

Session Six: Demonstrating the Gospel

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Preacher: Bryan Hart

[0 : 00] Welcome back to Gospel Growth.

My name is Brian Hart, and we have been talking about going out with the gospel, being on mission, and we've heard about the responsibility that we have as Christians to proclaim the gospel. Well, in this next session, we're going to talk about another responsibility that we have, and that is to demonstrate the gospel. This has everything to do with the language that you probably hear at One Harbor Church services every Sunday.

When we talk about pushing back darkness, what we're talking about is gospel demonstration, how we live out what we believe with our actions, not just with our words.

Now, there has often, unfortunately, there's often been tension between different camps and Christianity on which of these should be more important. Some would say that to emphasize good works and deeds in the community is not a good thing because then you lose the real mission, which is the preaching of the good news of what Jesus has done.

[1 : 10] And the gospel is always about what Jesus has done, and therefore, we shouldn't overemphasize things like social justice. On the other hand, you have some traditions which kind of say the opposite.

They emphasize the social justice of Jesus and the social teaching about how we care for the hungry and the poor, but they say that's more important and we don't need to be so fussed about actually preaching a gospel of repentance.

Well, we want to say it's clearly both. And Jesus said it's both. He told us that we had to do both. In Matthew 5, verses 14 and 16, Jesus says, You are the light of the world.

A city set on a hill cannot be hidden, nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

So Jesus is telling his disciples that the world will take notice of the gospel in part based on the behavior of the church, not only the words of the church.

[2 : 21] When Jesus Christ becomes our king, all of our life comes under his lordship, and it transforms not only our beliefs, not only what we think, and not only the message that we have to tell people, but it also transforms very practically how we live our lives.

And it's not just for us. This also reflects how Jesus lived his life. In Luke 4, verse 18, Jesus said about himself, he said, The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he's anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, to preach.

He said, I have words to give the poor. But then he said, he sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind and to set at liberty those who are oppressed.

So Jesus proclaimed the good news to the poor and the broken, but he also brought healing as well. He proclaimed liberty to the captives. Again, that has to do with a message of liberation.

But he also set at liberty those who are oppressed. So the mission of Jesus was not merely in what he said. It had also to do with the things that he did to usher in and demonstrate the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

[3 : 35] So if we want to be like Jesus, we got to realize he did both. And so we need to do both. To proclaim a gospel of eternal salvation and to do good deeds of care and healing to demonstrate what this kingdom is like.

So getting a little practical, what does this look like? Well, first of all, we have to embody the kingdom of God inside the community of the church. And this really has to be a priority, and this is where things have to start.

It doesn't need to start out there with the world, so to speak. It's got a life of good works and good deeds.

It's got to characterize interpersonal relationships within the church first. The way that we do community is so countercultural that what happens in here is part of the light that shines into the darkness.

John 13 says this, By this, this is Jesus speaking, By this all people will know that you are my disciples. If what? If you have love for one another. And in the New Testament, love is always characterized by the way that we live in our behavior.

[4 : 43] It's not merely an emotional response. It's much more than that. And so Jesus is saying that people will know that you follow me based on how you love one another, how you treat one another, how you lay down your life for one another, which is what Jesus said is the truest and highest expression of love.

And so these good works have to start in-house. We can't go out into the world and say we're demonstrating the gospel with our actions if within the family of the church were selfish and backbiting and fighting and quarreling.

We're not going to be able to care for the broken people in Beaufort and Moorhead and Swansboro and Havelock and Newburn and beyond if we can't care for each other. In Acts chapter 2, there's this really kind of famous passage about the early church.

It says, So it says, well, it says a lot here, but I want to point out that it says that they had favor with all the people and that the Lord added to their number.

When there is a dynamic community of hospitality, of showing love to one another and welcoming each other, people outside are drawn to that.

[6 : 16] People see it and they say, hey, I want to be a part of that. The rest of the New Testament is full of directions and commands to care for widows and orphans, for the poor, the people who are most vulnerable in society.

So it's important here to realize that this is one of the things that set the church apart in its earliest days. In the world, even back then, the way of the world is your value is dependent on what you bring to the table.

And the widows and the orphans in those days didn't seem to be bringing much to the table. But Christians said, every human being is made in the image of God. And those in our midst, we are brothers and sisters, and we will take care of everyone here who loves Jesus, who is suffering and hurting.

That kind of community, that kind of loving friendship, shows something, shines a bright light into the world. But we don't just stay in the community of the church, right, 24-7.

We gather together, we help each other, we strengthen each other, and then we go out into the world where we actually interact with darkness. The church lives out the kingdom of God in the world.

[7 : 26] Now, there's this mentality that can kind of creep into Christian circles, you know, reflected by the saying, this world is not my home, I'm just a passing through, my treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.

You know, there's a reality to the fact that our ultimate treasure is not here. We are, and we talked about that in this course of gospel growth. We're exiles, we're sojourners, we're travelers, and we're waiting for a future home.

But until we're there, this place is not meaningless. There is actually work to be done. And that whole language of exile and being a sojourner that we see in the New Testament really is rooted in the story of Israel that's found in the Old Testament, where Israel is taken from their homes, they're ripped away, they're sent to Babylon, and they're living there as exiles.

This is not our home. We want to go back to Israel, to the place that's home to us. And so there's this amazing passage in Jeremiah 29, while Israel is in captivity, and look what God says to them about how they're supposed to live.

He says this, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to who? To the exiles, whom I've sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Build homes and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce.

[8 : 43] Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons and give your daughters a marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf,

for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

So God's not saying, Hey, don't worry about that place Babylon. It's going to be destroyed in a few years anyway. No, he's saying, While you're there, you be a blessing. And you seek their welfare. And he tells them to do this by, you know, this has to do with like meeting needs, but also being in prayer.

And I think that's a great picture for the church. We can be God's faithful people of prayer. Sorry, we can be God's faithful people by being at the point of need, both in prayerfulness and by practically meeting needs.

We see another picture of this that's very similar in 1 Peter that kind of draws on this passage from Jeremiah and really the broader story of Israel. He says, Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

[9 : 58] So like the Israelites, we are exiles. We're travelers. And we don't want to get too comfortable. We know that this world is passing away and God will one day renew it and our ultimate home is coming.

We know that. But Peter says, Live in such a way that even if people around you speak against you as evildoers, they will see your good deeds.

They will see the way that you live your life. They will see the way that you push back darkness and they will glorify God. In other words, while we're here, we're living in such a way that even when people disagree with us, even when they don't believe what we believe, they're happy we're around.

They want us to be around because they know when we're around, people get helped.

Communities get stronger. My prayer, I think for a lot of us, our prayer is that the non-Christians of our communities would see our lives in the world and say, Hey, even if they don't believe in Jesus, even if they haven't yet accepted the gospel, they would see us and say, We wish there were more people like you.

That's what we want people to say about us. We want people to be grateful because of how we serve them, because of how we lay down our lives for them. Jesus prayed to his father, Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

[11 : 17] And so now we pray and we live to see God's reign and rule happen in Beaufort and Moorhead and beyond, in Swansboro and New Bern. What would it look like though if Jesus actually were king in this town?

What if he was here in, because a lot of times when we talk about Jesus being king here now, sometimes we can be a little vague when we say that.

What would it be like? What would it be like if Jesus was mayor in your town? What were the kinds of things that he would focus on? How would he be blessing the poor? Who would be the captives that he would be helping?

Who would be the oppressed that he would want to set free? Where are the areas of brokenness that he was most concerned with? You know, in his day, we have pictures of that. We see that from the life that he lived, the places that he went, the kinds of people that he helped.

Now this could get overwhelming because the needs are always beyond our capabilities to address them. I mean, we are never going to permanently make the world a better place. The only time that all the problems are going to be fixed and solved is when Jesus returns.

[12 : 27] And we know that. So we don't want to take on some kind of messianic pressure to be Jesus in ways that we're not meant to. It's more like we're supposed to live out the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Who is the person in front of you that's hurting? Who are the... You can't fix everybody's problem, but who are the people in front of you? What are the problems that you can fix? The good deeds that God has prepared for you to do.

What are those things? Where can you jump in? There are small things that you and I can do that make a huge difference, that make Jesus look amazing, that make his love visible.

And Jesus cares about children. We can patch a road filled with potholes so a school bus can get down the road easier. Jesus cares about the hungry. Well, we can help in our local food pantry.

Jesus cares about the imprisoned. We can visit local jails, not just to share the gospel. By all means, we want to do that, but also just to offer friendship. Jesus cares about the addicted so we can help with local recovery efforts.

[13:31] Jesus cares about racial unity. We can build relationships across racial barriers. Jesus cares about the poor. We can do home repairs for low-income families.

There are so many needs. You probably have a unique kind of exposure to some of them. My wife and I, years ago, decided that we wanted to adopt.

And we didn't start out down the road of fostering, but as we were getting involved in the license for the adoption process, we discovered that there was a drastic shortage of foster care families.

So children in our community being taken away from their parents, and you can only imagine the trauma of that, because there's not enough homes, are being sent two to three hours away. And so they're not just losing their mom and dad.

They're being ripped out of their schools. They're losing their friends, their siblings, everything that they know. And so we felt like there was a need in front of us, and that's part of how my wife and I became foster care parents.

[14:32] We realized that we had the ability to step into that particular gap and push back darkness and demonstrate the gospel by taking a child and bringing them into our home and loving them as best as we could for the time that they were with us.

And as we do these kinds of good works, we can and should expect that people will see them and they will come to faith in Jesus in part because of them. N.T. Wright says this, when the church is seen to move straight from worship of the God we see in Jesus to making a difference and affecting much-needed change in the real world, when it becomes clear that the people who feast at Jesus' table are the ones in the forefront of work to eliminate hunger and famine, when people realize that those who pray for the Spirit to work in and through them are the people who seem to have extra resources of love and patience in caring for those whose lives are damaged, bruised, and shamed, then it is not only natural to speak of Jesus himself and to encourage others to worship him for themselves and find out what belonging to his family is all about.

But it is also natural for people, however irreligious they may think of themselves as being, to recognize that something is going on that they want to be a part of.

You see, good deeds aren't only good if someone immediately gets saved or makes a profession of faith after doing them. Good deeds are good because God calls them good. They're good to do no matter what happens.

But it is a fact that if we live our lives, if the arc of our lives is that we are always doing good deeds for the sake of the gospel, we should expect people to encounter Jesus along the way and come to saving faith.

[16:18] Now that sounds like a lot of work and it is. It is a lot of work to live this way. Nothing that I'm talking about comes easily or naturally. Pushing back darkness is messy.

When you push back darkness, sometimes darkness pushes back. And I'll tell you, being a foster parent has not always been easy. Sometimes it's meant pain for us. It's meant hurt. It's been, at times, exhausting.

When you engage in areas of brokenness, you can get hurt along the way. You may be really concerned about a particular need and pour out your energy and your prayer and the change that you're wanting to see doesn't come to pass.

How do we stay motivated? How do we stay sustained when those things happen? Well, it's important to remember why we're doing this stuff. Ultimately, the reason that we do good works is because of what we have received in Jesus.

We are only doing for others what has been done for us, no matter what they do, no matter what long-term change happens. Everything we do is because Jesus has done it to us first and has told us it's now our privilege to represent him to the world.

[17:25] So we don't care for the poor so they'll be indebted to us. We don't meet the needs of the city so people will think highly of us and talk great about us. In fact, it's just worth acknowledging one of the great dangers of good works is you can do the right thing for the wrong reason.

It's one of the reasons our mission statement is to make disciples and push back darkness. Why? Not so we would be a great, cool, hip church. No, we do it for the sake of the gospel. We do it because of this gift that we have received.

The gospel is always our rationale. It's our why. After all, the gospel said, according to the gospel, right, we were the poor ones, the captives, enslaved to sin and bondage.

We were broken and oppressed and Jesus stepped in for us. So we are sent by that same gospel to others. So as you gather in groups, I would encourage you to ask, where is the gospel?

Where are the opportunities for you to step out and meet somebody's need for Jesus? Where are the places that God's putting on your heart to serve someone else?

[18 : 30] What are the good works that he is preparing for you to do? I would encourage you to talk with one another, get your faith stirred for what God could be doing in and through you, and of course, pray about these things and ask God to give you eyes to see the incredible good works that he has prepared for you to do.

God bless you guys. God bless you.