

# "Satan's Gospel"

Mark 8:27-38

March 1, 2015

Second Sunday in Lent

"Gospel" means "good news". This is information that helps us, benefits us, and gives us good things. Being the religious people that we are, we tend to think that there is only one "gospel." The fact of the matter is that there are many purported "gospels". All of them claim to be "good news" which, if we just believe and act on them, will help us, benefit us, and give us good things. But not all so-called gospels are good news. Some can be really bad news that hurt us, instead of help us; penalize us instead of benefit us; and give us bad things instead of good.

The typical gospel for religious people in America begins with Jesus. He is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of the world. So far, so good.

This typical American gospel is the good news that Jesus has all power and glory and wants you to share in His power and glory here. His job is to make you happy. He saves you from unhappiness by giving you whatever it is that will make you happy. He saves you from poverty by giving you wealth. He saves you from sickness by giving you health. He saves you from oppression by giving you power. The list goes on and on.

Following Jesus means having enough faith to believe that all of these good things will happen. You don't have to give up your lifestyle. You can be religious without being fanatical about it. Religion, in fact, can be fun. And, if you just have enough faith and have a positive outlook, then you will have a very nice life here. You will enjoy success and happiness. You will have all the money and possessions that you desire. You will be popular, respected, and accepted by all.

This Gospel is a very positive experience. It's no wonder that many Americans love it and why so many preachers (especially those on television) preach it. It's basically the American dream with a religious veneer. It's also all so logical. If God is almighty and truly loves us, then this is the way He should behave.

Unfortunately, this is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the “gospel” of Satan. It is a fake gospel. It is not good news at all. If believed and followed, it will lead to your destruction. Now you might say, “Come on, pastor. Aren’t you taking this a bit far? What’s wrong with a Gospel that has such a nice message and promotes such a positive way of life? And calling it “Satan’s Gospel” – isn’t that just a bit over the edge?” I would say, “No, it’s not over the edge. It is exactly what Jesus says in our Gospel reading for today.”

Jesus had given His disciples a little “pop quiz” at their retreat in Caesarea Philippi about who people thought He was. Some said John the Baptist; others said Elijah; and others said He was one of the prophets. Then He turned to them and asked, “But who do YOU say that I am?” Peter got it right, “You are the Christ.” So far, this is the same as the typical American gospel: belief in Jesus as the Christ. But Satan doesn’t care what you believe about Jesus’ identity as much as he cares about what you believe about Jesus’ mission and the meaning of discipleship.

Here’s where the two gospels diverge. Jesus did NOT begin to tell them about the kingdom of power and might He would establish when they got to Jerusalem; the power and prestige it would mean for them; and how wealthy and happy they all would be for having followed Him. Instead, Jesus began to teach them that He must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.

This was more than Peter could take. The man who was so right about Jesus’ identity was so wrong about Jesus’ mission. He took Jesus aside and rebuked Him – correcting Him for being wrong. Jesus identified the source of such thinking when He looked at His disciples and rebuked Peter, saying, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Jesus had not come to make us happy. Jesus had not come to take away all our troubles and give us an easy life. Jesus had not come to give us what our hearts desire of the things in this world. To think that He had is not only wrong, but, according to Jesus, Satanic. Why? Because that

is Satan's thinking. Satan wants us to focus our attention solely on the worries and problems, as well as the pleasures and possessions, of this world.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ also begins with Jesus, but a different Jesus with a different purpose. Jesus came for a much more important reason. He came to save us from so much more than poverty and pain. He came to give us so much more than pleasures and possessions. He came to bless us with something so much longer lasting than the fleeting happiness and popularity of this world.

Jesus came to save us from God's anger and wrath and the consequences of our sin which had not only condemned us all to die, but also condemned creation to destruction. He came to give us forgiveness for our sin and a right relationship with God Almighty. He came to bless us with eternal life – not the temporary, trouble-filled life of this world – but perfect life, free from sin and evil.

Jesus' way of doing this was not the easy way of using His divine power and glory to set up an earthly kingdom and pacify us with (as the Romans would say) "breads and circuses". This would do nothing to alleviate our greatest need. Instead, Jesus chose the hard way. He would set aside His divine power and glory, take on human flesh, become a servant, and offer Himself unto death as the perfect and complete sacrifice for the sin of the world.

In doing so, He earned forgiveness for you and me. He has brought you and me back into a right relationship with God. There would be a display of His divine power and glory when He would rise from the grave to life again and gain for us eternal life, free from sin, evil and death, but that would only be after the suffering and death, not before.

Those who want to come after Jesus and receive these things are NOT promised a carefree life in which they are always happy, always have everything they want, and are always popular and accepted. In fact, they are promised just the opposite. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Discipleship involves, not indulging your

desires, but denying them. It is not a life of avoiding suffering or thinking it is something wrong, but of sure and certain suffering which the disciple of Jesus is willing to take up and endure.

But why? How is any of this “good news” in any way? Everything depends on what you hope to receive through the gospel and how you hope to receive it. The gospel of Satan encourages you to focus your attention on the things of this world: money, possessions, fame, and popularity. That’s not a hard sell since the things of this world are the only things that we have personal experience with and they all seem very good to us.

The gospel of Jesus Christ promises you wonderful things which are not of this world and are beyond our wildest dreams: life without suffering, evil, or pain in the direct presence of God. This is a hard sell since we have never seen these things or experienced anything close to them.

The gospel of Satan has at least two flaws. First, it cannot always deliver what it promises. Those who promote a “prosperity gospel” which says if you believe enough, God will give you all of what you want here on earth, rarely have everything they want. The only ones who are getting all they want seem to be the preachers preaching such a gospel and getting people to send their money in to support their ministry.

Secondly, even if you were to get all you want – all the money, possessions, power, prestige and popularity, where would that leave you at the end of your life? Jesus asks that in our reading, “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?” In other words, if you have been following the satanic gospel which urges you to believe in Jesus just to get stuff in this life, what good does it do you even if you get it all but lose your soul? What is there among all that stuff which can redeem your soul from eternal death in hell?

The gospel of Jesus Christ has the answers. First, it gives us all that it promises. We have a right relationship with God as His children and we have it now through baptism. We have forgiveness for all of our sins through Jesus’ perfect sacrifice on the cross and we have it now – given to us every day through His Word declared and proclaimed. We have eternal life, free from evil, pain, and

suffering and it is ours now, even though it is not our possession at the moment. As the Scripture says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

Secondly, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is there precisely when we need it: when death knocks at our door. Jesus says, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.” Ordering your world according to how you might keep everything in it means you will lose everything. But freely living in the world and giving up everything for the sake of Jesus and the gospel means you have lost nothing. You still have everything the Gospel of Jesus has promised you.

Can't you have both? Can't you have the pleasure, possessions, and peace without conflict in this life which the Gospel of Satan promises and, at the same time, have the eternal life without evil pain and suffering which the Gospel of Jesus Christ promise? The problem is that the two gospels go in two different directions. If I ask you to follow me and I go west on the usually busy and sometimes dangerous 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue South but you decide to turn north and go on 32<sup>nd</sup> St. because it is a safer, more peaceful way to go, will we arrive at the same destination? Not likely.

If you are following the way Jesus went – suffering, rejection, and death, you'll end up where He is at the right destination. If you follow any other way – even if it is a more pleasant way, you'll end up at a different destination without Jesus.

And that's what it's all about: destination. The Gospel of Satan promises an easy and pleasurable journey, but a horrible destination. The Gospel of Jesus Christ promises us a difficult journey filled with suffering, but a wonderfully blessed destination.

So, keep plugging on. God has promised to give us “our daily bread” to feed and nourish our bodies for the journey. Often times, He gives us so much more. We are thankful for these blessings and enjoy them (they are not sinful), but those material blessings and pleasures are not the focus for our journey.

God has given us His Word and Sacrament to nourish our souls for the journey. He even gives us more: a building to gather in, a pastor to teach, preach, and administer the Word and Sacraments, and fellow Christians to support us during the journey. Rather than being a peripheral part of life,

these things become the very focus of our journey and to which we cling when the journey becomes difficult.

The journey is difficult and often unpopular. There is much suffering for following Jesus these days. Remember the 21 Coptic Christians who were beheaded by Isis. See the persecution of those in America who are faithful to God's Word in the areas of life issues, sex and gender issues, and so on. Many are abandoning the journey today. But the destination is sure and waiting for all of God's people who by grace through faith have faithfully walked the journey. There will be a life that never ends, with joy that never ends and peace that never ends with no more evil, no more pain, and no more suffering. THAT is gospel! THAT is good news! Amen.