

How Does the Gospel Affect Relationships?

The Gospel, as we've seen, is the power of God.

This is symbolic and summarizing language for the idea that human beings are broken and imperfect creatures.

Throughout the Story of God, they are seen, because of their rebellion against God, to be powerless to reconstruct or rebuild themselves.

Even more serious, human beings are powerless to rebuild their relationship with God.

In this sense, the life of Jesus was a perfect substitute for our imperfect life; his death was a perfect stand-in for the death of judgment we deserve, since God is Holy and can't allow sin to remain in his presence.

The resurrection of Jesus *sealed the deal*: in defeating death (the ultimate enemy, and the ultimate battle, so to speak), all whose faith is in Jesus are given power in each of these areas of powerlessness—but it is not their own power.

St. Paul makes this point in Romans 4:23-25:

...the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, *who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.*

Jesus was raised from the dead, at least in part, to guarantee that those for whom he died ("delivered up for our trespasses") would in fact have death-conquering power in this life and in the life to come.

How did Jesus rise from the dead? He rose by the power of God. What we could not do (being spiritually dead) He did (having conquered death).

In this sense, we've seen how weakness and powerlessness are fundamental to grasping the significance of the Gospel in character formation.

If this view of the world is correct, our efforts to change and shape our own character, and to remedy our character defects, taken by themselves, are without ultimate and lasting significance. They are impotent.

By extension, and really by necessity, if the Gospel is the only solution for our own personal human weakness and impotency, it must also be the solution for our relational needs.

Pride

Solomon wrote, "Pride goes before a fall."

Pride is that human impulse that puts something of "self" in front of someone else. The most powerful angel, Lucifer (whose name means "bright shining one"), became

jealous of God, and in his pride, deceived a third of the other angels to worship him instead of God.

As a result he and his followers (called demons) were removed from God's presence in judgment—recall that God cannot allow sin to remain in his presence.

Also, Lucifer's name was changed; he would thenceforth be called "Satan" which means "enemy" or "adversary."

This is the ultimate expression of pride: taking the glory and honor that belong to God for oneself. We saw this sin when we earlier discussed *idolatry*.

With pride, it is impossible to benefit from the Gospel. Why?

The Gospel requires a person to admit he is weak and powerless, and to rely by faith on God's strength and potency for acceptance and peace.

With pride it is impossible to change our character. If our understanding of character is correct, we can only functionally rearrange the broken pieces of our self; true change, and true restoration, must come from outside of ourselves.

With pride, by extension, it is impossible to live in harmonious relationships with others. Let me explain.

Salvation's Shalom

We've seen that the Gospel is the power of God "unto salvation" for everyone who believes. But what is salvation?

One pastor related a funny story: in speaking with a stranger about the Christian faith, he asked the man, "Sir, do you want to be saved?" The man looked puzzled and answered, "Saved from what?"

Salvation is a word that means deliverance from the judgment our rebellion against God deserves. In this sense, it is a spiritual reality.

But, salvation has broader implications than spiritual deliverance. The word itself has origins from the Hebrew word "shalom," which means peace.

But shalom isn't simply the "cessation of conflict"-kind of peace. Rather, it includes positive elements as well: peace in body and soul, peace in creation, peace across the universe.

In short, shalom speaks of a total, full-orbed material and invisible peace.

Jesus speaks along these lines when, in Matthew's Gospel, describing the end of time, he speaks of "the coming restoration (or renovation) of all things." In the ancient Christian tradition, people speak of the "new heavens and the new earth" in this regard.

Total Cosmic Renewal, then, is the ultimate change which is promised in the Gospel. However, this is only realized in part, now. Its full realization awaits a future time.

As a result, salvation refers not only to peace on an individual basis, but also peace in a larger sphere, including the sphere of our relationships with others.

The Gospel's Already and Not Yet

That salvation intends to bring about changes in the physical world is a profound realization for some people. For others, it's a stumbling block. "Where is the peace on earth I hear people talking about at Christmas time?"

The Gospel promises a change in status: someone moves from being under God's judgment to being accepted by God through Jesus. But the full experience of that change—Salvation's Full Shalom—has yet to be realized.

Sometimes this is called the "already and not yet" character of the Gospel.

As a result, as we've seen, though a person can believe the Gospel and receive grace today ("already"), experiencing the power of this change is a difficult and day-to-day challenge ("not yet").

Nowhere is the tension between the "already" and "not yet" more obvious than in human relationships.

The struggle to experience salvation's *shalom* is even more profound in relationship with other people since the brokenness and impotency is multiplied when two or more people enter into contact and aspire to varying degrees of intimacy with one another.

Which brings up an important point: if our relationships are not drawing power and strength from the Gospel, they are drawing from their own broken infrastructure, and can only partially realize what God intends for them to be.

Luther's Intra Nos and Extra Nos

Our human impulse in relationship with other people is the same as it is with our relationship with God. We want to begin with Gospel grace, but continue by our own strength.

This human tendency to resort to human power led Luther to strongly assert that the Gospel—the good news of the power of God to save rebellious people from His Judgment through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—was a reality described not by "intra nos" but by "extra nos."

These are two Latin phrases that are vector values: concepts with a directional component.

In both cases, the concept is "righteousness," or God's saving power. The directional component is either "within oneself" or "outside of oneself."

Intra nos refers to "righteousness inside us." *Extra nos* refers to "righteousness outside of us."

The Gospel is the good news that peace with God and acceptance with God is a righteous gift that is not to be found *within oneself*, but is to be found outside of oneself.

Looking within oneself highlights our impotency and weakness to bring about the relationship shalom we so desire. Looking to Jesus' finished work on the cross, and his subsequent victory over death on the third day, highlights the power of God.

Looking to oneself—*intra nos*—in this sense is actually bad news. Looking to Jesus—*extra nos*—is good news.

This is why the Gospel is so important to human relationships.

Bonhoeffer's Life Together

Deitrich Bonhoeffer, a famous German pastor and theologian who resisted Hitler during the Second World War, wrote a little book called *Life Together*.

The point of this book was to instruct the men who were being trained in his seminary (at that time which was "underground" and out of the attention of the government) on how they should live together as Christians.

Living life "together," for Bonhoeffer, meant a radical focus on Christ. To interact, or relate, to another person *directly* was to oppress that person. Bonhoeffer calls this kind of interaction "human" love:

Human love makes itself an end in itself. It creates of itself an end, an idol which it worships, to which it must subject everything.

On the contrary, through Gospel love, and because we believe the Gospel, interactions with others take place "through Christ." This is an indirect relationship to someone else.

In this sense, the only life-giving pathway to another person is the Gospel, and the Gospel Man, Jesus.

As such together two people have a relationship through Christ and through the Gospel. Neither person worships the other (which is like a relational version of Luther's "intra nos") but both worship Christ ("extra nos") and are thereby enabled truly to love one another.

The Barrier of Strength

This kind of relationship requires people to acknowledge their weakness before Jesus' strength, not only in the context of their own individual selves, but also in the context of the relationship.

This is not easy.

It is a tragic irony of life that our strengths often present barriers to being in relationship with others.

As something in which we feel a measure of potency, a strength tends to represent an area of pride for a person.

Weakness, on the other hand, tends to put others first, since we have no sense of achievement or accomplishment in that area of ourselves.

The Gospel doesn't eliminate our strengths, but puts them in their proper perspective: gifts from God intended to bring glory to God. In this sense, then, our strengths—even and especially our strengths—become weaknesses when viewed alongside the power and glory of God.

This creates an opening for other human beings to be in relationship to us. Without the Gospel, we impose our own power on others; in and through the Gospel, our power is "humbled" before the awesome power of God, and others are drawn into relationship with us rather than pushed away by pride.

Brokenness and Community

Jesus, the Perfect Gospel Man, makes a radical statement when he moves from eternity as the Eternal God and Second Person of the Trinity, into time and space as the Incarnate Son, "born of a Virgin."

He says, "I desire a relationship with you. I love you. Will you come with me?"

In this divine invitation, Jesus bids a person admit one's own powerlessness to save himself. This brings a realization of brokenness, and comes with a sense of loss.

However, the sensation of loss is more than made up for the love and communion followers of Jesus receive from Him, and from others—for the call to follow Jesus is always a call to enter into relationship with others.

Bonhoeffer said, of sin, "he who is alone with his sin is utterly alone."

This points to the real need for the Gospel—for only through the Gospel can a person be free from needing to prove himself before God and others, and thus be free to enter into relationship with others.

One of the most famous final scenes of a movie is that of the Godfather, part three. In this scene, we see Michael Corleone, at once the triumphant mafia "godfather," but at the same time, desolate, alone, on a chair in his estate in Sicily.

As he slumps over in death, he falls to the ground, and the scene fades to black.

Observing this arresting scene, the viewer is left with the question: what was the price of his success, if, in the end, he dies a broken man, and alone?

The Gospel's answer is that only in relationship with others are we not in that place Bonhoeffer called the place of being "truly alone."

Our brokenness (and the implied impotency that comes with it) then, *must* be the basis for entering into community with others.

Such a community will be one composed of people, all of whom have been called by Jesus' power and grace in the Gospel.

The Body of Christ

The Bible speaks of the Christian community as the "Body of Christ." The writers of Scripture envision a massive group of people—too many to count, from every tribe and nation—sharing one thing in common amidst all their diversity, and that is a shared belief that apart from God's grace in the Gospel, they would be lost.

Their differences, then, as they relate to one another, are not wrong, but merely pale by comparison with what they have in common: the Gospel Man.

His power, received by faith, intends not only to restore our shalom with Him, but also with one another.

Here are a few verses that talk about this figure of speech, "the body of Christ" from St. Paul's epistles:

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:4-8)

Here Paul teaches that the "body" is both one and many, and that the many belong not only to Christ ("...one body in Christ") but also to one another ("...members one of another"). This mutual "belonging" he shows is one of diversity ("...gifts that differ") and unity ("...let us use (our gifts for the body)").

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 12:12, Paul writes about the unity and diversity of the "Body of Christ"—

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

Our unity is founded upon the shared experience of being "baptized in the Spirit" no matter what our background—in this case, Paul highlights racial diversity in the Body ("Jews or Greeks") as well as socioeconomic diversity in the Body ("slaves or free").

But he goes on in the text to show that like a human body has many parts, each of which have a different function, so also in the Body of Christ: God has given different functions to different parts, with the overarching goal being,

...no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Corinthians 12:24-26)

This requires humility, the kind of character that arises through a deep and intimate experience of the power of the Gospel.

The Image of God

The basis of relationships we've seen comes from the shared experience of the Gospel; Paul said we have all been "baptized in One Spirit."

Relationships also derive from a common creation-source: every person was made, God tell us, "in His Image."

In Genesis 1:26-27, God said: "Let us make man in our image..."

The image of God that is communicated to people includes many characteristics, such as an ability to "know," to "discover," to "create," and to "exhibit holiness"—that which is good, right, and true.

It also includes a capacity for, and even a *need* for, relationships. Notice God says, "Let US make man in OUR image."

While the Hebrew language in which Genesis is written can be subtle regarding singular and plural pronouns, pastors and theologians have seen in these particular pronouns an expression of both the Singularity and Plurality of the Being of the One True God.

That is to say, not only is God One, but this One God, in the Christian tradition, exists in Three Distinct Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

These three Persons have always existed, and have always enjoyed a perfect community or relationship with one another.

In part, then, this explains why in Genesis 2, God observes the first thing in His Creation that was "not good" when God said, "It is not good that Man should be alone."

But the Creation of Man and Woman is immediately followed by the rebellion of our first parents against Him. They rebel and fall from THAT relationship with God. This is the beginning of enmity with one another.

Since then, not only husbands and wives, but all people together have struggled to experience the kind of Trinitarian Harmony that God Himself enjoys.

The Gospel Man, Jesus, begins the process of repairing a person's relationship not only with God, but also with other people. In this repair project, men and women are brought back to a place of relational harmony that they once enjoyed before the Fall.

You Need the Church

In light of the centrality of the Body of Christ to the expression and experience of the Gospel, and given that people are made for community as beings made "in the image of

God,” it makes sense, then, that the Church, the Body of Christ, is not an option for a believer.

Some people talk about the “church universal” and the “local church,” and say “I’m a member of the church universal, but not a member of a local church.

This is like saying my arm is a member of the “universal Body” but not a member of me. It simply doesn’t make sense.

Early Church fathers Cyprian and Augustine agreed, and in no uncertain terms. Both advanced the following strong exhortation related to being a part of a specific, particular church:

He who would not have the Church as his mother may not have God as his father.

While there may be specific and individual exceptions to this rule, the exceptions show the value of the rule, they don’t do away with it.

Conclusion

We’ve seen the importance of the Gospel for having fulfilling and life-giving relationships with other people—life-giving, I say, as opposed to relationships that functionally take away life, and are in that sense oppressive and destructive.

The Gospel creates a point of authority outside of a person, and of a relationship, to which the persons in the relationship can appeal, and from which they can interact with one another.

The Gospel also levels the playing field between a diversity of gifts and strengths between people: since every person is impotent apart from Gospel power, by submitting to the Grace of God in the Gospel Man, Jesus Christ, people’s gifts are thus put to service for God’s glory, and not one’s own.

“One’s own glory” refers to human pride. This can be seen as people seek to love one another humanly, as opposed to loving them in and through the Gospel.

Thus, the Gospel actually assumes relationships, and community. Rather than making Christian community optional, the Gospel makes it essential. Church, as an institution, despite all its flaws, is part of that picture of Christian community.

Together, we’ve seen how the Gospel changes our character and our relationships, bringing us both into harmony with God and with one another.

Questions for Discussion

1. Have you learned something new about relationships and community?
2. How has the teaching about the Gospel and its impact on your relationships challenge you?
3. Is there a relationship you have right now that is particularly difficult? What difference can the teaching in this chapter make on that relationship today?

4. Are you convinced of the importance of the “institution” of the church as a result of this chapter’s teaching? What reservations do you still have?
5. Many people deal with deeply held resentments over hurts experienced “in relationship” with others. How might the Gospel enable these resentments and hurts to begin the process of healing?

On Your Own...

A twentieth century author, Elton Trueblood, writes about the character of the church in his book, *Company of the Committed*. He says this:

What we seek is not a fellowship of the righteous or the self-righteous., but rather a fellowship of men and women who, though they recognize that they are inadequate, nevertheless can personally be involved in the effort to make Christ’s kingdom prevail. Perhaps the greatest single weakness of the contemporary Christian church is that missions of supposed members are not really involved at all and, what is worse, do not think it strange that they are not. (p. 38)

Do you think Trueblood is correct? What might this chapter’s teaching on relationships and the Gospel do to change a person’s view about being committed to the Church and her ministry? Do you think what Trueblood says of the Church can also be said of other institutions, like marriage, family, schools, etc?