**The Most Potent, One-Sentence Gospel Message**

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Before we get to the question that the title immediately arouses, which is “What is this one-sentence gospel message that is so potent?,” let’s talk about the typical statements used by preachers & see where they fail. When I discuss the following statements, I’m assuming that there’s nothing else said. It’s possible to recover something of value from the following statements, if we spend the time & energy to do so. But I want to find that ideal statement, that is, the one that expresses the truth of the gospel in the most complete, effective, & concise way.

We who have been taught the reformed faith know that salvation only comes by faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone to the glory of God alone. No works can save us, no other savior but Christ is the savior, and it is God’s grace that even allows us the faith to believe in Him. Thus, He receives all the glory for anything good or faithful we may be. But to introduce the truth to people and not be able to explain everything theological to them & keep them interested in your message, that takes skill with God’s word.

1. “Jesus loves you” is perhaps the most used statement by Christians, but it fails miserably in several ways. First, it may be incorrect in fact. Our love depends on relationship. We love our immediate family members differently from strangers. Although we may love the strangers we meet, we love them differently. It is the same with God. Who can read the bible without seeing a different treatment by God of his own people when compared to His treatment of the Gentiles? What about Jesus in the gospel histories? He even predicts that some people who claim to hold to Him as their Lord, He will reject on the Day of Judgment, saying, “I never knew you.” He doesn’t say, “You never knew me,” although that is implied also. Jesus didn’t extend His love to these people, even though they thought they were extending their love to Him. Matthew 7:21-3. What about Adam & Eve? As God ejected them from the Garden & closed it to them with an angel wielding a firey sword, sending them into the world of evil & death, can we say that God loved them? I know – He still loved them in spite of what He had to do to remain the consistent, just, & promise-keeping God, but this gets into some difficult theology for even Christians to understand.

Then there’s that difficult word “love.” What does it mean to the modern ear? Does it mean that Jesus has some affectionate feeling for the person? Or does it mean that Jesus finds the person extremely attractive? And how does a divine being find someone attractive? If you’re talking about the gods of ancient Greece & Rome, you could possibly mean a sexual attraction. If the listener has some religious theology they may hear this: “You’re okay because I’m okay with you.” The statement doesn’t call on the person to take any action. Nor does it explain what Jesus’ love entails. So, what does “love” mean to the person to whom you say this sentence?

Therefore, with this statement, as simple as it seems at first glance, we don’t know if people will actually understand it. It explains nothing of Jesus Christ or the bible or the type of love God expresses. And it places no responsibility on the person who hears it. They can press on with the life & faith in which they’re living without altering it one bit & be thinking all along that it’s a good thing that one more person in the universe loves them, whatever that means. At best, they’re left with a meaningless statement of sentimentality. At worst, they’re given a totally inaccurate impression of their status before God.

2. “God loves you & has a wonderful plan for your life” carries the same baggage about love as No. 1. Only it adds vagueness to the identity of the lover. The name “God” is about as amorphous as you can get about the identity of the creator of the universe. Perhaps, you could get away with it in the American South, the State of Alabama, for example, where people have enough biblical knowledge to understand to what God the speaker is referring. But anywhere else, this “God” could refer to just about anyone or anything.

Second, it’s a statement of fact & also demands nothing of the hearer. For a believer in reincarnation or Calvinist predestination or Muslim fatalism, they would simply nod their head & reply, “Yeah, & your point?” It’s a statement of fact about the sovereign God of the universe: He loves & He determines the future of every living creature. So what?

Third, what if He doesn’t have a wonderful plan for you? Let’s turn to the scriptures. God had a plan for Judas, Pontius Plate, King Herod, Cain, Cain’s descendants at the time of Noah’s flood, the people of Sodom & Gomorrah, Isaac’s son Esau, Haman in the book of Esther, the Jewish people who remained in Jerusalem when General Titus destroyed it in 70 A.D., & on & on, but it was definitely not a wonderful one. In other words, it’s a presumptuous statement to tell people that God has a wonderful plan for their life. Those who live forever in the lake of fire would not agree with you.

3. “What will you say when you appear before God & He asks, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ ” This is the best of the three. It causes the hearer to imagine the God they believe in, consider the final judgment of their life for eternity, then honestly state what it is that they rest their faith in with respect to the most important person in their life – God Almighty. You can glean all sorts of information about what the person believes, but still, there is no gospel message & no call to action. The statement is merely an introduction to the sharing of the gospel message. So, it was probably not fair of me to include this statement in the list.

4. “Invite Jesus into your heart” has a call to action, but the action is so ethereal as to be utterly unworkable. Does Jesus do whatever I ask? “Come into my heart, Jesus.” “Fix my heart, Jesus.” “Do this for me, Jesus.” “Go away, Jesus.” Is Jesus like our pet dog, doing what we say? We tell Him to save us, and He does is what is implied by this statement. This does not bring to my mind a picture of the sovereign, creator God of the universe. Nor is it the Christ of scripture who said, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.” John 6:44, KJV.

On the other hand, maybe He won’t accept the invitation. We would simply be making an invitation, & people can decline an invitation, right? Maybe Jesus should RSVP? Or maybe Jesus should say, “Hang on. Not today, but maybe later.” Implied in this statement is a guarantee – that God is just waiting anxiously to be allowed to “enter,” whatever that means, your heart & make you new. But that is not the sovereign God who determined all things that would be even before creation.

And where is your “heart?” Do our words command our hearts to “open” to someone? If you love someone, do you have to invite them into your heart? Don’t you just love them? Where did this idea come from? From Revelation 3:20, which was addressed to the Church in Laodicea, one of the seven that Jesus addressed through the Apostle John. It was addressed to believers who had lost their understanding of their relationship to the risen Savior and had become caught up in the wealth & prestige. Jesus had sternly rebuked them with words like: “but the lukewarm, I will spew out of my mouth.” It was a letter to former friends to return to Him who is worthy of all love & loyalty, even to the death, which some of their brethren in other cities nearby were experiencing. But not the Laodiceans. Then he finished His rebuke with a gentle invitation to the Laodiceans: “Behold, I stand at the door & knock; if any man hear my voice, & open the door, I will come in to him, & will sup with him, & he with me.” It was an invitation to reopen one’s heart & life to the one who deserves all worship & who will treat as friends those humble enough to recognize Him. Notice it makes no mention of your “heart.”

Is some romantic or ethereal entrance by Jesus into your heart what the scripture commands for salvation? And how does He enter? Where does He live once He does enter? Some would add the phrase “and make Him the Lord of your life.” But we don’t make Him anything. He is Lord. We simply bow in humble submission to the truth of who He is. He is Lord.

What about those who are weak in faith? They acknowledge Christ & seek to know & love Him more, but for the time being, they can’t honestly “invite” Him into their heart. It demands that they have a heart of love for Christ when they’re at only the very verge of knowing Him at all. It demands deep, mature love from someone who may be just beginning a relationship. It may be too much. Such a message may actually keep honest but needy & hurting believers from persevering in a growing faith. Or it can make the listener jaded, for if they ask for the living God of the universe to “come into their heart,” will there be the expected big change that such an entrance should present. When the King of the universe enters, there should be fireworks, pomp & circumstance, at least some goose bumps. If & when that doesn’t happen – because God is not at our beck-&-call – what does that do to the person’s faith?

5. “Call out to God for mercy, admit you’re a sinner in need of God’s grace in Christ.” Or words similar to those. This one comes close. Jesus even speaks of a man in parable who stood in the back of the synagogue, beating his breast & saying, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” And Jesus said that this man went to his house justified before God. That prayer acknowledges that it is by God’s grace that we are saved, and that grace is only available through Jesus Christ. You’re acknowledging who God is – your Judge, you’re acknowledging who you really are in the sight of this righteous God, you’re stating your need, you’re acknowledging Christ’s Lordship, for He could not save if He is not Lord of all, & you’re expressing a faith in a miraculous power this God has to raise you from your present state – dead in sin.

This sentence is a good gospel message, but it is not the most potent.

6. “Repent, & believe the gospel, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Yep, I spent years listening to gospel messages, thinking about them on and off, comparing them to the words of Jesus, and being the genius I am, I’ve decided that Jesus had the best way of presenting the gospel in one sentence. Amazing, isn’t it? But we so rarely hear the words of Jesus come out of the mouths of evangelists, it makes you wonder why. What is it about those words that actually makes preachers reluctant to use them? I think it’s in large part a misunderstanding of what Jesus was really saying.

Notice that all the responsibility for any action is placed on the listener. “Repent.” I think preachers are afraid to appear legalistic. But what about Jesus? Was He legalistic? Of course, not. However, He knew God & people better than any man who ever walked on the earth.[[1]](#endnote-1) But the word “repent” is not a legalistic one; at least, it should not be taken as such. To repent means many things. It means that you are allowed to repent. God, in His mercy, has not rejected you completely. There’s hope for you. Implied in the command is the ability, which only grace can give, but then, that’s what motivators do – they bring to the surface what is really present without necessarily spelling it out or overselling it. God’s grace is here for you, if the man of God is telling you to repent. The speaker expects something from the hearer, but that means the speaker has good expectations of the hearer, not negative.

Gospel means good news. To believe that God has good news is to turn from unbelief. You can’t turn from unbelief apart from God’s grace. You don’t have to explain all that because the ones who now believe know that God has worked in their life, for they no longer disbelieve. As for those who don’t believe the message, you’re only adding salt to the wound. “Nah, nah, nah, you don’t believe because you can’t; God hasn’t given you that gift. So there!” There’s no need for that. For the legalists in the crowd, they think repentance is some kind of work to gain God’s favor. In other words, they don’t understand who God is & that all our works are as filthy rags. We believe in God’s mercy & goodness & simply turn from our ways that have, until that point in time, demonstrated what was in our hearts, bitterness & unbelief toward God.

Notice that there’s no guarantee in Jesus’ message. There’s a warning about the kingdom of heaven being “at hand.” Yes, timing is important. “Here’s your chance! It’s the right time! Don’t miss it! You could miss it! You don’t want to miss it! It’s disrespectful, discourteous, & foolish to dismiss this message from the all-gracious King, who holds your life & eternity in His hand!” All those messages are packed inside that phrase. But Jesus is not guaranteeing anything to anyone, leaving room for some of the hearers to be revealed as false believers on either the Day of Judgment or one day in this life. Jesus was not presumptuous.

This time was different from others apparently. If the kingdom of heaven was at hand, then it was right there, where people could reach it. Like the cobbler working at his workbench, saying, “Now where’s that tool that was right here at hand a minute ago?” He doesn’t even have to get up to find it. It’s right in the toolbox he keeps by him. It’s at hand. The coming of Jesus meant that the kingdom of heaven was come, not that it would come one day thousands of years later. This period of time, the 1st century, was the time predicted by prophets, like Daniel & Isaiah, who foretold of a time when “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”[[2]](#endnote-2) And it was when the 4th beastly kingdom would see the coming of the Son of man to appear before the Ancient of Days after accomplishing His great work of redemption according to the timetable given to Daniel.[[3]](#endnote-3)

But unlike what many Jewish people expected at the time, this kingdom was invisible. “Neither shall they say, ‘Lo here! or, lo there!’ for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.” Luke 17:21, KJV. And anyone, intelligent or foolish, rich or poor, outwardly righteous or outwardly sin-filled, could access it. How? Simply by turning from your unbelief in this God. In other words, by repenting.

What a tremendous message! It doesn’t say too much & tire you with explanations of everything theological. It doesn’t demand that you understand deep theological concepts. It calls upon you to do something . . . or else. So it’s not some pie-in-the-sky, easy-believism. It tells you not to wait. It is full of God’s mercy to sinners who want badly to escape their bondage to sin. And finally, it tells you that heaven can come into you in power & change your life, not by your invitation but by the gracious choice of God Almighty, who sees the heart of those who sincerely believe & repent in the deepest part of their being.

Jesus was the best psychologist & the greatest communicator. Why would we think we could improve upon His message?

1. By the way, John the Baptist preached the exact same message, and Jesus called John the greatest man to live until His own coming to earth. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” Isaiah 11:9, KJV. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Daniel chapters 7-9. “I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. . . . Thus he said, The fourth beast shall be the fourth kingdom upon earth, which shall be diverse from all kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, and shall tread it down, and break it in pieces.” Daniel 7:13, 23, KJV. “Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy. Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times. And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined.” Daniel 9:24-6, KJV. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)