

“Christ shows us what it is to be God,
in the way he dies as a human being.”

~ John Behr

What is the Gospel? Faith as Change and Divine Synergy

1. The Gospel is the character of God as revealed in Christ. This proclamation (God’s character) is the good news.¹

A good example of a proclamation is a man telling a woman for the first time that he loves her. If she desires to be with him, her believing that can change the entire direction of her life. The power of the proclamation lies in the believing. If a person doesn’t believe a proclamation, then that proclamation makes no difference to him or her. The Gospel is a proclamation about God’s goodness that is expressed to all people as active love.^{2, 3}

2. A First Point of Change – New Belief

Belief means change. The first point of change for any person is to believe God loves him or her. Once a person believes God loves them, the pattern revealed throughout history is that he or she will no longer be indifferent or hostile towards God. (Salvation is salvation from the sin of disbelief, which results in all other sins.)

3. A Second Point of Change – God’s Way of Life

Because God loves us, he showed us his way of life. Sometimes this way is understood as the Law of God, but this is much more than a juridical law. It is like a health standard against which one may measure personal progress. God’s purpose in showing us this law was not to condemn us, but to help us see the difference between His way of life and living in other ways. Sickness follows when a person is outside of God’s way of life.

4. A Third Point of Change – How We See God

The more a person knows just how good God is, the less they fear him because “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18).^{4, 5} The person who fears God, seeks to avoid punishment from God. The person who loves God, no longer fears God’s punishment. God’s justice is not like man’s justice. When He acts to correct a person, it always has a higher purpose. Its purpose is to bring people to the point of change to embrace God’s Way of Life. When a person understands how much God loves them, they no longer fear his correction, and they may in fact welcome it.

5. Divine Synergy – Our Response

For over 2000 years, the church confirms that when these changes occur in the heart of a person, so begins the life of faith. Faith means that a person changes their beliefs and habits to be consistent and reliable in living God’s Way of Life, bringing a cycle of spiritual health and renewal. Until such time as God has finished making us, we will not be perfect in this faith. We will still fail and need correction (and sometimes the Bible refers to such correction as punishment).

Christ came into the world not to condemn the world, but to save it (See John 3:17). Many assume that God punishes people because they have broken the law, and that God must punish them in order to be just. It is true that we are all law breakers—and because we break the law—the law judges us guilty. (We all fail to love others as we ought.) But God’s purpose in giving us the law was not to condemn us, but to show us right from wrong. It just so happens that imperfect people are condemned by the law because the law shows us where we fall short. It is a mistake to assume that just because the law condemns us that God condemns us. According to the Bible, there is no law higher than the law of love.⁶ And only God loves all creatures with a perfect, unchanging, and unending love.

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails.” 1 Corinthians 13:4-8b

Illustrative Quotations

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.” 1 John 4:18

“...God is infinitely more bound to provide for his child than any man is to provide for his. The relation is infinitely, divinely closer. It is God to whom every hunger, every aspiration, every desire, every longing of our nature is to be referred; he made all our needs—made us the creatures of a thousand necessities—and have we no claim on him? Nay, we have claims innumerable, infinite; and his one great claim on us is that we should claim our claims of him.” George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*

“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.” 2 Peter 1:3-4

“It is the greatest punishment to commit sin, though we may remain unpunished – it is the greatest honour and repose to live virtuously, though we may be punished.” St John Chrysostom

“The notion that the salvation of Jesus is a salvation from the consequences of our sins, is a false, mean, low notion. The salvation of Christ is salvation from the smallest tendency or leaning to sin. It is a deliverance into the pure air of God’s ways of thinking and feeling. It is a salvation that makes the heart pure, with the will and choice of the heart to be pure. To such a heart, sin is disgusting. It sees a thing as it is,—that is, as God sees it, for God sees everything as it is.” George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*

“His nature is always to forgive, and just because he forgives, he punishes. Because God is so altogether alien to wrong, because it is to him a heart-pain and trouble that one of his little ones should do the evil thing, there is, I believe, no extreme of suffering to which, for the sake of destroying the evil thing in them, he would not subject them. A man might flatter, or bribe, or coax a tyrant; but there is no refuge from the love of God; that love will, for very love, insist upon the uttermost farthing.”⁷ George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*

“For as Christ died and was exalted as man, so, as man, he is said to receive what, as God, he always had, in order that this great gift might extend to us. For the Word was not degraded by receiving a body, so that he should seek to ‘receive’ God’s gift. Rather he deified what he put on; and, more than that, he bestowed his gift upon the race of men.” St Athanasius

Footnotes

1. The cross points to the character of God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. God became a man and died for you. He loves you.

2. Does a baby who has just been born deserve their parent's love? They have certainly done nothing to earn that love. But their parents—just because they are their parents—owe their love to their child. They brought them into the world, and are therefore responsible for them.

We are all God's children. God loves us not because we deserve his love. He loves us because we are his children.

“No amount of wrong-doing in a child can ever free a parent from the divine necessity of doing all he can to deliver his child; the bond between them cannot be broken.” George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*

God loves us unconditional. He loves and accepts each and every one of us. (But that does not mean he approves of all we do. See *The Inescapable Love of God* by Thomas Talbott.)

3. If a person doesn't believe that God loves them, then his love and forgiveness means nothing to them.

This does not mean God's love is worthless to a person if they don't believe he loves them. God desires their good, and will continue to do all he can to bring them to the point where they see just how valued they are.

4. “I no longer fear God, but I love him. For love casts out fear.” St Anthony

5. When a person realises that God is good, they seek intimacy with him. Intimacy with God is salvation, and through this intimacy, we begin to become like him in character.

“Christ died to save us, not from suffering, but from ourselves; not from injustice, far less from justice, but from being unjust. He died that we might live—but live as he lives, by dying as he died who died to himself that he might live unto God. If we do not die to ourselves, we cannot live to God, and he that does not live to God, is dead.” George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*

God is always working for our good. He loves us and will never turn his back on us. (There's a great little video on YouTube called “Orthodox view of Salvation” by Steve Robinson which illustrates this point.)

God showed us how much he loves us by becoming a man and dying on a cross. He died to propitiate us and turn us from our self-destructive ways.

6. All laws on this earth must have punishments to be law. Crime must be deterred through those punishments. This is true of man-made laws and the laws God gave Israel. But what is true of the laws on this earth is not true of the Heavenly law of love.

God does not have to set an example so that those in Heaven are deterred from doing evil things. All in Heaven will love God and want nothing more than intimacy with him. If those in Hell are not punished simply because they are law breakers—but they instead suffer the punishment of correction from a loving Father—those in Heaven will not be tempted to sin, nor will they think God unjust.

7. Due to the context in which the word "punishes" is used in this quote, it could easily be replaced with the word "corrects."

Recommended Reading:

The Hope of the Gospel by George MacDonald

“Our wrong deeds are our dead works; our evil thoughts are our live sins. These, the essential opposites of faith and love, the sins that dwell and work in us, are the sins from which Jesus came to deliver us. When we turn against them and refuse to obey them, they rise in fierce insistence, but the same moment begin to die. We are then on the Lord's side, as he has always been on ours, and he begins to deliver us from them.” *The Hope of the Gospel*