



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

1 CORINTHIANS 1

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WHY IS THE GOSPEL OFFENSIVE?

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18, 21-24 NRSV)

It has always been true that the good news from God to mankind is offensive. It seems strange because, after all, it is good news. Typically we like good news. When the stock market goes up or the weather forecast is sunny and mild or the kid's report card has "A's"- we love it. Why then does the natural mind react to the news that God has acted in history to save us and that His mercy is behind it?

Let's address three reasons for the offense:

First, the advent of Jesus in history was radical. The New Creation was newer than humans expected. We

like gentle transitions, even when we have been longing for change for centuries. Time had dragged on for a long time before Jesus came on the scene to inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth. It had been 400 years since the exile had been interrupted by Cyrus allowing some Jews to return to Jerusalem. Not much changed with that move, however. The ruling nations changed, but the oppression was the same. Babylon fell to Persia. Persia fell to Greece. Greece was defeated by Rome, but the promised day of vindication had not come. Then one day, a baby was born in a manger to a virgin. About 30 years later, He came on the scene and announced that

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time was fulfilled and the kingdom of heaven had arrived in Him. This was a change too abrupt for the Jewish mind to easily grasp. The old era was giving way to the new creation. Jesus chose twelve apostles to fulfill the role of the twelve patriarchs. He gave His Sermon on the Mount, fulfilling the Moses on Sinai event. He lived to fulfill the covenant requirements, and He died to cancel the curses of disobedience for the people. The Law was superseded by the Spirit who changed the heart to love God and walk in trust. The temple was destroyed, a new one being made of members of Christ's body. The inheritance was expanded to the whole world.

It was and is radical. Since the time that Jesus walked the earth, humans have been trying to smooth out the curve. We want to keep some of the old era and its customs. Instead of honoring our history as preparation for the new creation, we have tried to carry it with us and mix the eras. Old Testament Israel is the New Testament Church's history, while the New Testament Church is Old Testament Israel's fulfillment. The change in eras is as radical as death and resurrection. The most volatile controversy of the early church was whether Jews and Gentiles were equal as the sons of God. It is still a constant area of concern.

The **second** reason for offense is the nature of the proclamation. The

gospel is an announcement. It is not a presentation of a *principle* we can apply, nor is it a *precept* we have discovered by observing the wisdom of the sages. Neither is it a *proposition* that requires our doing our part in order to get God to do His.

There are many *principles* we can discover in God's creation. There is divine order in all that is. As we align with God's ways of doing things, we are more successful at subduing the earth. For instance, the principle of sowing and reaping is essential for increase. It works. We reap what we sow, more than we sow, and later than we sow. All farmers succeed based on how well they apply this principle. There are poor farmers who sloppily apply the principle and have poor harvests. Better farmers pay more attention to soil preparation, fertilizer, weed eradication, etc. and get better harvests. Great farmers are great at applying the principle and have great harvests. The gospel, however, is not a principle that produces grades of successful Christians.

Precepts are those conclusions we embrace based on the wise observations of attentive people in different cultures. Solomon collected thousands of such precepts and recorded them in scrolls. We enjoy his books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Those who give heed to such wisdom are sure to find life on earth working better. The gospel, however, is not just a precept.

Propositions regulate how humans relate to each other economically. We trade, negotiate, make contracts, swap, and barter. We tend to think in terms of "If I will...What will you do?" The gospel, however, is not just a proposition.

The gospel is an announcement. It is news. Without consulting us, God acted to procure our full salvation. He sent Jesus who died for our sins and arose to rule over all that His death redeemed. He gave to His heirs the same Spirit who raised Him from death and who guides us in paths of love-motivated works of righteousness. We don't get to work a principle. God sowed his Son, and we are the fruit of his initiation. We don't get better by following a principle, but we are given His perfect standing before God.

There is much wisdom gained by looking and listening in God's creation, but there is a wisdom that astounds and confounds the wisest of the wise. No one can find the mystery of God's sovereign grace apart from the cross event. That kind of wisdom is special and given to those whose eyes are opened to see what no human eye could ever see.

We are all incurable negotiators. We err when we think that God needs a commodity we can provide or that we actually have something to trade. He doesn't need our obedience, our money,

or our adoration. He is completely satisfied in Himself. He loves to give of Himself, but needs nothing we can offer Him. When we relate to Him with a "if I will... then God will...", we reduce Him to a merchant and miss His grace. God supersedes all the principles, precepts, and propositions with His *promises*. He made a promise to Abraham, and biblical history is the story of how He fulfills it. The Seed that He promised would bless the world is Jesus. His promises to us give us hope and build our faithfulness. When we are so totally focused on His faithfulness, we are no longer analyzing our own. The more we work on our own faith, the less we focus on His faithfulness and the dimmer life becomes. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's central promise. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to live in His people. He comes to every believer to reveal the intimacy between the Father and the believer. He makes God's presence known. He empowers His own to do the same kind of works He did on earth. He guides into all truth. He does miracles to reveal that we live in the new creation. He gives us words to say and thoughts to contemplate so we can know Him more fully. He is the guarantee of the final installment on His promise of new heaven and new earth. He focuses us on Jesus rather than ourselves.

Third, the gospel is a revelation of mercy and that requires that we need it. We are usually willing to admit that we

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need some help from time to time, but we detest being so destitute as to need mercy. By its very definition, an object of mercy is messy. God's purpose in history is to reveal His nature, which is full of mercy. We see His purpose being revealed in the story of the Bible. Every person has a mess. Adam and Eve failed. Noah got drunk. Abraham lied. The sons of Jacob sold their brother. There was adultery, incest, murder, spying, rape, perversion, and idolatry. None were a picture of moral success. Life on earth is not neat and tidy, wrapped in a nice bow. It is messy because God's mercy shines in a mess. For instance, when Peter wanted to walk on the water, he assumed success would be walking out to Jesus and walking back to the boat to the applause of his friends. Success was Jesus picking him up after his failure and waking back to the boat with Peter in His arms. Peter was clinging to Jesus like a two-year-old hanging on to mommy after being frightened by a vicious dog. The divine program is to exalt His grace, not our success at being good or better.

In the book of Revelation, as the apostle John looked into heavenly reality, he saw the throne of God that rules His kingdom. There was a slain lamb. God exalts the One who made mercy real for everyone who has a need for it. When the gospel falls deeply into our hearts, we *"come boldly to the throne of grace to find mercy to help in time of need"* (Hebrews 4:6). To the natural mind

seeking to define success as the absence of failure, mercy is raw and offensive. We will take a little but try not to need it. We are more comfortable with a gospel that allows us to contribute to our salvation, so we smooth out the radical nature of mercy.

The radical announcement without propositions and the nature of mercy confront our demand for merit-based blessings. A tamped down gospel is not persecuted as much. It is not offensive. Everyone appreciates people trying to be nice and better. But the good news is that, absent any of our initiatives, God has shown His love to us in doing everything for us that is required of us to be the blessed people of God.



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