sometimes I suggest to people that they get to the cross as soon as possible. Jesus Christ...died on the cross - no beating around the bush! The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the church in Corinth, said that he "decided to know nothing among [them] except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2, ESV). The cross is the Christian answer to the problem of evil. God is all-powerful, and is perfectly good, and chose to defeat evil by taking all the evil of the world into himself. We will talk more about evil later in the book. But right now, we'll just think of evil as all those things that make us want to shout "that's not right!" or "that's not good!"

Here's a way to think about what Jesus, the Father's only-begotten Son, did on the cross. Imagine you are visiting a wealthy friend, who is touring you around their home. She points out an incredibly expensive statue sitting on a ledge behind you. You turn to look at it, and accidentally knock it to the ground. It doesn't just break: it shatters, into hundreds of pieces. You apologize over and over, not knowing what else to do. Your friend, however, waves her hand and says "Oh, don't worry about." Many people wonder why God doesn't simply do the same thing. Why doesn't he "just forgive" the evil that we cause? But we forget that the friend's statue *is still broken*. She will have to cover the cost of replacing it, or at least be out one statue! When she says "don't worry about it," she has chosen to pay the cost of the broken vase herself.

On the cross Jesus did the same thing: God assumed the cost of a broken world himself. That cost was the death not just of a man, but of God himself. The Father in love for us sends his Son, who willingly absorbs the cost of evil, and then breaths out the Holy Spirit into the world - the Spirit that gives eternal life in the place of death.

For the Sins

We just talked a little about evil. But where does evil come from? One source is our “sin.” Most non-Christians who have grown up in societies that were once Christian know the word. They use it to mean a moral failing, or doing something wrong or unjust. But sin is more than just an action, or even a thought. Sin is a condition into which all people are born. Jesus himself on several occasions reminds even his closest disciples that they were not born “good.” In Luke 11:13 he points out that even the disciples, “who are evil,” give good gifts to their children. When a rich young ruler comes to ask Jesus about eternal life, he calls Jesus “good teacher.” Jesus responds with a question, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God” (Luke 18:9, ESV). We are not “born good.” We are born, instead, without a love for God or trust in Him, and with a desire to do things which are harmful to ourselves and others. One Christian once said that it is not committing sins that makes us sinners; it is being a sinner that makes us commit sins. We call our sinful condition and its results *moral evil*.

The two other kinds of evil in the world are related to our sinful condition. There is *supernatural evil*, evil that exists outside our universe of matter and energy yet still interacts with us and our universe. When we speak of the

Devil or demons, we are speaking of *supernatural evil*. It was the Devil who tempted the first two humans, who were not sinners by nature, to introduce sin into the world. As a result all of us who are descended from Adam and Eve are, by nature, the Devil's children and not God's. Only God can cause us to be born again as his children, giving us a trust and love for him and true love for one another.

The other kind of evil is *natural evil*, things like earthquakes and hurricanes, diseases and death. The fact that these exist in the world is the result of *moral evil* and *supernatural evil*. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he points out that all of creation is in "bondage to corruption," groaning under the weight of sin (Romans 8:20-23). When God cursed the ground in Genesis 3:17-18, it meant more than weeds in our flower beds. It meant that all of creation, unwillingly, now works against us and not just for us. So natural disasters can rightly be called evil, because they're connect to the evil that comes from us and from the fallen beings in the spiritual realms.

Jesus Christ's death on the cross was God's answer to all three kinds of evil. By absorbing the cost of moral evil, he paved the way for God to create a new world in the future with no supernatural or natural evil. When Christians fight their tendency toward moral evil, reject supernatural evil, and help those affected by natural evil, we are giving a foretaste of the world God will call into existence in the future. But make no mistake: it was for sins, for moral evil and its effects, that Jesus Christ died on the cross.

Of the World

The world is not what we would hope it would be. We have left in our hearts and minds a picture of what the world should be like: a world where people are kind and considerate to one another. A world where disasters do not leave people destitute and dying. A world where violence and warfare are no more. A world where people, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, will “beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks” (Isaiah 2:4, ESV). In the words of the apostle Peter, we would like to see “a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwell” (2 Peter 3:13, ESV).

It was to make that new world possible that Jesus Christ died on the cross for sins. He accepted the cost of all sins, of all people, past, present and future. Jesus didn't just die on the cross for a select few, for those who were “worth it,” for the Jews only, for men only, for the rich or for the poor only, but for all people. Jesus said “I, when I am lifted up from the earth [on the cross], will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32, ESV). Not everyone will be drawn to receive the gift of life in Jesus' name; some will reject the gift (John 12:36, ESV). But one way or the other, the cross will be central to all people on earth, to Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female (Gal. 3:28).

Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, God will be able at a point in the future to “make all things new” (Revelation 21:5, ESV). There will be a new creation in which there will be no more sin, no more “mourning, nor crying, nor pain” (Revelation 21:4, ESV). In that new world the divisions between all people joined to Christ will be healed (Revelation 22:4, ESV). All the signs of sin in the

world and the people who loved those signs - the abuse of the gift of sexuality, the worship of false gods and of self, the desire to possess, and all lies and deceit – will be gone. When Christians say they have “been saved,” it means that they've been saved *from sin* but also that they've been saved *for a new and perfect world*

That All Might be Saved

To be saved is, to put it simply, to be rescued from a horrible situation. Sailors in trouble still send out S.O.S. signals, a plea for some other ship to “save our souls.” Jesus says that he did not come “to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17, ESV). He came to save us from the consequences of sin.

The first consequence is one that all of us can see - death. At some point or other, everyone will be faced with the end of their mortal life. We know, somehow, that death is not good. No matter how many people might tell us that the death of a parent or child “was for the best,” it rarely feels that way. No matter how many times we are told that death is a part of life, it doesn't feel like it. Calling a funeral a “celebration of life” somehow doesn't do our grief justice. Something inside us wants to scream “this just isn't right!”

Then there is the question of justice. The warlord who massacres thousands and amasses a fortune dies at a ripe old age, in the mansion bought with the blood of others. Is that fair? Is that right? In the Quebecois songwriter Luc de la Rocheliere's song, *Six pieds sur terre*, he wants God to

promise that hell exists. Doesn't it seem fair that people should pay the price for the evil they have done in life? Yet, as we talked about earlier, all of us have done immoral and unjust things. If we do not accept Christ's payment for those things, we will pay for them ourselves. It's to avoid that fate that Jesus Christ died on the cross for the sins of the world.

It's worth noting that it was Jesus, not the apostle Paul, who really warned of the consequences of sin. If you want to read about hell, you need to read Jesus' words, not the words of the apostles. Christ calls hell a place where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12, 13:50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30). He calls it a place like *gehenna*, the burning trash heap outside of Jerusalem (Matthew 5:22, 10:28, 23:33). He talks about worthless branches being thrown into the fire, chaff being burned up while the wheat is gathered into the barn, fruitless trees being cut down by the ax. This makes sense: who knows the price that needs to be paid for the broken statue like the one who has to pay it?

Being saved by Jesus is often equated with "going to heaven." But it's much more than that. Jesus came to save us from the great cleansing on the Last Day when the world will be cleansed "by fire" of everything in it that has been twisted by sin (2 Peter 3:12). Everyone sealed with Jesus' baptism, and who has put all their trust in Him, will be cleansed of sin without being utterly destroyed or cast aside (Mark 16:16). Salvation means having a new relationship with God based on trust, love and sacrifice, which in turn causes new relationships to be built with one another based on trust, love and sacrifice as well. Those

relationships will live on not in some mystical “cloud city,” but in a new creation without sin, and without death.

Through Him

It should make sense that, for Christians, everything is about Christ. Yet too many Christians would rather talk and sing about God without ever mentioning how that God can be known, found and followed in Jesus. Muslims can talk about God; so can Jews. Agnostics might even talk about God without getting into details about him (or her). But for Christians, God is known most clearly and explicitly in Jesus. Recall Jesus' conversation with Philip in John's Gospel: “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9 ESV). To know God is to know Jesus. If you say you know God but disregard Jesus' teachings and person, you are describing a God that does not exist, a fiction out of your own imagination.

Pliny the Younger, a Roman governor who lived a few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, described the lives of the Christians in his region. Writing to the Roman Emperor from his Black Sea territory, he said that Christians “were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god.”¹ 1st generation Christian leaders such as Ignatius of Antioch, writing in the last 1st century AD, wrote “our God, Jesus Christ, was conceived by Mary in accord with God's plan: of the seed of David, it is true, but also of the Holy Spirit.”² There is no question that the early Christians

1 Pliny, Penguin Classics, vol. L127, The Letters of the Younger Pliny (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1969)

2 Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians 18 (ANF 1)

believed that Jesus was indeed God in the flesh. So to come to God, one must come through Jesus of Nazareth.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ died on the cross for the sins of the world, that all might be saved through him. One sentence, less than twenty words. It's certainly not the Nicene Creed, but if you get put on the spot about what your faith is about, you could do worse than to share that short sentence. Given more time for conversation, an unpacking of each of the words gets to the heart of Christian belief. It also rejects many false ideas about Christianity. Our faith is not primarily about our behavior, what kinds of movies we should watch or who we should marry. It is not a list of things that people should hate, or a guide for political action. It is a belief that in Jesus of Nazareth, God has delivered us from the evil outside and inside ourselves – and not just us, but all people and the whole world.