

The Gospel

Text: Mark 1:1

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I began my pastoral ministry in November 1997 by planting a small church in a dormitory at Claremont School of Theology. Since then, I have spent nearly twenty-eight years serving churches through many joys and many challenges. There have been seasons of growth and seasons of disappointment, times of celebration and moments of heartbreak. And now, by God's grace, I have the privilege of serving alongside you here at Liberty UMC.

Throughout those twenty-eight years, one prayer has never left my heart, "Lord, let Your church grow." I imagine that every pastor prays that prayer. We pray for more people to come to Christ. We pray for families to return to worship. We pray for young people to discover faith. We pray for marriages to be strengthened, for lives to be transformed, and for churches to be spiritually healthy and financially strong.

But the reality is often discouraging. Many churches today are struggling. Since the COVID pandemic, thousands of churches across America have experienced significant decline. Many churches have closed their doors, and many pastors have left ministry altogether. We pray, we visit, we make phone calls, we send cards, we invite people to church, and yet the results are often far smaller than we had hoped.

Why is that? The church is called the Body of Christ. A body is a living organism, and living things grow. Living things reproduce. An apple tree naturally bears apples. A healthy rose bush naturally produces flowers. A healthy body grows, heals, and renews itself. Growth is one of the clearest signs of life. So why do so many churches struggle? What are we missing?

Today, on my second Sunday with you, I would like us to think together about the secret of true church growth – not merely numerical growth, but healthy spiritual growth that comes from God. In a word, what makes a church truly alive?

The answer is found in the very first verse of Mark's Gospel: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The word "gospel" simply means "good news" – the good news of what God has done through Jesus Christ. Notice that Mark begins not with a command, not with a ministry strategy, not with a miracle, and not even with a list of teachings. He begins with the gospel.

According to early Christian tradition, Mark was closely associated with the Apostle Peter and recorded many of Peter's memories and teachings about Jesus. Some traditions even suggest that Mark's family home may have been connected to the Upper Room where Jesus shared the Last Supper with His disciples. While we cannot verify every detail of those

traditions, what we do know is that Mark was deeply connected to the earliest Christian community.

And when Mark sat down to write his Gospel, he began with the most important truth he knew: “The beginning of the gospel.” Not church programs. Not church buildings. Not church budgets. Not church traditions. Not church activities. But the gospel.

Mark is telling us that everything begins with the gospel, and everything returns to the gospel. In fact, the entire Gospel of Mark is framed by this message. The very first verse introduces “the gospel of Jesus Christ.” At the end of the Gospel, the risen Christ tells His disciples: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation: (Mark 16:15). Then Mark concludes, “And they went out and preached everywhere” (Mark 16:20).

Do you see the pattern? Mark begins with the gospel, ends with the gospel, and fills every chapter with the gospel. The mission of the church is the gospel. The message of the church is the gospel. The power of the church is the gospel. The church has never been sustained by its buildings, its wealth, its programs, or its popularity. The church has always been sustained by the gospel.

There is a well-known story about the nineteenth-century evangelist Dwight L. Moody. Someone once asked Moody what method he used to bring so many people to Christ. Moody replied, “I have only one message; Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” That was his secret. His message never changed.

And it is still the secret of every healthy church today. Whenever churches lose sight of the gospel, they may become busy, but they lose their spiritual power. They may become active, but they stop transforming lives. They may become organized, but they cease to bear spiritual fruit. The gospel is not simply one ministry among many. The gospel is the heart of every ministry.

So, what exactly is the gospel? Imagine your phone ringing this afternoon. What kind of news would make you smile immediately? Perhaps your doctor calls and says, “The test results are back. It’s not cancer.” Perhaps your financial advisor says, “Your investments have fully recovered.” Perhaps your son or daughter calls with wonderful family news. For me the best news I could receive today would be a phone call from my daughter saying, “Dad, we’ve landed safely – and Isaiah is with me.” Isaiah is my seven-month-old grandson. I miss him terribly. Nothing would make me happier than knowing that he has arrived safely. That is good news.

Several years ago, a newspaper conducted a survey asking people what single piece of news would make them happiest. The answers were predictable: a clean bill of health, financial

security, reconciliation with family, and success for their children. Those are all wonderful blessings.

But imagine a man sitting on death row who received the news that he has been completely pardoned. Suddenly, every other concern becomes secondary. His financial problems may remain. His health may not improve. His future may still contain many challenges. Yet one piece of news changes everything: he is no longer condemned. He is free.

Brothers and sisters, that is exactly what the gospel does. The gospel is not merely good advice for living a better life. The gospel is not simply a collection of moral teachings. The gospel is not a self-help program for becoming a nicer person. The gospel is the announcement that through Jesus Christ, guilty sinners are forgiven, condemned sinners are pardoned, and those who were once far from God are welcomed into His family.

Matthew tells us that an angel appeared to Joseph and said: “You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save this people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). The name Jesus means, “The Lord saves.” Jesus did not come merely to teach us. He did not come merely to inspire us. He did not come merely to show us a better way. He came to save us. He came to rescue us from sin, guilt, shame, death, and eternal separation from God. That is why Jesus Himself is the gospel. The greatest news in the world is not that our circumstances have changed. The greatest news in the world is that our Savior has come.

I know this personally because I experienced it myself. I met Jesus Christ during my sophomore year in college. When I was a student in Korea, we received a new student ID card every year. Years later, I looked back at those ID photographs. My freshman and sophomore pictures looked dark and unhappy. There was a heaviness on my face. Something was missing in my life. But my junior-year photograph looked completely different. There was joy on my face. There was hope in my eyes. There was a peace I had never known before.

Why? Because sometime during my sophomore year, I encountered Jesus Christ. The circumstances of my life had not changed dramatically. I was still the same student. I still faced the same challenges. I still lived with the same uncertainties about the future. But I had changed. The gospel had changed me. That is what the gospel does. It brings people from darkness into light, from guilt into forgiveness, from fear into peace, from despair into hope, from death into life.

Some of you met Christ fifty years ago. Some of you met Him twenty years ago. Some of you may still be seeking Him today. But the question is not merely, “When did you meet Jesus?” The more important question is, “Is the gospel still good news to you today?”

Have you become so familiar with the gospel that it no longer amazes you? Do you still wake up each morning grateful that your sins are forgiven? Do you still marvel that God calls you His child?

Do you still rejoice that your name is written in heaven? Do you still thank God that Jesus Christ died for you and rose again for you? A church grows when its people never get over the wonder of the gospel.

So, how does this church grow? Many people assume that churches grow because of better programs, better buildings, better music, or better marketing. Those things may have value. But throughout history, every genuine movement of God has begun when people rediscovered the gospel. The Protestant Reformation began with a rediscovery of the gospel. The Wesleyan Revival began with a rediscovery of the gospel. The Great Awakenings began with a rediscovery of the gospel.

Whenever God's people are captivated by Jesus Christ once again, spiritual renewal follows. When believers are captivated by Christ, they naturally pray more. They naturally worship more. They naturally serve more. They naturally give more. They naturally share their faith. Any healthy churches are born.

Liberty UMC does not need a new gospel. We do not need a better gospel. We do not need to replace the gospel with something more modern, more entertaining, or more fashionable. We simply need to return again and again to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the gospel. He is the One who forgives our sins. He is the One who breaks the power of darkness. He is the One who give hope to the hopeless, peace to the anxious, strength to the weary and life to the spiritually dead. When Jesus Christ remains at the center of our lives, our families, and our church, spiritual growth becomes the natural result of spiritual life.

My prayer is that Liberty UMC will always be a church deeply rooted in the gospel, passionately committed to the gospel, and joyfully transformed by the gospel. May the gospel of Jesus Christ bring new life to every person here, to every family represented here, and to this church for generations to come.

May Jesus Christ always remain at the center of this church, and may His gospel continue to transform lives until He comes again. Amen.