Theology: Gospel

How to Listen to a Sermon
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Unfortunately, it's pretty common to hear a sermon that is all Law, all the time. Maybe not God's Law, but somebody's law.

Strangely enough, though, nobody ever got better by being told what to do! If commanding automatically resulted in obeying, our world would be in perfect shape. Well, it would depend on who did the commanding and what exactly they commanded!

This is a pretty good description of the condition that the Bible calls sin: even when God tells us what to do, even when it's for our own good, we don't do it. In fact, we are often motivated to do the exact opposite, as happened with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3) or the Apostle Paul (Romans 7). Being told what to do doesn't fix our problem.

That's why a true Christian sermon also brings the gospel—that is, good news—to the congregation [and to individual sinners gathered there]: announcing, not another demand, but a gift. A sheer, perfect, generous, beautiful gift.

We didn't actually need sin at all to get gifts from God. God started giving gifts, purely because God loves to do so, before there was even a possibility of sin. That's what it means to praise God as our Creator. The gospel begins with creation itself: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31).

Human sin certainly damaged, and continues to damage, God's good creation. But God refused to let that be the last word on what he declared "very good." Unwilling to relinquish his beloved creation to sin, death, and devil, God determined to rescue it, as the most famous Bible verse so beautifully expresses: "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).

And that isn't the end! The decisive victory has been won in Jesus, yet this creation still suffers. So there is a final chapter yet to unfold in the life to come, when all that is broken, damaged, alienated, and estranged will be transformed. "And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new'" (Revelation 21:5).

A faithful preacher names all these good gifts of God: creation, salvation, and re-creation. But pride of place has always gone to the gospel of Jesus' willing death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, for us and for our salvation. Jesus himself is the supreme good news: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord" (John 20:19–20).

Here are some questions to keep in mind about how the Gospel is presented in a sermon.

First, is it *actually* the Gospel of Jesus Christ that you're hearing, or is it some "other gospel"? (Not that there is one!) For example, does the preacher make it sound like all your hope is placed in something of this world — good behavior, a social program, a political outcome, a religious discipline, or a historical event?

Second, even if Jesus is named, are you hearing a promise that he *really* offers, such as the forgiveness of sins, his own self in the Lord's Supper, and resurrection in the life to come? Or, are you being sold a bill of goods falsely under Jesus' name, like prosperity or escape from suffering or a perfect happy life?

Are you hearing the whole story of Jesus Christ, or only parts? Sometimes preachers have a lot to say about Jesus' ministry, but little to say about his death and resurrection, which subtly turns Jesus into an ideal teacher for us to emulate, but forgets that he is above all our Savior and Lord.

Or, sometimes Jesus is disconnected from his own place in the people of Israel, so that what appears as good news is really just hidden criticism of Jews and Judaism. Does your preacher help you understand the good news of Jesus in the light of the Old Testament, its faith in God as Creator, its expectation of the Messiah, and its hope for a renewed heaven and earth?

Worse still, sometimes preachers make "grace" and "salvation" so vague and abstract that they don't really mention Jesus at all! Could your preacher's promises get by just fine without Jesus altogether? Or without his cross and resurrection?

Last but not least, what is the invitation the preacher offers through and from Jesus Christ? Are you invited to respond to this good news in trust and faith, not as a condition or burden, but as a free and joyful response to Christ's loving generosity?

Tuning your ears to these questions about Law and Gospel won't just help you assess the sermons you hear. They will create a thirst in you for the true and everlasting word of God—and create a distaste for fakes and substitutes!