

God-Breathed
Part 7: Gospel Power
August 23rd: 2015

Welcome: One of the greatest joys of being part of Harbor for all these years is that we've witnessed countless lives changed by Jesus Christ. So many of our stories go something like this... *"I used to live by my own power, intelligence, wisdom, beauty, success but now, because of the mercy and goodness of Jesus Christ, I've come to see that He is greater than all those things...I live for Him!"*

Never would I have dreamed that God would do what He has done in and through your lives...and I can't wait to see what He continues to do in the seasons ahead!

Historically...the church has grown as ordinary people are transformed by Jesus...and then live the rest of their lives on earth with a radical commitment to Him!

"We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves." 2 Corinthians 4:7

What is this treasure and what will your life look like when you have it? (Let's look...)

The author of this verse was at one time one of the most self-righteous, violent, antagonistic opponents to the gospel of Jesus Christ in all of history. And yet, Jesus chose this man, who we now know as the Apostle Paul, to help get the church off the ground!

So, if you've spent any part of your life hating the church...you're in good company, and if you're suspicious of Jesus altogether...His patience and mercy are greater than your suspicion! *If God chose Paul to lead His church...then, you have no idea what He can do in and through you!*

One of the things that makes Jesus' choice of Paul so interesting is that in addition to being a vicious, lawless, sinner, Paul was also a disciplined, law-following, God-fearing overachiever.

Listen to what Paul wrote in his letter to a church in the city of Philippi...

*"Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more! I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was **so zealous** that **I harshly persecuted the church**. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault." (Philippians 3:5-6)*

How zealous was Paul?

The first time we read about him is at the end of Acts chapter 7 when a young follower of Jesus named Stephen became the first Christian to be killed for his commitment to Jesus. As the Jewish leaders picked up rocks to pelt Stephen's body, they laid their coats at the feet of a man who, Luke tells us, agreed completely with the killing of Stephen. The man was Paul, and his actions ignited a wave of persecution against Christ-followers in Jerusalem!

When was the last time you hunted down and killed someone you disagreed with? Don't answer...

Through Paul's life, we see both a man of intense religious devotion and blatant irreligion. He is at the same moment devoted to God and deteriorating in sin!

Paul's story teaches us two things?

***Nobody is beyond the need of God's grace
Nobody is beyond the reach of God's grace***

Some of us think to ourselves, "I'm a very bad person." *God could never forgive my past or accept me as I am with all my faults and failures.* Therefore, we live under a cloud of regret or shame, keeping God at arms-length. Yet Paul's story shows us how God pursues, forgives, transforms, and ultimately works through a very bad man.

In another letter, Paul says...

*"This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners and **I am the worst of them all**. But God had mercy on me..."*

1 Timothy 1:15-16a

No one is beyond the reach of God's love and mercy!

For others, that's not your story! Some of you were born into a religious family and you grew up around the church. You may know a lot about Jesus...you may even live a very disciplined or devout life!

But if there's one thing we learn from Paul's life, it is that we can know a lot about God and be very zealous for Him, but knowing a lot about God doesn't mean you

know Him! A Christian is someone who personally encounters Jesus and has his/her life transformed by Him!

Illustration (College legalism): I've shared with you that I'm a recovering legalist. In fact, there was a time in my college years when I decided that I wasn't going to watch Rated-R movies (which is a fine decision to make if done for the right motives). But I believed somehow that God would smile on me for my commitment to cinematic holiness. All was going well until *Saving Private Ryan* came out...and I lived with a guilt complex for weeks because I watched it three times. I couldn't even keep up with my own rule-system, and it was tearing me up inside. During this time of life, I had very little peace or joy...I was self-righteous and highly critical of other's lifestyle choices...yet I was proud that I didn't watch R-rated movies!

I knew a lot about Jesus and was passionate about rules I attributed to Him, but I didn't know Jesus and I had no idea how far I was from the life that He created me for. **Maybe that's your story too!**

*Some of you are sitting here this morning thinking, "that's me...I've always thought that I'm too bad and that Jesus wouldn't want a thing to do with me." And you're sitting beside someone who has lived their whole life believing, "If I can just be good and keep my life together, God will have to love me." **God pursues both of you in love.***

He even pursues those who aren't interested in God! Jesus came after Paul when Paul isn't even looking for him? Some of you aren't looking for God...but your disinterest doesn't stop him from pursuing you in love! **The gospel is that God came after us in Christ when we're his enemies...**

Here's the thing...he can come after you, but it's only when you stop running and respond to him in faith that you will truly encounter Jesus!

****How do I know? "What does it even mean to have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ?"***

Detonation vs. Germination (2 ways God works)

For some...the good news comes like a pickaxe to the soul. God takes a spade and literally slams it against you and the gospel detonates in your soul. Some of your

stories are like Paul's story! You were walking your own way in obstinate rebellion against God until Jesus interrupted your life...and in a flash you saw your badness and Jesus' goodness, and since that moment, you have never been the same.

For many of us, the gospel came or comes to us more like what Jesus talked about in Luke 8 when he described a farmer sowing seed on various types of soil to show how God gently and carefully softens our hearts to prepare us to receive the Good News about Jesus Christ. He woos and he calls and he puts people and circumstances in your life to make himself real to you and by seasons of patient and persistent sowing, the good news breaks into your life!

For some of us...conversion happens in a split-second like a bomb, detonating in our heart...but for others it happens gradually like a seed germinating in the soil until a single shoot of life breaks through.

My Story: I began to realize in my early 20's that I had no genuine or vital relationship with Jesus Christ. For the first time, I began to see how impossible God's standard of perfection was for my life, and that I was sunk in my sin. I can't point to a moment during those years...it was more of a season when the beauty of what God has done for me through Jesus became real. For years, I had believed that holiness was something that I needed to self-manufacture...but I began to see that Jesus (the holy Son of God) took my un-holiness, the worst and darkest of my sins and died for me on the cross to cover me in his love. For the longest time, I feared being cast away from God because of my uncleanness...and then I discovered that Jesus was willingly cast away from the Father so that I could be drawn up into his arms.

When I finally realized all that Jesus did this for me because of His great love for me, these truths began to open a locked door in my heart. The gospel freed my heart from deep insecurity and despair and filled me deep comfort and joy! For the longest time, my whole relationship was, *"What can I do so that he'll love me."* And now, *"What can I do for Him because He loves me perfectly?"*

At the end of the day, whether the gospel detonates or germinates in your heart, when the gospel breaks in...you'll know it and there will be evidence...you'll see it.

**Is this true for you? Is there evidence of a personal encounter with Jesus in your life?
Are you learning to rest in Him? Is your heart filling up with joy and peace and contentment?**

Is the love of Jesus Christ leading you to be more compassionate to your neighbor?
Is Christ's goodness making you a more warm, hospitable, and generous person?
Are you growing in kindness and patience? Is the mercy of Christ leading you to be more forgiving?

Can you say, "I used to walk in this direction, but Jesus found me...and now I walk a different way." If you peel away the layers of your life, is there evidence?

Several months ago, a young man named Tom began attending Harbor with his family! He shared very honestly about how challenging life had been and yet...with time, Tom discovered in a new way how good Jesus' mercy is!

In the spring, Tom came to us wanting to be baptized, and he wanted to do it immediately! So...we arranged to baptize him at Freeman Lake on a Sunday afternoon in June. When the afternoon rolled around, it was about 50 degrees and raining...it was miserable weather for an outdoor baptism...but nothing was going to keep Tom from celebrating his faith in Christ through baptism...
When we got to the lake...Tom's family was gathered around...huddling under umbrellas! And Tom, standing in the rain, shared his story of brokenness, addiction, and incarceration...and he closed his story with these words!

The gospel talks about the miracles Jesus performed over 2000 years ago but what I failed to see is that my living God, is performing one on me right now and is slowly transforming me into the husband, son, man and father that I need to be. We are so undeserving of His grace and mercy yet we get it anyway...I want to be baptized to show my obedience and my love for my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I want to walk with Him and give my life to Him, as he has given His life for me!

When Tom finished...we baptized Him! The coldest baptism I've ever been part of and the only time I can remember losing hold of the person I was baptizing!

"We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves." 2 Corinthians 4:7

The presence and power of Jesus Christ (treasure) is at work in our fragile lives! We are the jar...Jesus is the treasure! When we hear stories like Tom's, we're reminded that this surpassing power is from God...not from us!

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Personal Encouragement – That’s Tom’s story...look at what God has done in your story! Look at how faithful and merciful he’s been in spite of your humanity! We are subject to vulnerability, failure, and inconsistency. We are powerless, subject to disease, decay and even death!

Yet...Jesus Christ, the Creator and Lord of Heaven and Earth is transforming our lives! Look at how far you’ve come because of his tender, at times forceful, yet gracious hand in your life. Is he not faithful to continue on in your lives?

The world doesn’t ultimately need a person or a pastor, but the power of God at work in them! Even Paul...the Apostle Paul is writing to people he loved and led, but would never see again...and He’s reminding them that the power of the gospel – to change lives – is not based upon human power, personality or persuasion, but on the power of Christ crucified!

This is the treasure we celebrate and put our hope in...

One of the reasons we take the Lord’s supper every time we gather and that we baptize people into Christ as a celebration of the gospel is to remember the treasure that is Christ!

Remembering is so important!

Family Pictures: We were in Concord last week to take family pictures...Last time we had family pictures, Jarin was 9 and Elise was 3...now, Jarin is as tall as Beth and Lydia is almost two! How quickly we forget what is happening around us!

We need pictures to help us remember how far we’ve come!

As followers of Jesus, we also need pictures to help us remember. Communion and Baptism. Help us fix our eyes on Christ...

Baptism Celebration (in a few weeks – September 13) – People saying, *“I need Jesus and I want Him!”* Baptism is about His greatness, not ours! We have this treasure in jars of clay!

Communion: We hold this treasure. The body of Christ...the blood of Christ! We are jars of clay – leads us to repentance and celebration. **That God would work out his will in our lives is an unspeakable gift!**

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In a moment...we're going to take communion together...first, we're going to celebrate through worship the power of God at work in us!