

Pastor Dwight Wagner
Garden Heights Baptist Church
Erie, PA
April 25, 2010

“Getting the Gospel Out!”

Mark 1:1-8

Introduction

There are two challenges every church faces when it comes to the gospel. Getting the gospel right and getting the gospel out! Getting the gospel right is a constant challenge in every generation as there are religious, political, academic, and cultural pressures to water down the gospel, to dilute it, to emasculate it! But getting the gospel of Jesus Christ right is absolutely essential, for if you mess with the gospel you have no good news to herald and proclaim. You are left with good advice and good morality. That is why we have to constantly guard the gospel and get it right!

A second danger regarding the gospel that every local church faces is getting the gospel out. We can guard the gospel well and protect its purity. We can make sure we know the gospel theologically and have been rightly dividing it or interpreting the Word of God regarding the good news of Jesus. And yet we might be keeping it under a bushel! We get the gospel right but may not be getting the gospel out!

So as we begin this message, we need to ask ourselves, “Are we getting the gospel right?” Are we getting the gospel out?”

These are dangers that all of us need to be aware of. As Mack Stiles has recently written in his book about gospel evangelism, “Losing the gospel doesn’t happen all at once, it’s much more like a four generation process too:

The gospel is believed —>

The gospel is assumed —>

The gospel is confused —>

The gospel is lost.”

One of the ways to counter this process is to constantly keep in front of us what the gospel is as well as set before us examples of what it means to get the gospel right and to get it out! Praise God there have always been who have not been afraid to get truth out and to get truth right.

Travel back with me centuries ago to Scotland as John Knox stands tall against Queen Mary, known as bloody Mary, a man who was so passionate for his homeland that he prayed, “Give me Scotland or I die!” He faced martyrdom from that Queen but even after the dangerous times passed, he never gave up boldly and fearlessly getting the gospel out.

Or consider Hugh Latimer in Hampton Court preaching to Henry VIII in such a way that offended him. He was dismissed and yet a few days later Henry VIII commanded Latimer to appear before him again the next Sunday and to preach again, yet to first offer an apology for his offense against the King. Hugh addressed himself as he began to preach:

Hugh Latimer, dost thou know before whom thou art this day to speak? To the high and mighty monarch, the king's most excellent majesty, who can take away thy life if thou offendest; therefore, take heed that thou speakest not a word that may displease; but then consider well,

Hugh, dost thou not know from whence thou comest; upon whose message thou art sent? Even by the great and mighty God! who is all-present, and who beholdest all thy ways, and who is able to cast thy soul into hell! Therefore, take care that thou deliverest thy message faithfully.

He then gave King Henry the same sermon he had preached the week before—only with more energy!

I would like to have been at Worms on April 18, 1521, when Martin Luther stood against his world, *contra mundum*. There before him were arrayed the princes and theologians of the Church, and along with them, Charles, heir of a long line of sovereigns—of Maximillian, of Ferdinand the Catholic, of Isabelle—the orthodox-scion of the Hapsburgs, Lord of Burgundy, Austria, Naples, Spain, the Low Countries, Holy Roman Emperor! To the questioning of Johann Eck, Archbishop of Trier and his antagonist, Luther answered 489 years ago last week

“I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.”

Go back to the early church, I wish I could have been there in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost to hear Peter and the apostles declare, “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.” And when he and the others were told to cease and desist their gospel activities they responded, “*Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.*” ” (Acts 4:19–20, ESV). Later, they said, “We must obey God rather than men!”

And then going back even earlier than that, I would love to have heard the man we will study about today preach the unvarnished gospel. He preached mightily,

“He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” ”
(Luke 3:7–10, ESV)

“John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”
So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. ” (Luke 3:16–18)

John the Baptist was a great man with a great message. His primary message was one of urgent repentance! He was the primary witness to Jesus Christ before His ministry commenced! He was a mighty preacher of judgment! Of this man, Jesus testified, *“I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John.”* (Luke 7:28, ESV)

I believe we can learn three principles this morning from John the Baptist' ministry that will keep us on the right path toward getting the gospel right and getting the gospel out! Our infallible guide this morning will be the first eight verses of Mark's gospel which read,

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’ ” John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” ” (Mark 1:1–8)

Mark's gospel begins by doing something he only does once—quotes from the OT. The only other OT quotes in the entire book come from the lips of Jesus and they are few. Mark says, “Just as it is written” which means “This is an accurate record of what has already been written and it continues to be true: God's Word is settled forever in the heavens. This OT quote is important because it shows the NT is organically connected with the OT. There's no breach between the two. The NT fulfills the OT.

We will look at this tapestry of quotations that Mark weaves together from the OT in just a minute but the very fact that Mark quotes from the OT is worth

pondering here when it comes to Jesus Christ. It demonstrates several important truths beginning with this one: Mark is saying, “You can't understand who Jesus is and why He came apart from the OT. The gospel is only understandable when it is understood in terms of OT history and prophecy.” This is so important because some people think that Jesus' coming to earth was a sort of “Plan B.” Since God's other plans didn't work out, he decided later that He would have to send Jesus. No, this quotation shows that the plan of God had predicted centuries before Jesus came.

A second explosive truth is that these OT quotations in their original settings were applied directly to God Himself who was known as Yahweh to OT Israel, the people of God. But now Mark is applying them directly to Jesus in their fulfillment—which is to say in an authoritative and yet quiet way at the very beginning of this gospel, “Jesus is God!”

Then thirdly as was pointed out last Sunday, there is the prominent emphasis in these quotations on the word “way” or “path.” That's a popular spiritual term today, but Mark wasn't using it in some metaphysical, mystical, or even ethical sense as a “way of life” but he was using it in a transforming sense as the way to God, the way of salvation! He begins here to lay out for us that the way to God is ultimately the way of Jesus which leads to the cross!

Here's the tapestry of quotations, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” (1:2-3). Mark is blending words from Exodus 23:20, Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. He says they come from Isaiah the prophet, likely because Isaiah was viewed as the greatest of the prophets and he quotes most extensively from him. In fact all four gospel writers quote Isaiah 40:3 in their books.

Now, Mark doesn't quote Isaiah in full or perfectly but you need to understand that this was not an uncommon thing to do, to refer to only one prophet the more prominent one, the more notable one, and tuck in another prophecy by another prophet since it all was the Word of God. These prophecies go hand in hand, Malachi the introductory one and Isaiah the more important one.

NT writers do this all the time. This is something you need to know that New Testament writers do. Sometimes they quote exactly from the Hebrew, sometimes they quote from the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, sometimes they make sort of a general reference to a text and sometimes it's an interpretive reference because, remember now, the New Testament writers are inspired by God and so when they interpret an Old Testament text, they interpret that in an inspired way. So they always give the true interpretation of the text. Sometimes they directly quote it, sometimes it's an interpretive quote. Here you have some interpretive

quotation, certainly in the case of Malachi 3:1, which when Malachi wrote his book applied directly to God the Father and now Mark uses it in reference to Christ, the Son.

What's the plan: there is going to be a messenger, a forerunner of Jesus. One who will prepare the way! Now the Roman readers, the primary original audience of John's gospel, would get this. The Gentiles would get this imagery. The Jews would also. You see monarchs, rulers in the near East never just showed up unannounced. No, when they travelled from one place to another, they would dispatch some men to prepare the way for their coming. This involved both repairing the roads that they would be using because in that day they weren't always well maintained but it also involved preparing the people for the sovereign's arrival. They would ready the people, preparing for this event.

It's the same today. Heads of state don't just show up unannounced normally. There's a lot of preparation when the President, for example, is going to appear somewhere. The setting is prepared, the route along his motorcade is secured, and before he arrives the crowd is educated on what is acceptable and what isn't.

Well, that's how it was in the ancient world as well. And the Roman readers of Mark's day would have expected this sort of authoritative, credible herald who would announce the arrival of a king. But as we will learn this was no ordinary king, no typical king because as we have already learned He is the Christ, the Son of God!

This one would come “crying [shouting, speaking with a high and strong voice, with emotion and appeal], “Prepare the way of the Lord [a name that referred to royalty yes, but ultimately as we shall see to deity.] Make his paths straight.” This forerunner, this herald was to prepare the way for Jesus Christ, the Son of God. His chief method would be preaching and his distinctive activity would be the baptism of repentance.”

The character of the messenger

The first thing I want us to see is the character of the messenger, then the nature of his message and finally the passion of this messenger. Getting the gospel out requires the right character, the right message, and the right passion. Notice first John's character.

Verse 4 then abruptly, without any transition, not even a conjunction, then announces, “John appeared!” Poof! He is just here in Mark's gospel. And John then gives a very focused and defined picture of who John is. He is “baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance.” Verse six tells us “Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.”

Now, from the other gospel's account and from this description we can piece together a pretty complete understanding of John's character. His conception and early years were pretty incredible. He was born to parents who were past their prime and God supernaturally worked out John's conception so that his father and mother who had no previous children brought John into the world. An angel appeared to John's dad and told him what his new boy's name would be and that he would live an uncompromising life being called a Nazarite which means he never drank any wine, ate only certain foods, and never got a haircut. John was actually a cousin of Jesus' and was born just six months before Jesus entered this world as a baby.

John would appear as the last of the OT prophets—and he was the biggest news story in over 300 years in the land of Israel! Here was the first man in nearly 400 years with a word from God!

We learn more about his character from his lifestyle. First, where he lived, then what he wore, and finally what he ate—all in keeping a bit with his calling as a prophet in the vintage of Elijah. He lived and preached in the badlands of Israel, the wilderness seared by wind and heat. The wilderness was the Judean wilderness and referred to the uninhabitable, open, wild territory just west of the Jordan River and Dead Sea region. Stark, rugged, dry terrain. An area nicknamed by the Jews as “the devastation” area. So John must have been a tough guy. He definitely was no city boy.

And that imagery is sustained by the description of his clothing consisting of “camel's hair.” Let's just say this about his outwear—John was not mainstream. He would not have been likely welcomed to stay at the Courtyard by Marriott or the Jerusalem Sheraton! I suppose in one sense you didn't care about fashion if you lived in the wilderness. Basically, you worried about surviving and staying warm because it did get cold in the desert at night. So he wears this rough hairy material woven from camel's hair. And this garment which is pretty free flowing is gathered together with a leather belt rather than something a little more stylish even in that day.

Then to round out this picture of rugged character, John, we are told, ate locusts and wild honey. John had a high protein diet believe it or not in eating locusts. Israelites were allowed to eat four varieties actually. And honey has a lot of nutritional benefit as well. And both were in fairly ample supply in the wilderness. I'm sure that you all know about how to prepare and eat locust, right. You just yank off the wings and the legs and then depending on your preference you can roast the body, boil it, dry it, grind it up and bake it in your bread with salt.

Now, what was the point in all this? Living in the wilderness like this basically shows that John was associated with another famous OT prophet named Elijah.

And Malachi, the last of the OT prophets associates one who will come one day in the spirit of Elijah and John the Baptist is that man. He like Elijah, spent most of his days, in solitude, he dresses oddly, is very confrontational in his message and didn't care what people thought about him. He just wanted to be faithful. His clothing and his message were a protest against the godlessness and self-serving materialism of his day. His life embodied his message.

He didn't care to be on the in crowd. He cared to be identified as a prophet, as a man of God! Now thankfully, God doesn't require us all to go live out in the desert and live on locust and wild honey and wear scratchy animal hair. But if we want to get the gospel out we will have to live differently and not seek the approval of men. We will have to live counter-worldly.

To get the gospel out we will have to display a fearlessness like John did. So often we are scared of saying the wrong thing and offending people. So often we have this fear of man that keeps our lips sealed when the gospel should be boldly, lovingly, and faithfully proclaimed. So we can learn a lot from John's character.

He was uncompromising, devoted to holiness, living a life of continual repentance and fearless. He embodied the message. And that has to be true in our lives. We have to live the message first before we proclaim it. We won't be perfect in this but we shouldn't be getting the gospel out if it hasn't first gotten into the depth of our souls and transformed our lives first!

Notice just one other aspect of his character: thorough-going humility. “He preaches (verse 7), “After me comes (with the sense of immediacy) He (literally “the One) who is mightier than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.”

The lowest of the lowly slaves were the ones who stooped down and untied the leather straps of the Master's sandals. Jewish slaves didn't do this even. It was beneath them. Wealthy Jews employed Gentile slaves to do this lowly task. A Jewish slave might carry his master's sandals but to stoop down and untie them was unthinkable.

And John says, “I'm like the lowest of slaves when it comes to Christ.” He must increase, and I must decrease! I am baptizing you with water—an external rite that symbolizing moral cleansing and a breaking away of sin, but He only can deluge you internally with the Spirit—and change you from the inside out. My baptism is outward and ceremonial but Messiah's is inward and supernatural.”

So his character was self-forgetting and humble. He lived a life that showed downward mobility! He exemplified humility and that made his getting the gospel out so powerful!

Brothers and sisters, here's the lesson to learn from John's character as messengers of the gospel. The word of Christ will penetrate so much more when it first rings true in our lives and comes from a sincere heart. If we want to be effective in getting the gospel out we must ask God to give us devoted, repentant, humble hearts that demonstrate the truth of the gospel even before we start proclaiming it!

The nature of the message

There is another principle here. The character of the messenger is important if we are to get the gospel out. But also the nature of the message must be right if we are to get the gospel out. Notice just the highlights of John's message and how different it is from the modern evangelical gospel,

“John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”” (Mark 1:4–8)

John's message is focused on repentance, sin and judgment. But it also proclaims forgiveness of sin and Holy Spirit transformation. He's proclaiming these truths, the word is *kerusso* which always carries the “suggestion of formality, gravity, and authority which must be listened to and obeyed.” John is an officially commissioned herald vested with the authority of God. He carries the message of a king! He gives a public summons and his message carries with it a demand. The account of John's message in Matthew 3 and Luke 3 displays very convicting, specific preaching that deals with the common sins of people.

He is calling people to a baptism that is a sign of true repentance! A baptism connected with genuine repentance, not just sorrow over the consequence or the revelation of one's sin, but a change of one's mind, a willful turning away from sin, with deep conviction and sorrow over one's wrongdoing.

The gospel of Jesus Christ involves faith but it is a call to repentance. A change of mind about who God is, who Jesus Christ is and about your sin. It involves a resolute change of direction of one's life away from sin and toward holiness. And it shows in true grief over sin—a sorrow that leads to a changed life.

Friends, we must have a deep seated change of mind, of will, of heart in regard to sin. Why? God hates sin and He hates the wicked! Sin is a violation of his holy and righteous law! Every sin is an offense against a holy God!

Verse 5 says all the country of Judea and Jerusalem (and that is a big area—Jerusalem alone is 20 miles away from the Jordan River and the area that John

likely was baptizing near the fords of Jericho—it was also 4000 feet above the Jordan making the journey down the rugged Judean hills quite cumbersome, but if you thought going down was bad—what do you think the climb back up was like. The point is this was no cake walk). They were doing this in waves. They kept coming, new people, day after day to hear John's preaching—from as far north as Bethel all the way down to Beersheba in the south, from the Jordan River in the east to the western edges of Judea. Some estimate as high as 300,000 people might have showed up.

John certainly was popular. His influence, we learn, years later extended to far away Ephesus. A well-respected Jewish historian named Josephus devotes more ink on John than he spills about Jesus.

But what was John calling them to? Their best life now? Positive thinking? Name and claim it faith? Easy believism? No, he got the gospel right and got it out because of the nature of his message which was confessing sin! That word in verse 5 means to agree with, to acknowledge, to admit. It is an intensive form of the verb “confess.” That tells us friends that we must openly agree with God about his verdict regarding our sin. We must confess our sin and then and only then will God be faithful and just to forgive us of our sins!

Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest explains simply, “Confession of sin is more than a mere acknowledgment of sin in the life. It is an agreeing with God as to all the implications that enter into the fact that one has sinned. It is looking at sin from God’s point of view, and acting accordingly. It means the putting away of that sin. It means the determination to be done with that sin.”

So the message involves sin—a breaking of God's holy, moral, perfect law! It calls us to repentance of sin. The message calls upon people to confess sin! And the message proclaims forgiveness of sin. The first part of the message is all about sin, then!

If we repent of our sin, if we confess our sin to God, He stands ready to forgive sins. The word here speaks of “the removal or cancellation or barrier of guilt.” Forgiveness deals with the debt of our sin, based on the death of Jesus Christ. It deals with the cancellation of God's judgment. The wages of sin is death—eternal separation from the loving presence of God and the eternal damnation of God against us.

Now, don't misunderstand verse 4. Forgiveness of sins is the occasion for baptism not the result of it. The baptism of John, which does differ significantly from Christian baptism, was nonetheless a testimony to the fact that the person being baptized was confessing and receiving forgiveness of sin already.

Baptism is an outward demonstration, a symbol, of an inner reality! You are not baptized because you want to receive forgiveness of sins but because you already have done so.

So the nature of the message, that is involves sin—calling for repentance of it, confession of it, and forgiveness of it. That is the bad news! That is the law! God is holy! We are sinners. Sin deserves condemnation. But the nature of the message also involves good news—gospel! And the gospel in this text is verse 7-8, *“And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” ”* (Mark 1:7-8, ESV). The Gospel is that Christ, the one mightier than John, mightier than any of us has come and defeated Satan, the strong man! Christ comes and baptizes us into the Spirit—the life giving Spirit that He promised to send! The law brings death, but the Spirit gives life and regenerates the soul!

John's message still rings true today, “Behold the Lamb of God (Jesus Christ) who takes away the sin of the world!” How? Because He was the perfect Lamb who lived a perfect life! And then as the perfect man, He died as the sinner's substitute! He paid the penalty for our sin! And now He offers us His righteousness in exchange for our sin! He offers us life in exchange for death! But we must repent and believe! That's the nature of the message.

Oh, don't forget that message, friends! Let's take this message to our neighbors, friends, family, loved ones, fellow workers, our community, nation, our world!

The passion of the messenger

And there is one more element, one more principle for getting the gospel out like John the Baptist did—passion! You can't miss his passion! He is (verse 3) the voice of one crying in the wilderness! Get ready for Christ!” And now we say, “Look to Christ and live, friends! He alone can save you!” There is great feeling in that word “one crying!” Great emotion! The gospel has to come from our hearts and we must address the hearts of our fellow men! Our hearts must be broken, burdened and full of love and compassion for the lost—just like the heart of John, of Jesus, of Paul, of John Knox.

I read an article this week by Ed Stetzer in which he lists seven habits of highly evangelistic people. We don't see them all in John the Baptist life explicitly in Scripture, yet no doubt they were there. I wonder are they in yours today.

1. They are people of prayer. They realize that only God can convict and convert, and they are totally dependent upon Him in prayer.

2. They have a theology that compels them to evangelize. They believe in the urgency of the gospel message. They believe that Christ is the only way of salvation. They believe that anyone without Christ is doomed for a literal hell.

3. They are people who spend time in the Word. The more time they spend in the Bible, the more likely they are to see the lostness of humanity and the love of God in Christ to save those who are lost.

4. They are compassionate people. Their heart breaks for those who don't have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. They have learned to love the world by becoming more like Christ who has the greatest love for the world.

5. They are intentional about evangelism. They pray for opportunities to share the gospel. They look for those opportunities. And they see many so-called casual encounters as appointments set by God.

6. They are accountable to someone for their evangelistic activities. They know that many good activities can replace Great Commission activities if they are not careful. Good can replace the best. So they make certain that someone holds them accountable each week either formally or informally for their evangelistic efforts.

Listen we may **never have an audience in the thousands** like John did. We may **never stand before kings and queens** like John Knox and Hugh Latimer did. We **may never lead a reformation like Luther did**. We are **not apostles like Paul** was. But just like all of these we are **commissioned** to go and herald the gospel to every creature. **Christ's last command is still our great commission**. Are we, like these men, **heralding the gospel?** Does our lives demonstrate the character of the gospel? Are we getting the message **right?** Are we getting it **out** with **passion?**

May God give us grace to be men, women and children **of, by and for the gospel**. Let's get the gospel right and get it out!