

Gospel—*We place our faith in Jesus, joyfully surrender to his Lordship, and boldly proclaim his good news.*

A number of years ago I was on a plane flying down to Atlanta when I struck up a conversation with the guy sitting next to me. Usually, my airport and airline protocol is to not tell people what I do for a living, because as soon as they find out I'm a pastor, things get weird. They either apologize for swearing, tell me that their grandfather was a pastor, or find a way to effectively shut down the conversation within seconds. But this time the very first question the guy asked me after we exchanged names was what I do for a living. I can't lie, so I said, "I'm a pastor." He got a huge smile on his face and said, "I'm a Christian. Can I tell you my testimony?" Sure! He said:

I grew up in Colorado Springs and was born into a Jewish family. When I was in high school, I played on the soccer team, but my family was always so busy, they never came to any of my games. One day, I went out to lunch with some of my friends who were Christians, and their youth pastor happened to be at lunch, too. When he found out that my family never went to my games, without my knowing, he mobilized the entire youth group to come to my next game and cheer for me. So there I was, getting ready for kick off. I looked up in the stands, and there were nearly 100 students, all of whom had signs with my name and number on them. They were chanting my name. The guys took off their shirts and revealed the painted letters of my name on them. I had never seen anything like it. I was standing there on that field, feeling loved by people who didn't even know me and thinking, "Whatever it is these Christians have, I need it in my life." Within months, I gave my life to Jesus and was baptized.

I was sitting there thinking, "This has to be one of the coolest conversion stories I've ever heard." I asked what it was like to have come from a Jewish family and accept Christ. He said "My family refused to accept it. They warned me, they threatened me, they cursed me. Eventually when I decided to be baptized, they held a funeral for me and said that because I accepted Christ, I was dead to them. I was utterly heartbroken." What did you do? He said, "The church took me in, my Christian teammates became like brothers, older men and women in the church became like mothers and fathers. They loved me like their own families." I was thinking, "This story just keeps getting better."

Because I am from Colorado, I asked him who the youth pastor is who led him to the Lord. He said a guy named Alan Briggs. At that point, I am pretty sure that my jaw hit the tray table in front of me. I said, "No way! Alan is my cousin. My cousin led you to the Lord?" We were hugging and crying on this plane ride together. This story keeps getting better. God brought this guy out of darkness into the light. He used the love of Christians to lead him to faith, the love of the church to nurture him in the faith.

Right when you think that true story can't get any better, there's more! When I was following the story of the Asbury revival from earlier this year—the revival that drew 70,000 people to Wilmore Kentucky, a revival that ended up spreading to over 250 college campuses with millions of people streaming it online—I decided to watch the initial chapel service that got the whole thing started, the first event that launched the revival. I got online to watch the recording, and who was preaching? Zach, the same guy I met on the airplane all those years ago.

Never underestimate the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We are continuing in our series called Seven, talking about the 7 in our 317, the seven priorities that guide us as a church, seven key ingredients we focus on as we try to become the church God has called us to be and help people grow in their faith and mature as disciples. Last week we focused on worship. God created us to worship him! God wants us to delight in him, to desire him, to be desperate for him, and to live our lives in his presence and for his glory! Today we get to focus on the **gospel**. As in the story I told you to begin today, what we know is that the gospel of Jesus radically changes people's lives. We are a gospel-centered church, where the gospel influences and forms everything we do. Here's how we say it: **Gospel—We place our faith in Jesus, joyfully surrender to his Lordship, and boldly proclaim his good news.** You can see that there are really three components to our focus on the gospel: the first requires trust, the second requires submission, and the third requires participation in declaring the message. Let's dive in and talk about each.

We place our faith in Jesus. The essence of the gospel message is that Jesus Christ, a man who lived 2,000 years ago, is also the one and only God who made the world and loved the world enough to enter into the world he had made on a rescue mission to redeem and restore it from the corruption that had taken place because of rebellion and sin. Part of that rescue mission included Jesus' teaching about love and truth and righteousness, part of it included miracles of compassion and mercy, but the rescue mission centered on Jesus Christ laying down his life on the cross, taking the nails and the spear, shedding his blood, an innocent person absorbing in his own body the just penalty for the sins of the world. He loved us all the way to the grave. He succumbed to death, but death was not powerful enough to keep its hold on him. On Easter morning, Jesus rose from the dead, a climactic victory proving he really is who he said he was and really can do what he claimed to be able to do—Jesus Christ really is the Lord and Savior of the world. That's the gospel message, and when we hear that message we are given a choice in how we are going to respond: we can decide it's false and so reject it, or we can look at all the evidence—the empty tomb, the changed lives, the dozen resurrection appearances to hundreds of people, the birth and spread of the church, the people willing to die for their testimony—and we can choose to believe, to place our faith in Jesus.

To have faith in Jesus requires us to place our trust that the gospel message is true. When Jesus first rose from the dead, not all of his disciples saw him at first, only a few. They told the others, "It happened! It happened—Jesus really did it. He rose from the dead. We saw him. We touched him. It's real." One of Jesus' very own disciples, Thomas, looked at his friends and told them they were crazy, that they had lost their minds. He said, "I won't believe unless I put my fingers in the places where I saw the nails go in. I won't believe it unless I can take my own hand and put it where I saw the spear go in." In other words, your gospel hasn't convinced me yet! Later that day, Jesus appeared to the group of them. He graciously went over to Thomas as said, "Here's my hand; see the hole. Here's my side; go ahead, touch the wound." Thomas, having irrefutable evidence, bowed down and declared, "My Lord and my God." What happened next has so much relevance to us: "Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed'" (John 20:29). Thomas saw it firsthand; he had to believe. We haven't. The evidence is real, but we are removed from it. We haven't seen Jesus with our own eyes, but Jesus himself said, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet still believe." This is the very essence of faith. Hebrews 11:1 says, "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." We want to be people who put our faith, our trust, our hope, our confidence in Jesus Christ.

- Our hope and confidence is not in a political party; it's in Jesus Christ the Lord.
- Our hope and confidence is not in living a good, moral life; it's in Jesus Christ the Lord.
- Our hope and confidence is not in our ability to be successful at work or being accepted by our friends; it's in Jesus Christ the Lord.

- Our hope and confidence is not in building a strong family and a stable life; it's in Jesus Christ the Lord.

He is the one we believe in, not ourselves, not anyone or anything this world has to offer, but Jesus and Jesus alone. Because we believe in him, **we joyfully surrender to his Lordship**. When Jesus called people to be his disciples he said to them, "Come and follow me" (Matthew 4:19), which meant he was summoning people to reject living the way they were previously living and to choose to let him be in control of their lives.

We are all familiar with the concept of surrender. The word is used regularly in the context of war. In 1945, after years of fighting in World War II, American forces pleaded for Japan's surrender and warned them that if they refused, there would be consequences beyond their imagination. The Japanese refused, and then the first atomic bomb was dropped. Again, the Americans demanded surrender. Again, the Japanese refused. The second atomic bomb was dropped. Staring down a force they had no ability to fight against, desperate for their survival, on September 2, 1945, in Tokyo Bay, Japanese officials stepped aboard the USS Missouri and signed letters of unconditional surrender. Not surrender if, not surrender so long as, not surrender based upon—it was unconditional surrender. We give up entirely. You are in charge.

Countless times throughout history, nations have been brought to their knees and forced into unconditional surrender out of fear and self-preservation. Jesus is looking for an entirely different kind of surrender, where it's not the threat of punishment that forces us to give up sovereignty of our own lives but rather it's the joy of a student at Oxford who gets to sit under Albert Einstein to learn physics from one of the greatest minds in history, or the joy of a 8-year-old kid going to Michael Jordan's summer camp to learn the game from the greatest ever to play it, or the joy of a piano student being tutored by Mozart. In any of those scenarios, it's not fear or compulsion that makes you surrender, it's opportunity, it's joy, it's hope, it's a desire to forsake your inadequate ways of doing things and learn from the master himself. That's what surrender to Jesus Christ is like, but it's not learning to practice a hobby a certain way; it's learning to live life a certain way—to live life like Jesus, to follow him. Which of course doesn't mean that we follow behind him on a road, but that we follow all the words he taught, every example he set. We submit to his entire way of life.

One of the best examples of submission comes from the Old Testament life of Naaman, who was the lead commander of a powerful army in Syria and suffered from leprosy. He had a slave in his household who had been captured from Israel and this slave said to him, "There is a prophet in Israel to whom God has given the ability to heal people. You should go see him." Naaman's master, the king, sent him to Israel with the equivalent of millions and millions of dollars in order to entice this prophet to heal his commander. When the commander got to the prophet, a man named Elisha, the prophet told him, "Go and wash yourself in the Jordan river seven times and you will be cleansed." Naaman, this proud, strong military commander, looked at him as though he had lost his mind. "Why would I go down and wash myself in that river? There are better rivers back home. This was a wild goose chase. I should never have come all this way." And he stormed back toward his home. On the way, one of his servants said to him, "I know what he told you doesn't make sense, but we came all this way to meet with the prophet. We met with him, and he told you what to do. Shouldn't you listen to him? Who cares what rivers we have back home. If he says to wash in this river seven times, why not do what he says and wash in that river seven times?" Naaman listened, nodded, went to the river, did what he was told, and immediately was made well. He had to press pause on what made sense to him. He had to forsake doing things his way and simply follow the instructions given by another.

Sometimes, total surrender to the Lordship of Jesus comes at a high price. There's a wonderful book called **Everything Sad is Untrue**, the autobiographical story of Daniel Nayeri, who fled from Iran as a 7-year-old boy with his mother because his mom became a Christian. Before that, Daniel's mother had it made. She was a doctor, well-educated, from a good family, wealthy, respected in the community, and a devoted Muslim. But she came across a Bible, read it, and started following Jesus. In Iran, becoming a Christian is a capital offense; they'll kill you for it. So they had to flee the country, and ended up in the US, where his mom's medical license wasn't recognized, so she was working hourly jobs just to scrape by.

I'll let Daniel take it from here. He says,

My mom became a Christian....Not just a regular one, who keeps it in their pocket. She fell in love. She wanted everybody to have what she had...to realize that in other religions you have rules and codes and obligations to follow to earn good things, but all you had to do with Jesus was believe he was the one who died for you. And she believed. When I tell the story...this is the part where the grown-ups always interrupt me. They say, "Okay, but why did she convert?" Cause up to that point, I've told them about...all the villages my grandfather owned, all the gold, my mom's own medical practice—all the amazing things she had that we don't have anymore because she became a Christian. All the money she gave up, so we're poor now. But I don't have an answer for them. So I just say what my mom says when people ask her. She looks them in the eye...and she says, "Because it's true." It's true and it's more valuable than seven million dollars in gold coins, and thousands of acres of Persian countryside, and ten years of education to get a medical degree, and all your family, and a home...and even maybe your life. My mom wouldn't have made the trade otherwise. If you believe it's true, that there is a God and He wants you to believe in Him and He sent His Son to die for you—then it has to take over your life. It has to be worth more than everything else...There's no middle...She had all that wealth, the love of all those people she helped in her clinic. They treated her like a queen...And she's poor now. People spit on her on buses. She's a refugee in places people hate refugees...And she'll tell you-it's worth it. Jesus is better. It's true. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. She not only placed her faith in Jesus, but her life was also radically turned upside down because she decided to submit to his Lordship, no matter the cost. But the gospel is not only something we believe and submit to, there is a third element to it: it calls for something from us, it necessitates our participation, we become heralds of the gospel. **We boldly proclaim his good news.** The gospel of Jesus is not something we keep to ourselves. The gospel is such good news it simply has to be shared with others. A few months ago, a new Thai restaurant came to this part of town. They didn't send out any flyers or pay for any social media marketing, but within weeks I heard ten different people raving about it. So of course, I had to go try it. Then I became a walking billboard, too. *When you experience something you love, you share it with the people you love.* That is 1,000 times more true for Jesus. Sharing this message changes people's lives and eternities!

Romans 1:16 says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes." The message of Jesus is used by God to bring people to faith in God. The Lord has commissioned us with this task, to ensure everyone knows. "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20). As a church, we not only center our lives on the gospel, we declare the gospel. This is the heartbeat of our church. We want central Indiana to be saturated with the gospel. We want every man, woman, and child to have continual, compelling opportunities to hear and

respond to the good news of Jesus. The goal isn't church growth; it's gospel saturation. The goal isn't that a lot of people get to hear once, but that every person, every man, woman, and child has continual, compelling opportunities. For that to happen, every person in this church has to live on mission.

Starting in December our church is going to spend four months studying the gospel of John together, doing a deep dive into the life and ministry of Jesus. One of the really neat things we see in the gospel of John is the impact of one of his followers named Andrew. Andrew is only mentioned by name three times in the gospel. In John 1, after Andrew becomes a disciple, we read: "The first thing Andrew did was find his brother and introduce him to Jesus." In John 6, Andrew is the one who finds the small boy who has the fish and the loaves and Andrew brings him into the presence of Jesus. In John 12, there are some men traveling from a different country who hear about Jesus, and Andrew escorts them into Jesus' presence. Every time he shows up, he is bringing others to Jesus. That's the life, that's the mission, that's the impact to which God is calling every one of us.

We try to do everything we can to equip you to live on a mission to tell others about Jesus. We have a focus on our prayer wall, to pray for those you want to introduce to Jesus. We make these 317 bags available. I know four people in just the last few weeks who have been baptized here at The Creek. I asked what brought them to this decision. Each of them have held up this bag and said that they moved into a new home and a neighbor came over and with love and kindness gave them a gift and invited them to church! Something as small as a knock on the door, a big smile, a generous gift, and a non-intrusive invitation can be a part of sharing the good news of Jesus and bringing others into his presence.