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THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL AT THE BEGINNING OF A GOSPEL

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The introduction to Mark's account of the life of Christ is a lot like the rest of his writing – short and to the point. As it reads in most translations, it's not even a complete sentence: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). However, these words contain some profound opportunities for reflection.

Take for example the word **gospel**. Like Vizinni and “inconceivable,” the word gospel is so commonly used by Christians that it quite possibly has lost its meaning (and, if you didn't catch that reference, do yourself a favor and watch *The Princess Bride* as soon as it is conceivable to do so). The term according to Strong literally means, “a good message.”

The idea of the life of Christ being a good message gets lost in the synonyms with which the term gospel travels: New Testament, new covenant, law of Christ, etc. While each of these terms were originally meant to be descriptive and thought provoking, today they simply travel in a bundle with one practical definition: “The part of the Bible that Christians obey.”

Sometimes though, the term gospel carries a quick and easy definition based upon its usage in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 – the gospel is the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you have 30 seconds to explain the gospel to someone (or, like Paul, you're about to defend the importance of faith in the resurrection), that definition is fine, but if that is the depth of your knowledge concerning the term, your picture is incomplete. The death, burial, and resurrection of Christ gives the gospel its power, but not its entire content. Mark's account does not begin with Christ's death and end with His resurrection.

Unwind the term gospel from the bundle and put a tack on your quick and easy definition. The fact is that the 27 books of the New Testament contain many good messages – messages concerning the life and teachings of Christ, the history of His disciples, and the teachings which he relayed to His disciples through the Holy Spirit. Collectively, these good messages can be thought of as **the** good message, the gospel. I look at the term gospel as a challenge – a call to answer two questions: 1) What makes this message so good? 2) If this message is good, what should I do with it?

Another cause for pause regarding Mark 1:1 lies in the concept of this being “**the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ**.” An old man once came up to me after worship service one Sunday with an odd question that was totally unrelated to what I taught about that morning. “Do you believe that Jesus' teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage applies to Christian and non-Christian alike?” he said. “Yes,” I responded, “God doesn't have two standards at work in the world.” He wasn't satisfied with that response and after a brief conversation, he told me that I “need[ed] to go back to school.”

Where on earth did this man get the idea that Christ's teachings applied to Christians but not to non-Christians? It probably had to do with 1) his definition of gospel, 2) the extent to which he had reflected on Mark 1:1. Jesus' life and his teachings are as much a part of the gospel as is His

death, burial, and resurrection. You don't have to "go to school" to see where the world stands in relation to the gospel: God will judge the world by the resurrected Christ (Acts 17:31); Jesus Himself claimed He would judge based on the words He had spoken (John 12:47-48).

To justify self, friends, or family, some people try to lessen the scope of the gospel message. Mark didn't believe in doing so. He knew that the good news of Jesus included His life and teachings, not just His death, burial, and resurrection or even the fact that He was (and is) Lord. To edit the gospel is to preach another gospel, and that's not a good idea (Galatians 1:6-9).

Maybe the term gospel presents another challenge. If this news is so good and if it's good for sinner and saint alike, why am I not telling more people about it? I believe that the Spirit's inspiration was behind Mark's account of the life of Christ. However, I do not believe for a minute that Mark was an "unwitting participant" in the recording of this message. Mark believed the life and teachings of Jesus Christ was a good message, one that everyone should know about. Do we?