

Articulating the Gospel

If you've got a bible, turn with me to the book of **Colossians, chapter 1**. When I was around **nine or ten years old**, I got "saved." And I'm not using quotes because I'm trying to make fun of that experience. I'm using quotes because the more time that passes, the less sure I am that that's actually what *happened* to me. I was at a baseball camp in my hometown, put on by a local church. And at the end of the camp, they had their pastor come and give a talk. You know, *the talk*: bible, Jesus, tears, the whole deal. And ironically, I don't remember a lot about the *content* of that talk.

What I *do* remember was **the illustration** he used at the end. He asked if he could borrow one kid's baseball glove. He took the glove, walked about ten yards away, and laid it on the ground. He then said "this is what your life is like *without* Jesus." And then he took a baseball, rolled it *towards* the glove. It hit the glove and bounced off. *Then* he got the kid to come up and put his *hand in* the glove. He said "*this* is what your life is like *with* Jesus." And then he rolled the ball towards it again, and the kid scooped up the ball. Looking back, I've always wondered what would've happened if the kid would've missed the ball. That's a very high-stakes grounder that came his way. Maybe the kid was a plant and they had practiced it beforehand. Who knows.

But the point is that after all that, this guy **gave an invitation** where he said "if you want to be like the second kind of glove, and want to be in heaven with your family after you die, you should come forward and accept Jesus so that can happen." And I'm thinking "well I don't want to be a useless glove and I *do* want to see my family again, so I guess I should accept Jesus." I mean any reasonable nine year-old can do that math. Right? So in that moment I went forward, and did at least what *he* called "accepting Jesus." And then the next Sunday, I walked the aisle and *my* pastor led me through a prayer and signed me up to get baptized. It was a big deal—everybody came by after the service and told me how big of a decision it was and how proud they were of me, how *life-changing* of an experience this was for me.

And then the next week, I remember **asking another older kid** in my youth group a *question*. He had gotten baptized earlier that year. I said, "okay, so what do I do now?" What's the next step? How does this 'being a Christian' thing work, exactly?" His response was, "Dude, you don't have to *do* anything. You're good. Don't worry about how you live—you're *saved* now." And to make a long story short, essentially, I took his advice. I spent the next ten or so years of my life not really '*worrying*' much at all about how I lived. Certainly making no effort to live like a Christian would. After all, *why would* I? I was already *saved*.

And **because of that**, my life was full of one bad habit after another, one addiction after another, one destructive relationship after another. I lived my life profoundly unconcerned with the way I lived, and it showed. But the irony is that pretty much that whole time, if you would've *met* me, I would've told you, and told *myself*, with 100% confidence, that I was "saved." In fact, I wouldn't let anybody tell me any different. It wasn't until halfway through college that I figured out following Jesus was a little more, and a *lot* more *beautiful* than that.

I tell you all of that simply to **illustrate that it matters** how we think and *talk* about the gospel. It *matters* how we think and talk about what it means to be "saved." Those things matter *deeply*. **The way that we communicate those things shapes the trajectory of people's lives for the better, and for the worse.** And this morning, there are likely to be parts of the teaching that will feel dense and almost seminary-like in nature. But that's because thinking well about these ideas is *important*. **When we talk about these ideas—what the gospel *is*, and what it means to be *saved*—we're not just talking about theological concepts. We're talking about people's lives, and the trajectory of people's lives. It all matters *profoundly*.**

This morning, we **wrap up our six week series** all about *mission*. We've been talking about how we demonstrate and articulate the gospel to those who don't yet know it, or haven't yet understood it. And we've covered a lot of ground so far. We've talked about overcoming some of our internal angst and anxiety *about* mission. We've talked about how "we *are* where we *are* for a reason": how God wants us to see the people around us with purpose and intentionality. We've talked about how to ask good *questions* as a way of understanding other people's worldviews. And we've talked about living a distinctive, counter-cultural life in a way that invites questions from others around us.

But *today*, we arrive at **the question of all questions**. Assuming that we're regularly participating in all of *that* I just *mentioned*—and assuming that all that *leads* to opportunities to share the gospel with people—*how do we actually do that?* How do we *talk* to people about Jesus? How do we articulate the good news of Jesus, and what it means to accept the good news?

Well it seems appropriate to *start* by making sure **we're all clear on what the good news *is***. If we don't grasp that, we're going to struggle mightily to articulate it to others. So *for that*, let's take a look at our passage. **Colossians 1**, starting in v. 15. We'll read all the way through v. 23 and then talk through it some:

[15] The Son is the *image* of the *invisible God*, the *firstborn* over all *creation*.

[16] For in him all things were *created*: things in *heaven* and on *earth*, visible and

*invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; **all things** have been created through him and for him. [17] He is **before** all things, and **in him** all things hold together. [18] And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that **in everything** he might have the supremacy. [19] For God was pleased to have **all his fullness** dwell in **him**, [20] and through him to **reconcile to himself all things**, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

*[21] Once **you** were **alienated** from God and were **enemies** in your minds because of your evil behavior. [22] But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present **you** holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— [23] **if** you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. **This is the gospel (what is? Everything he just said. "This is the gospel...")** that you heard and that has been **proclaimed** to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.*

Okay. So there's obviously **a lot in there** we could unpack. And in just a few moments, I'm gonna give you some big categories to put the things in that passage *into*, that I think will help. But before we do that, I just want us to zoom out for a moment and look at this passage as a complete *unit*. Notice that in this passage, for Paul, **the gospel is an announcement about something God has done and is doing in the world as a whole**. How through Jesus, God is "reconciling all things to himself." Not just "all people"—all *things*. Another way of putting that is that God is returning things in the world to how he intended them to be in the beginning. And he is doing that, evidently, through the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross.

And **only once he's said all that**, does he zoom in specifically to talk about what God has done for *us* as human beings. *After* he tells us about God's plan to 'reconcile all things to himself,' *then* he pivots to say "once *you*—human beings—once *you* were alienated from God because of your sin. But God has also reconciled *you* to himself through the cross and resurrection. Now, he *could've* just mentioned the second part. Right? He *could've* just said that the gospel is about God forgiving your sins on the cross, or that the gospel is the way you get to go to heaven when you die. In fact, *most* "gospel presentations" I've heard in my lifetime *do* just focus on that. But he *didn't* just say that. *Why?*

Here, I think, is the answer. **The gospel isn't a story about us. It's not a step-by-step process by which we can be saved. The gospel is a story about God, and what God is doing in the world as a whole: what he has done, is doing, and ultimately one day will complete. We—you and I—are a key part of it, to be sure. But it's not**

primarily *about us*; it's about *God and the entire cosmos*. *If we try to make the gospel* primarily just about *us*, here's what happens. The gospel becomes little more than a *means to our end*. A means for *us* to acquire favor or acceptance or even just right relationship with God. All of a sudden, the gospel message becomes a means by which we get something we need. And while the gospel isn't *less* than that, it's certainly way *more*.

The gospel isn't first a means to *our* end, it's a means to *God's* end. And *God's* end is to reconcile all things to himself. *His* end is to restore everything that is broken under heaven. To restore the world we live in to what he intended it to be all along. And as *part* of his plan to accomplish that, he is *saving* individuals like you and me, out of our sin, by his grace, to participate with him in the reconciliation of all things. Are you following all of that?

Which means that *when we talk* to someone about what it means to believe the gospel, and to be saved, we need to make sure we're taking *that* into account. To be "saved," in other words, is not the *end* goal; it's the beginning. It's not a spiritual transaction where we complete the minimum entry requirements to heaven; it's how God *brings us into* his plan for the entire world.

Another place in the Scriptures we see this is in Mark 10. There's a story there about a so-called "rich young ruler." *In short, a rich man comes up to Jesus and asks the minimum entrance requirement question.* He says, "what must I do to inherit *eternal life*?" And the conversation that ensues between him and Jesus is *fascinating* to read. If you have time this week, I would recommend going and reading it yourself to see how Jesus navigates it all.¹

But if you do that, you'll see that *in that passage*, Jesus and the disciples seem to *use four different terms almost interchangeably*. The four terms are "**eternal life,**" "**following Jesus,**" "**entering the kingdom of God,**" and "**being saved.**" In that passage, it seems like those four words refer to the *same thing*. Or at the very *least*, like they are *necessary implications* of each other. In other words, to inherit eternal life *is* to follow Jesus. To *follow Jesus is* to enter the kingdom of God. And to enter the *kingdom of God is* to be *saved*. They all correspond to one another.

Which means that to be "saved," in the bible's language, is about way more than having your card punched for heaven. It is to experience and participate in God's kingdom in every arena of life both here, and in the future. It is to follow Jesus: bringing every aspect

¹ You can find the story in Matthew 19:16-29, Mark 10:17-30, and Luke 18:18-30.

of *your* life under the rule and reign of Jesus the king. And it is to receive *eternal life*. But that life doesn't *start* when you *die*—it starts *now*. John 17 puts it this way:

Now *this is eternal life* (here's what it is): *that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*²

If you **want eternal life**, get to *know God*. Get to know *life* in his kingdom. *Starting* in the here and now, and then *continuing into* the life to come. // To be just a little more blunt about it: **if you aren't interested in knowing God now, you're not going to be interested in spending eternity with him**. If you're not enjoying *following* Jesus now, what makes you think you're going to *enjoy* it, all of a sudden, once you die? ~~If you have no interest in living your life in the kingdom of God now, you won't become interested in it then.~~ Our friend **Dallas Willard** was known for saying, somewhat tongue-in-cheek:

I am thoroughly convinced that God will let everyone into heaven who, in his considered opinion, can stand it.

I love that. **This is what being "saved" means**. It means bringing your life and your activity and your thinking and your believing all under God's rule and God's reign *now*. *More and more* so, with every day that goes by. And then *fully and completely*, on the day when Jesus makes all things new. That is what it means to be "saved." Now hear me: **doing that isn't what merits God saving you. But it is what God saving you means.**

There is a reason, that **when Jesus left his disciples their final instructions**,³ he did *not* say "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them," *period*. If being saved is just a one-time spiritual *transaction*, that's all he would need to say, right? But for those of you who know the passage, what did he say? He said, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, *and...*" what? "...teaching them to *obey everything* I have commanded you." What matters isn't just that people sign at the dotted line. It matters that they learn how to bring the entirety of their life under the good and loving reign of Jesus the king.

The biblical authors often talk about **salvation in three different tenses**: *past*, *present*, and *future*. When you decide to follow Jesus, you are *saved* (past tense) from the *power* of sin. Sin is no longer your authority, no longer your master—because Jesus has liberated you from that by his death and resurrection. But you are also *being saved* (present tense) from the *presence* of sin. With each day that goes by, you are learning, more and more, how to *live* in freedom *from* your sin by the power of the Holy Spirit. *And*, you will also *be saved* (*future* tense) from even the *effects* of sin, when God makes all things

² John 17:3

³ Matthew 28:18-20

new and fully reconciles all things to himself. You *have been* saved, you *are being* saved, and you *will be* saved. That is what *salvation* means in the bible. Past, present, future. Not a one time transaction, but a life *trajectory*.

So with all that unpacked, let's circle back to our original question: **how do we articulate** all of that to others? And right off the bat, we **need to acknowledge something**. And that's that in the bible, there is no *one* correct way to present the gospel to others. **For instance, in the book of Acts,** the early leaders of the Church present the gospel in a myriad of different ways, emphasizing different parts of it depending on the setting, context, and audience. To be sure, there are some common elements in most of the presentations, but the *details vary* a good bit. This is also the case in **Paul's many different letters**. He always *talks* about the gospel. But the *way* he presents it is usually very specific and contextualized to *whoever* he happens to be talking to and whatever issues they happen to be facing at the time. **We don't ever get,** best I can tell, a one-size-fits-all answer for how we articulate the gospel to others.

So today, I just want to give you what I think is **a helpful framework** for how we do it. And this framework isn't my *own* invention: it's really just the story of the bible, and of the gospel *itself*. But I think it can serve as a really helpful *guide* for how we articulate the gospel to others. I'll give it to you as a whole, and then we'll break it down a little and see how it guides and informs our conversations with people. The **framework is this:** **Creation-Fall-Redemption-Restoration**. This, I think, is a helpful framework for communicating the gospel to others. So let's take each of those pieces in turn and talk about what they mean:

- **Creation**, we could summarize like this: **there is a way that the world is supposed to be**. In the Christian's worldview, God is the *creator*, and *he* designed the world with purpose, intention, and design. There is a way that the world is supposed to be.
- **Fall** is the idea that **something has gone wrong with us, and therefore with the world**. It's the belief that something has *broken* about how the world was supposed to function. Things aren't the way they should be, and more personally *we (you and I)* aren't the way we should be. For followers of Jesus, we call the thing at the core of that problem *sin*: "missing the mark" of who and how God made us to be.
- **Redemption** is the belief that **we need something to be done about what is wrong**. Something has to, in the bible's language, "save" us. The world can't go on as it is—something has to change. As Christians, *we* believe that "*something*" is Jesus. That by entering into the world as the man Jesus, and by sending him to the cross and bringing him back to life, God has plotted a new trajectory forward

that is possible for all. That through Jesus, we can have our sin addressed. We can be reconciled to God, and therefore reconciled to who we were meant to be and how we were meant to live all along. *Redemption* has arrived in and through Jesus.

- And lastly, **restoration**. Restoration is the understanding that **the world is returning to what it was meant to be**. Everything that was lost can be recovered, and everything that has gone wrong can be set right. For those who belong to Jesus, that is happening *right now*, as God is “reconciling all things to himself,” and it will happen *fully* when Jesus returns.

Creation. Fall. Redemption. Restoration. Now, like I said: one of the reasons I think that framework is helpful is because it’s **literally the story of the bible**. Most theologians from all different perspectives agree that this is the storyline that the Scriptures follow, beginning to end. Genesis to Revelation. If you were to go back and read Colossians 1, for example, you would see that it touches on all four of these movements. But there’s **also a very practical reason** I think this framework is helpful. It’s helpful because **most people already use this framework to make sense of their world, whether they realize they’re doing it or not**. We as human beings, just inherently understand our lives through these lenses. We don’t know how *not* to.

So, just for sake of illustration, the **Republican party** believes a version of this story. *Creation*: America was meant to be the greatest nation that ever existed. *Fall*: we are no longer the greatest nation because of some combination of factors, that may or may not include the Democratic party just existing. *Redemption*: we’ve been given candidates (or, primarily, *one candidate* at the moment), who can return us to greatness. *Restoration*: under that leadership, we will return to greatness once again. *Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration.*

The **Democratic party** believes a version of this story. *Creation*: we were meant to be a beacon of education, progress, and enlightenment to the world. *Fall*: we currently are a little backwards. We are *regressing* instead of *progressing*, for a multitude of reasons that may or may not include the very existence of the *Republican party*. *Redemption*: we can elect forward-thinking leaders who can legislate us *past* America’s more outdated ways. *Restoration*: we can become that beacon of progress and enlightenment that we *should* be for the world. *Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration.*

But **more importantly for this series**, you need to know that the **individual people** in your *life* that don’t know Jesus...they *also* tend to see their world in terms of *creation, fall, redemption, and restoration*. Maybe because they live out of a narrative like the ones of the Republican party or the Democratic party. Or maybe they have their own, *unique*

version of the story they live out of. But most everyone lives into and out of their own version of the story. They believe that life was supposed to be a certain way. They believe that something has gone wrong. They believe that something has happened or needs to happen to rescue them out of that. And they believe that there is a better world on the horizon, because of that.

So for instance, your classmate who is on three different dating apps right now, thinking that on one of them, she's going to find a guy who wants something more than a hook-up—she is believing some version of this story. Your coworker who is climbing the corporate ladder and is willing to take anybody out they have to get there—they are believing some version of this story. Your family member who is entrenched in internet conspiracy theories right now—they are living out of some version of this story. Your neighbor who comes home from work every day, closes his garage door, and turns on Sportscenter until he falls asleep—he is living out of some version of this story.

You see, **not everybody believes the gospel.** But everybody believes a gospel. All of us operate out of a narrative script with its own versions of creation, fall, redemption and restoration. We don't know how to function in the world without that framework. **Which means learning to articulate the gospel is simply connecting the stories people already believe—to the one true story of the gospel.** Helping people see how God's story of creation, fall, redemption, restoration, is the only big story that their story makes sense inside of. When we articulate the gospel to people, that's what we're doing. We're helping them connect the story of their life, to God's bigger story. To his commitment to reconcile all things to himself.

So I just want to grab one of the examples I rattled off a second ago and try to show you how this might work. So for the classmate looking for love on all the dating apps. Her functional framework right now might sound something like this. **Creation:** I was made to enjoy intimacy of all kinds with another person. **Fall:** I haven't found that person yet, so I can't be a whole person the way I was supposed to be. **Redemption:** there are ways out there to accelerate the pace at which I find that person. **Restoration:** I'll find that person, and we'll live happily ever after. That's the narrative script that she is operating out of.

But if she's your classmate, and you've built a relationship with her, what would it look like to connect—and maybe even replace—her story, with God's story? Well, it might look something like this. **Creation:** so she is right, in thinking that God didn't design her to be alone. That's in Genesis 2, right? "It is not good for man to be alone." Now, that's talking about much more than romantic relationships, but still: loneliness is not God's design for humanity.

Fall: she is feeling the **frustration of loneliness** on a deeper level for at least **two reasons**. One, because all these guys she's meeting so far on the apps want *one* type of intimacy, without any of the other types. They want to *use* her, more than they want to *love* her. But also, she is feeling this loneliness on a *deeper* level **because she has believed** that *romance* is the only type of relationship that can resolve the loneliness.

And then **redemption**. Here is where you get to **start delivering some good news** to your classmate. The good news is that in and through Jesus, her loneliness has been directly addressed. One, God has accepted her fully and approves of her completely at the cross. He has told her not only that she is beautiful and desirable, but that she is holy, blameless, and *cherished* in the sight of God. That's true of her because of the cross and resurrection, where Jesus makes her a daughter of the king.

Restoration: Jesus is **restoring her**, through his death and resurrection, to who she was made to be. He's helping her realize who she truly is. And through that, he's giving her the ability to realize that she doesn't need a boyfriend or a husband to be a whole and complete person. He's helping her to see that there are other ways to resolve some of that loneliness—like intimacy with the Holy Spirit. Like other followers of Jesus that can love her and know her at deep levels of her humanity.

And **maybe, one day, God provides a guy** to come along and be one more *aspect* of that. And if he does, this all means she will be in a healthier place for that to happen. But even if that *doesn't* happen, she will be okay—because she no longer needs *that one thing* to cure her loneliness. And further, she can now *become* the type of friend to *others* that she herself *needed*. She can participate with God, not just in her *own* reconciliation and restoration, but in that of others too. God, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is reconciling all things to himself.

So **do you see what we did there?** All we did was attempt to **take her story**—her own functional understandings of *creation, fall, redemption, restoration*—and connect them somehow to God's *bigger* story. We helped replace *her* gospel, with *the* gospel. That is how you articulate the good news of Jesus.

Now real quickly and then we'll be done: **nine times out of ten**, you're not going to be able to walk her through *all* of that in *one* conversation. Hopefully we realize that. That's a *lot* to unpack in one setting. *Sometimes* God gives you the opportunity to do it that way, but usually not. Usually, you're helping her to see those various components of God's story through multiple conversations, **over the course of weeks or months or years**. You're helping her grapple with it, one piece or a couple pieces at a time. But

that's how you do it. You meet her where she is in her own attempt to craft a *creation, fall, redemption, restoration* story, and you show her that there's a better one out there.

And as you help her see that, you **invite her to live into it**. *Some* of that is going to happen by your *words*. *Some* of that is going to happen by you asking enough good questions that she begins to see some of the holes in her worldview. *Some* of that is going to happen by *her* observing *your* life—how *you* live into and out of a better story and the effect that it has on you. **And often, by you inviting her to come around and see how a community of Jesus-followers do that.** But it all culminates in you being able to articulate to her, over time, a better story.

So **our practice for this week** in the **practice guide** is basically, what I just did. We give you several different Gospel “Simulations.” Just stories of imaginary people in your life, and then we give you some space to figure out how you would connect their story to God's story. How you would articulate *creation, fall, redemption, restoration* to them, based on where they're at and what they currently believe. So we'll work through that together.

But with all of this, we need God's help. So let's pray for that together.