

“Gospel-Centered Teaching”
What is it and how do we do it?
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(This material was originally presented to Marathi-speaking Pastors in India)

If the story of the Bible is the story of God sending His Son to this earth to save His people, then we need to make sure that whatever we are preaching and teaching in this Book, we are relating it to this story.

This morning we are going to answer two questions: 1.) *What does it mean to be Gospel-centered in our teaching and preaching?* 2.) *How do we do it?*

I. Connect the dots and tell the story.

I want to read the introduction to a book that I recommend to all of you, whether you are parents or not because it is such an excellent example of how to be Christ-centered and Gospel-centered in teaching the Scriptures. It is called **“The Jesus Storybook Bible”** by Sally Lloyd-Jones. This is written for children, but it touches my heart every time I read it. It might touch your heart as well—

“Now, some people think the Bible is a book of rules, telling you what you should and shouldn’t do. The Bible certainly does have some rules in it. They show you how life works best. But the Bible isn’t mainly about you and what you should be doing. It’s about God and what he has done.

Other people think the Bible is a book of heroes, showing you people you should copy. The Bible does have some heroes in it, but (as you’ll soon find out) most of the people in the Bible aren’t heroes at all. They make some big mistakes (sometimes on purpose), they get afraid and run away. At times, they’re downright mean.

No, the Bible isn’t a book of rules, or a book of heroes. The Bible is most of all a Story. It’s an adventure story about a young Hero who comes from a far country to win back his lost treasure. It’s a love story about a brave Prince who leaves his palace, his throne-everything-to rescues the ones he loves. It’s like the most wonderful of fairy tales that has come true in real life!

You see, the best thing about this Story is-it’s true.

There are lots of stories in the Bible, but all the stories are telling one Big Story. The Story of how God loves his children and comes to rescue them.

It takes the whole Bible to tell this Story. And at the center of the Story, there is a baby. Every story in the Bible whispers his name. He is like the missing piece in the puzzle-the piece that makes all the other pieces fit together, and suddenly you can see a beautiful picture.”

This Big Story of the Bible revolves around Christ and the Gospel, and we can break it down like this: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration—

- **Creation:** One Hebrew word sums up the picture of Genesis 1 and 2: *shalom*. Peace. Earth was full of God’s *shalom*, the kind of peace in which everything works

according to God's intention. The world was made for human beings to live in joy in the presence of our Maker, worshiping God by loving Him and one another forever.

- **Fall:** Adam and Eve rejected God's rule over them. And because Adam represented all of humanity, his action affects us and all of creation. Through our attitudes and actions we have declared ourselves to be God's enemies, and this rebellion against God results in physical and spiritual death.
- **Redemption:** The loving Creator who rightly shows Himself to be wrathful toward our sin is determined to turn evil and suffering we have caused into good that will be to His ultimate glory. So God implemented His master plan for redeeming His world and rescuing fallen sinners. In the Person of Jesus Christ, God Himself comes to renew the world and restore His people.
- **Restoration:** The story doesn't end with redemption. God has promised to renew the whole world, and the Bible gives us a peak into this glorious future. The restoration of all things will take place in two ways. Christ will return to judge sin and evil, and He will usher in righteousness and peace. God will purge this world of evil once and for all.

No matter where you are in your Bible teaching and preaching, you should know where it fits within this big picture, and you should spend at least a minute or two pointing backward and forward to help your people understand where they are in this picture. Your ultimate goal is to help your people learn how to read and understand the Bible on their own through a Gospel-centered lens.

II. Point to Jesus as the ultimate solution to our sin problem.

The following is from the introduction to the *ESV Gospel Transformation Bible* edited by Bryan Chapell—

1. Some passages—such as the prophecies and the messianic Psalms—clearly *predict* who Christ is and what he will do. Isaiah wrote of the Messiah, that “his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end” (Isa. 9:6-7). This is a clear prediction of Jesus’ person and work, and there are many more such predictions in the prophetic portions of Scripture.

2. Other passages *prepare* God’s people to understand the grace that God must provide to redeem his people. When God uses his servant David to show mercy to King Saul’s lame grandson (a royal descendant who would be David’s blood-rival for Israel’s throne), we understand something about God’s ways of forgiving enemies and showing mercy toward the helpless.

Not only do many Old Testament passages prepare God’s people to understand the grace of *his provision*, they also prepare the people to understand *their need*. When Paul writes in Galatians 3:24 that the law was our schoolmaster or guardian helping lead us to Christ, we understand that the high and holy standards of the law ultimately prepare us to seek God’s

provision of mercy rather than to depend on the quality of our performance to make us acceptable to him. The sacrifice system further prepares us to understand that without the shedding of blood there is no atonement for our failures to keep the law (Heb. 9:22). And because Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness, we are prepared to understand that our standing before God depends upon our faith in the provision of another (Rom. 4:23-24).

Grace does not spring up like a surprise jack-in-the-box in the New Testament. God's people have been prepared for millennia to understand and receive the grace of Christ on their behalf.

3. Because grace is the key to understanding the purposes of God throughout the whole Bible, culminating in Christ, aspects of the gospel are *reflected* throughout Scripture. When a text neither plainly predicts nor prepares for Christ's person or work, the redemptive truths reflected in the text can always be discerned by asking two questions that are fair to ask of any text:

1. What does this text reflect about the nature of God who provides redemption?

2. What does this text reflect about the nature of humanity that requires redemption?

These simple questions are the lenses to the reading glasses through which we can look at any text to see what the Bible is reflecting of God's nature and/or human nature. Inevitably these lenses enable us see that God is holy and we are not, or that God is sovereign and we are vulnerable, or that God is merciful and we require his mercy. Such reading glasses always make us aware of our need of God's grace to compensate for our sin and inability. Christ may not be specifically mentioned in the text, but the reflection of God's nature and ours makes the necessity of his grace apparent.

Using these reading glasses throughout the Old and New Testament will enable us to see the gracious nature of God who provides redemption as he gives strength to the weak, rest to the weary, deliverance to the disobedient, faithfulness to the unfaithful, food to the hungry, and salvation to sinners. We also learn something about the human nature that requires redemption when heroes fail, patriarchs lie, kings fall, prophets cower, disciples doubt, and covenant people become idolaters. These lenses prevent us from setting up characters in the Bible *only* as moral heroes to emulate, rather than as flawed men and women who themselves needed the grace of God.

**Every text, seen in its redemptive context, is reflecting an aspect of humanity's fallen condition that requires the grace of God. Focus upon this fallen condition will inevitably cause readers to consider the divine solution characteristic of the grace that culminates in the provision of the Savior.*

4. Finally, we understand how God's redemptive message appears in Scripture by those texts that are a result of Christ's work in our behalf. We are justified and sanctified as a result of Christ's atoning work and spiritual indwelling. Our prayers are heard as a result of his priestly intercession for us. Our wills are transformed as result of our union with him. We worship as a result of God's gracious provision for every aspect of our salvation.

Ultimately, the reason to read Scripture with an eye to understanding how our actions and status are a *result* of grace is to keep straight the order of Scripture's imperatives and indicatives. The imperatives (what we are to do) are always a *consequence* of the indicatives (who we are by God's gracious provision); what we do is never a *cause* of who we are with

respect to our eternal status in God's kingdom and family. We obey as a *result* of being God's beloved, not to cause God to love us. His grace toward us precedes, enables, and motivates our efforts toward holiness.

A key example of imperatives flowing from indicatives occurs when God gives the Ten Commandments to his people. He does not make their obedience a condition of his love. He first declares, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Deut. 5:6), and then he gives the commandments. He rescued his people before they obeyed. Their obedience was expected as a consequence of receiving God's deliverance, not as a condition for obtaining it. By understanding this consistent redemptive pattern in Scripture, we not only have a tool for understanding the Bible's structure, we have a way of seeing the grace of the gospel even in passages dominated by God's commands.

The indicative/imperative pattern of Scripture leads us next to consider why it is so important to see the grace message pervading Scripture and culminating in Christ. So far we have only considered how we can excavate grace from all Scripture, but we have not discussed why this is so important. The reason is that grace not only underlies God's imperatives, it is also the ultimate power that enables us to live out these standards from the inside out.

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Note the two excellent questions he gives, but let's reverse them:

- 1) What does this text reflect about the nature of man that *requires* redemption?
- 2) What does this text reflect about the nature of God who *provides* redemption?

In a very general sense, we can say that all of Scripture presents us with either law - what God requires of us and how we fall short, or gospel - how God meets that need through Christ. And then note what he said about imperatives and indicatives: what we are to *do* is always grounded in what God has *done* for us through Christ.

In **Gospel-centered preaching and teaching**, the logic should always flow from indicative to imperative; i.e., from what God does, in Christ, to what man ought to do out of obedient gratitude. Our proper motive and power to perform the *imperatives* of Scripture should flow from the proclamation of the *indicatives* of Scripture.

- We see this throughout the New Testament epistles: The first 3 chapters of Ephesians are indicative, the last 3 chapters are imperative. In Colossians, chs. 1,2 are the indicatives in Christ, chs. 3,4 give the imperatives as our response to the grace we have received in Him. We see the same thing in Romans: chs. 1-11 explain the Gospel, then beginning in ch.12, Paul gives the application: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God . . ."

Whenever the focus of the sermon is on *imperatives*, what we can or should be doing, and the *indicatives* of God's work on our behalf rates as a secondary concern, we unintentionally communicate that we *earn* the indicatives by *performing* the imperatives: i.e., God loves us the more we obey and the better we perform. This is false, man-centered preaching. The Gospel message is not "Do!" The Gospel message is "Done!"

Question: "When I am finished preaching or teaching, do people leave gripped by what they must do, or empowered by what Christ has done?"

III. Ground your application in the Gospel.

Before you preach or teach, ask yourself this question: *“What is distinctively Christian about this message?”* This is from Jay Adams’ excellent book, *“Preaching with Purpose:”*

- “If you preach a sermon that would be acceptable to the member of a Jewish synagogue or to a Unitarian congregation, there is something radically wrong with it. Preaching, when truly Christian, is distinctive. And what makes it distinctive is the all-pervading presence of a saving and sanctifying Christ. Jesus Christ must be at the heart of every sermon you preach. . . Preaching must always be evangelical; that is what makes it moral rather than moralistic, and what causes it to be unacceptable in a synagogue or mosque, or to a Unitarian congregation. By evangelical, I mean that the import of Christ’s death and resurrection - His substitutionary, penal death and bodily resurrection - on the subject under consideration are made clear in the sermon. You must not exhort your congregation to do whatever the Bible requires of them as though they could fulfill those requirements on their own, but only as a consequence of the saving power of the cross and the indwelling, sanctifying power and presence of Christ in the person of the Holy Spirit. All true, Gospel-centered preaching must fully take into consideration God’s grace in salvation and in sanctification.”

Someone put it this way, *“I would never want to preach a sermon that could be just as true if Jesus had not died and been raised!”*

A. When teaching the stories of the Bible.

It is very common for us to approach the stories in the Old Testament in a moralistic manner, rather than a Gospel-centered approach. Below is a chart by my daughter, Sara, who is a teacher, illustrating the difference between these two approaches—

Moralistic Interpretation	Gospel Interpretation
Noah: If we obey God He will take care of us. God loves animals.	Noah: The human race was sentenced to death because of sin, yet God provided salvation through one man. Later God would send another Man to offer spiritual salvation to the human race.
Tower of Babel: God punishes pride.	Tower of Babel: It is impossible for man to reach God on His own. But God has provided a way for us to get to heaven - not through our own hard work, but through His Son Jesus.
David and Goliath: Be strong and courageous like David.	David and Goliath: David won a great victory for his people, just like Jesus did for us. We identify more with the people who needed saving than we do with David.
Joseph: We should forgive each other like Joseph forgave His brothers.	Joseph: Just like Joseph forgave his enemies and provided safety for them, God forgave us while we were His enemies. He offers us eternal life.

Jonah: If we disobey God, we will be severely punished.	Jonah: Jonah's sin was great, but God's grace was greater. Just like Jonah spent three days in the whale to save the other men on the ship, Jesus spent three days in the tomb to save His people eternally.
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B. When we teach practical topics.

So how does the cross cast its shadow over some of the practical topics that we preach on?

1. Giving.

Take the subject of giving money to the church for the support of the ministry. How could anyone find Christ in that? Paul spends two chapters on giving in 2 Cor.8-9, and he relates it to Christ crucified and worshiping Him through our financial gifts—

- 2 Corinthians 8:9 ⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

I.e., “Look at how Jesus gave for you and what that has done for you!”

- 2 Corinthians 9:15 ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

“Now worship God through your giving with lavish gratitude for this gift!” You literally can’t be honest with this text if you don’t preach Christ crucified at the heart of Christian giving.

2. Work.

Your people might feel Christ’s presence in your worship services, but what happens when they go back to work on Monday morning? You can relate the work God calls us to do with His original calling for Adam and Eve to subdue the earth and rule over it as His co-regents. In Christ, we can fulfill this calling in even the most mundane employment. We can actually offer up our work to Christ—

- Colossians 3:23-24 ²³Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

Our motivation and energy for doing our work is tied directly to our redemption in Christ. If you preach this with the Spirit’s intended purpose, you will preach Christ!

3. Marriage.

Marriage is often preached without any relationship to Christ or the Gospel. I know of an extremely popular series of messages on marriage by a Christian author/speaker that doesn’t mention one Bible verse.

*Let me say something as a pastor here: Many pastors give counseling and instruction on marriage that could be received and applied by unbelievers as well as believers. And even though we might be able to offer good, practical advice for happier marriages, I firmly believe that the only counsel we should offer to unbelievers is to repent and believe the Gospel! We can do this graciously and compassionately, but we should make it clear that they can’t apply the principles of Scripture apart from a new heart. And why would we seek to make people hap-

pier and more comfortable on their way to hell? God put the problems in their marriages to lead them to repentance and to Christ. To help them resolve their problems apart from repentance is to work against God. End of sermon.

But in light of what Paul says in Eph.5:25-33, how can you preach on marriage *without* preaching Jesus Christ? Turn there and look at with me:

- Ephesians 5:25-33 ²⁵Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body. ³¹“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³²This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

It’s amazing how we can miss Paul’s point here. V. 31 says, “*Therefore*, a man shall leave his father and mother, etc.”--he’s quoting Gen.2:24. “This is the reason for marriage.” What is the reason for marriage? We go back to v.30: “Because we are members of His [Christ’s] body” Now get what he is saying: Our salvation is the reason behind marriage. The ultimate reality is the relationship between Christ and the church--earthly marriage was created by God as the illustration. Wow!

It’s usually preached the other way around: Paul is pacing the floor saying, “I need an illustration, what’s a good illustration of marriage? . . . Ah! I’ve got it - Christ and the church!” Actually it’s the opposite. Before time began, God said to Himself in eternity past, “I need a good illustration of Christ and the church--Ah! I’ll invent marriage!” And Paul saw this in Gen.2:24, because Paul saw Christ everywhere he looked in the Old Testament.

To preach the Holy Spirit’s purpose in marriage, you must preach Christ.

Spurgeon preached 31 sermons from the Song of Solomon, and they all centered on Christ and His beloved, the church. Sophisticated theology students snicker that he could be so silly! “Why, didn’t Spurgeon know that Song of Solomon is not about Christ, it’s about marriage?” My response is, “And what is marriage about?” Brothers, be careful before you criticize Spurgeon for anything, but especially for seeing too much of Jesus in God’s Word.

4. Missions.

Gospel-centered teaching must always ask, “*How does this lead to mission?*” We haven’t truly understood God’s Word until we obey it, and the Gospel calls all it transforms to be witnesses of this same Gospel. This is from *Gospel-Centered Teaching* by Trevin Wax—

- “There is no true Gospel-centeredness that does not lead to mission, because the Gospel is the story of a God with a missionary heart, a Father who desires that all come to repentance, a Shepherd who seeks and saves the one lost sheep. The purpose of God’s Word is to reveal God and His plan to us, in order that we might then be gripped and empowered to fulfill His Great Commission . . . the Bible intends to reorient our lives around God’s mission and equip us to join Him in the work He is doing The more we grow in our faith and become like Jesus, the more the heart

of Jesus should be evident in our own lives. What greater evidence is there of a Christlike heart than passion for God's mission? What greater evidence is there that the truth of the Gospel has soaked into someone's life than seeing a passion for the lost overflow through our witness?" (pp.97,98)

Now if all of this is true, then the key to motivating people to evangelism and missions is not to constantly lecture them about doing evangelism and missions! That only produces guilt-ridden, duty-driven Christians who begrudgingly pass out tracts or e-mail missionaries to get their Pastors off their backs! The key is to constantly set before them the magnificent, majestic God of the Bible, and the glories of the Cross, so that they overflow with God's love and they have to go out and share it with others.

Wasn't this the source of Paul's passion? In 2Cor.5:14 he said, "*The love of Christ controls us - it constrains us, it drives us - to be His ambassadors. Joyfully!* And he didn't mean his love for Christ, he meant, being gripped by Christ's love for him.

When you constantly set before your people an exalted view of a massive God, and set before them Jesus Christ as the loving Lord and Savior that He is - they will be filled with love and worship for this God. And service, and giving, and evangelism and missions will all flow out of their being captivated by Christ.

A final thought on Gospel-centered application: When seeking the application for a text, we should not start by asking, "*Who am I and what should I do?*" but "*Who is Christ and what has He done for me?*"

- Bryan Chappell said this: "Faithful expository preaching unfolds every text in the context of its redemptive import. The success of this endeavor can be assessed by a bottom-line question every preacher should ask at the end of each sermon: 'When my listeners walk out the doors of this sanctuary to perform God's will, with whom do they walk? If they march to battle the world, the flesh, and the devil with only me, myself and I, then each parades to despair. However, if the sermon has led all persons within sight of the Savior and they now walk into their world with His hand firmly in their grasp, then hope and victory brighten the horizon. Whether people depart alone or in the Savior's hand will mark the difference between futility and faith, legalism and true obedience, moralism, or real godliness."

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Some helpful resources for Gospel-centered teaching and preaching—

- *The Gospel Transformation Study Bible, ESV - Crossway*
- *The ESV Study Bible - notes in the back on "The History of Salvation in the Old Testament" - Crossway*
- *The Jesus Storybook Bible - Sally Lloyd-Jones*
- *Christ-Centered Preaching - Bryan Chapell*
- *Gospel-Centered Teaching - Trevin Wax*
- *The God Who is There - Finding Your Place in God's Story - D.A. Carson*
- *Jesus On Every Page: 10 Simple Ways to Seek and Find Christ in the Old Testament - David Murray*