

The Point of the Sword

There are two types of gospel passages in the NT. The first type deals with the *content* of the gospel. The second type deals with the gospel *call*. We could say that one describes the meal we are obliged to serve,¹ while the other describes how to offer it to our guests.² This is not the only gospel metaphor we find in the bible.

Christ said, "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." This speaks more of division than feasting. Yet the gospel is indeed the tip of the sword of truth.³ It explains the entire "thrust" of Scripture. It is the key that unlocks the great mystery of God's eternal love for his people,⁴ and of Christ-in-us.⁵ The bible says that the word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword. It pierces to the point of dividing soul and spirit, bone and marrow, judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.⁶ Christ says that his sword separates fathers from sons, and mothers from daughters.⁷ It distinguishes the way of God from the way of men,⁸ and the way of righteousness from the way of death.⁹

Christ crucified is a stumbling block,¹⁰ and the gospel is the tale of his crucifixion.¹¹ It compels us to acknowledge Christ's identity, and thus take one path or the other into

¹ Jn. 6:48-58 I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not as the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." ESV

² Matt. 22:2-14 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.' But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.' And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen." ESV

³ Tit. 1:1-3 Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior; ESV

⁴ Jer. 31:2-Thus says the LORD: "The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

⁵ Col. 1:27 To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ESV

⁶ Heb. 4:12

⁷ Matt. 10:34-39 "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ESV

⁸ Isa. 55:8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD ESV

⁹ Jer. 21:8 "And to this people you shall say: 'Thus says the LORD: Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death.

¹⁰ 1Cor. 21:3

¹¹ 1Cor. 15:3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ESV

eternity.¹² Christ asks every one of us, “Who do you say I am?”¹³ When we answer, we identify ourselves either as his sheep, or as the Devil’s children.¹⁴ The cross is an offense,¹⁵ and the gospel is all about the cross. Therefore the gospel will be offensive to many people; its telling will naturally separate the goats from the sheep.¹⁶

Because the gospel is the leading edge of the sword of truth, we need to pick up that sword, and begin to wield it with some skill. But we will be employing it to bring peace and reconciliation to God’s elect,¹⁷ not to wage war against his enemies. Its proclamation is our means to free the sheep from their captivity,¹⁸ and to sound their Shepherd’s voice.¹⁹ It is used to protect them from the wolves in sheep’s clothing that prowl among them.²⁰ These wolves hope to lead astray and devour the sheep with false doctrines and practices.²¹ The gospel is the truth that informs the sheep, and refutes such falsehoods.²²

The Sacred Dance

So embracing this idea of using the gospel as a means of reconciliation and education, let's use a different metaphor. Let's think of presenting the gospel as a *Sacred Dance*. It's like going to a dance hall filled with strangers. There will be heavenly music playing. We are expected to dance. We begin by introducing ourselves to our partner for the evening, and learning something about him or her. There is polite conversation, tentative questions, interested responses, and awkward silences. As the music begins to play, we want to know if this person is willing to dance with us. We take the lead because we already know the steps to the *Sacred Dance*. We clearly explain to them what must be done, and then we patiently demonstrate what to do. Finally, we take their hand, and together we respond to the rhythm of the music...

¹² Mt 10:32-33 So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. ESV

¹³ Matt. 16:15

¹⁴ Joh 8:43-44 Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. Jn. 10:26-27 you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ESV

¹⁵ Gal. 5:11 But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. ESV

¹⁶ Matt. 25:32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ESV

¹⁷ 2Cor. 5:18-19 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ESV

¹⁸ Lk. 4:18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ESV

¹⁹ Jn. 10:3-5 To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” ESV

²⁰ Acts 20:28-30 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ESV

²¹ Matt. 7:15-16 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. ESV

²² Col. 1:5-6, 21-23 Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, 6 which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth;... 21 And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, 23 if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, ESV

Keep the following things in mind -

- There are two audiences for the gospel message:
 - those who are *called*,²³ and
 - those who are *condemned*.²⁴
- There are two purposes for presenting the gospel:
 - to *convert*,²⁵ and
 - to *convict*.²⁶ (please don't confuse convicting with judging!)
- There are two possible responses to the gospel:
 - they either *come*,²⁷ or
 - they *contend*.²⁸
- If they contend, it is because they have two fears:
 - the first is fear of *judgment*,²⁹ and
 - the second is fear of *new birth*.³⁰

It is our duty to address their fears. What they will present to us, either quietly or in anger, is a laundry list of their objections to truth, religion, or change. Sometimes their objections will be valid ones; but more often, they're just a smoke-screen to fend off the sword of truth. Handling objections effectively is an art that takes some time to learn.

Remember the first rule of etiquette: never offend or embarrass your potential dance partner. It is not our dance hall. It belongs to God. He is the Lord of Hosts. We are his servants and his ambassadors, and we act accordingly. Instead of challenging or refuting someone, we ask questions. We gently probe to determine this person's spiritual condition. If they challenge us, then we answer them truthfully and in love, without disapproval. We simply want to know if they are ready to dance. If not, we treat them with dignity and respect, and continue the conversation. Perhaps they want to dance, but not with us, or not right now. Or they may be unable to dance at this time. God calls his children to dance only when the moment is ripe.³¹ But if they are indeed ready, then we must be prepared to dance with them, joyfully and graciously.

Learning to invite someone to dance is what evangelism is all about. And so our goal is to become interesting conversationalists, and proficient dance instructors. To do that, we must commit ourselves to learning the melodies, steps, and rhythm of the gospel.

²³ Joh 10:3 The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ESV

²⁴ Joh 3:18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. Joh 6:44 *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.* ESV

²⁵ Ac 16:30 Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ESV

²⁶ Joh 16:7-8 if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. ESV

²⁷ Joh 6:37 All that the Father gives me will come to me, ESV

²⁸ Ac 25:19 Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. ESV

²⁹ Rev 6:15-17 everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" ESV

³⁰ Joh 3:3 Jesus answered him, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*" Joh 12:42-43 Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God. NIV

³¹ Mr 4:29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." ESV