

HEBREWS
The Gospel – A Better Word
Hebrews 12:18-29

Many of you know the story of Jim Elliot, missionary to the Auca Indians of Ecuador in the mid-1950's. Elliot, along with four other young men, gave their lives for the Gospel as they made contact with the people they longed to tell about Jesus. Jim Elliot and all those with him knew the dangers of their mission and they were prepared to die for the truth of the gospel. They had given their hearts to Jesus many years before that fateful day of January 8, 1956.

In October of 1949, Elliot had written in his journal, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” That is a good word. “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” Again, that is a good word. It is not the best word, but it is absolutely based on the best word, which is the Gospel of Jesus.

The Gospel, as we learned a few weeks ago, is a foreign language that must be reviewed constantly if we are to maintain our grip on it – or, better, if it is to maintain a grip on us. The book of Hebrews reminds us that the natural language for man is Law. You may think that strange with the level of decadence and corruption in the world, but most people believe in some sort of a higher power and most are trying to find a way to make themselves acceptable to God.

There are not many people in the world who do not believe in a higher power, though undoubtedly atheists and agnostic numbers are growing. For the most part, though, people want to be right with God. The world is however, tired of hearing that Jesus is the only way. The world is tired of feeling guilty over behavior and ethics. In our attempts to get the Hunzikers to America, we have been told by a Washington D.C.-area lawyer that there a growing

sentiment of opposition to orthodox evangelical Christianity, not just in America, but around the world. Much of the world is willing to acknowledge God, but to confess Jesus and all that goes with it – well, that’s a bit too much.

This is not new. The men and women to whom the book of Hebrews was written lived in danger of imminent arrest, immediate bogus trial, and public execution. It is not surprising that some were thinking about abandoning Christ and going back to Judaism. The author sternly warned them against doing so in five separate warning passages in Hebrews, the last of which we will cover today in our text, Hebrews 12:18-29. To maintain one’s faith in the face of imminent death requires genuine faith. Some who heard the Word did not intend to abandon God, only Jesus. But, if Jesus is God . . . In order to persuade his readers to maintain their faith in Jesus, the author contrasted the Law with the Gospel and showed how Jesus is far better word than the Law. See if you can catch the contrasts in our text. Would you please stand as the Scripture is read? I will be reading from the ESV.

18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

25 See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. 26 At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” 27 This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.

With antipathy against Christians building worldwide, you may be a bit timid about sharing your faith, maybe much more so than you were even a few years ago. But to contrast the Gospel with the Law can be a far more positive experience than you might expect. Why? Because those who do not know Jesus are most often trying to find a way to get to God, and the Law rarely satisfies the human heart. In fact, it is frightening when people feel good about their relationship with God based on the Law – that was the Pharisees problem, remember, and some of Jesus’ harshest words were directed toward them. But, truly, most people are not happy with their uneasy relationship with God, via the Law.

Over the past few years, I have had the privilege to share the gospel with several men and women that you might think would absolutely be closed to the Gospel, but when the Gospel is held forth in all its beauty and contrasted with the Law, it can be quite attractive and quite compelling. Of course, most people already have an opinion of Jesus based on what they perceive to be the narrow opinions of his followers in the cultural arena. Rather than seeking to understand the core of Christianity’s claims, many allow the noise of the day to drown out the underlying emptiness in their hearts and the often subconscious concern that they may have about giving an account to

a holy God at the end of life, so, consequently, it probably doesn't seem like adherence to the Law is what drives them. But, it is a Law of their own making, which may lead them to feel that it is best to judge others on the basis of what the majority thinks about religion and morality. In response, Christians, having falsely assumed that they were in control of the culture in the "good old days" and trying desperately to get back in charge of the public square, are often defensive about their beliefs and so miss the opportunity to share the true beauty of the Gospel, a far better word than the Law.

Hebrews 12:18-24 is considered by many to be the rhetorical peak of this profound sermon. In these seven verses, the author contrasts the Law and the Gospel. He does so by contrasting Mount Sinai, representing the Law, with Mount Zion, representing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even though Mount Sinai is not mentioned by name, there is no doubt that the author has Exodus 19 and 20 in mind where Moses himself trembled before the Lord as God gave the Law to his people.

Unless your mind works a certain way, you would have missed the fact that the author recalls seven terrifying things that were present when the Law was established and he gives seven thrilling truths about the Gospel. No wonder the Gospel is a better Word! I hope your Bible is open to Hebrews 12 while we think about the seven marks of the Law and seven marks of the Gospel. First, let's think about Mount Sinai, representing the Law. It was:

- 1. (The mountain) that can(not) be touched**

Whenever you encounter God after Adam and before Jesus, there is distance between man and God. As he revealed his holiness and his expectations for the people, God warned both men and beasts not to come close to the mountain lest they be consumed. Look at the ways

that God related to the people through the Law. At Mount Sinai, the people saw God's terrifying holiness in:

- 2. A blazing fire**
- 3. Darkness**
- 4. Gloom**
- 5. Tempest (storm)**
- 6. A trumpet blast**
- 7. A voice speaking words**

The voice was terrifying and the people begged Moses to tell God to make it to stop. Even Moses, who had encountered God up close and personal, trembled with fear when the Lord came in all his glory. Think about how the believers who first heard this sermon would have received these words. William Lane has said that "the recital of these terms in measured cadence, when the homily was read aloud in the house church, would have created a verbal impression of the awesome majesty of God who made his presence known at Sinai. Ironically, though, God remains hidden."

Just imagine if people encountered God in this way today. Would they repent? Maybe. One thing is for sure, they would be afraid of God and recognize their helplessness apart from a mediator. The people begged Moses to ask God to stop speaking because they knew God's word would destroy them if it was the final word. Thank goodness, as we were told in the first few verses of the sermon of Hebrews, *Jesus* is God's final Word. Not his final act, but his final Word. Look at the description of God's better Word of the Gospel, represented by Mt. Zion. It is the:

- 1. City of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem**

It is the eschatological kingdom of God that is referenced in Hebrews. It is the promise of a better day in heaven when all will be made right. The heavenly Jerusalem is filled with:

2. Innumerable angels in joyful gathering

It reminds you of the angels praising God at Jesus' birth. There was much joy, even though painful days awaited God's Son before his crucifixion. At Mt. Zion we find community. It is there that we find the:

3. Church of the firstborn(s), whose names are enrolled (permanently inscribed) in heaven

“Firstborn” is plural. In this context it refers to all the church of God of all ages whose names have been permanently inscribed in heaven. You may be the third child in your family, but all of the children in your family who are believers are considered to be firstborn in God's eyes. Obviously, the author indicated that the jury was still out as to whether or not those who heard his sermon were actually a part of the church. Their perseverance as believers would be the ultimate indicator as to whether or not they belonged to the Church. To be among the firstborn was to be considered worthy of the same privileges as Jesus, the ultimate Firstborn Son of God. That does not mean that Jesus was created, but, rather, that he enjoyed all the privileges of God's favored Son. And, we enjoy the benefits of the firstborn. At Mt Zion, the Church encounters:

4. God, the judge of all

One who encounters God at Mt. Zion finds the judge of all the earth to be far different than those who encountered God at Mt. Sinai. Why? Because they are:

5. The spirits of the righteous made perfect

As Peter O'Brien says, "There is nothing lacking in their relationship with God." Why? Because of:

6. Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant

The one who stood between a righteous God and sinful men and women. He makes us perfect because of:

7. The sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel

Whoa – the blood of Abel. What's that all about? Remember, from Genesis 4, when Cain murdered Abel, Abel's blood cried out to God for vengeance. Jesus' blood, on the other hand, cries out for forgiveness. Maybe you have never murdered anyone, but if you have broken God's Law, you stand condemned before a holy God at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Far better for you to come to Mt. Zion at the foot of the cross where Jesus died for you. Acknowledge your sin before a holy God and confess your belief that Jesus died for you. That's the Gospel. Do not walk away from God's beautiful grace.

When we were reading the description of Mt. Sinai, it sounded dark and foreboding. That is because it was! If you had been at Mt. Sinai on the day that God appeared to the Israelites, you would have likely been trying to hide. You may have become bitter and angry about such a frightening appearance by a God who demands perfection. In fact, you might consider it a manifestation of a hellfire and damnation kind of God. You would be correct, but you wouldn't like it and you would find ways to deny what you have seen and heard.

We have a better Word than Law to present to the world. It is true, though, that all must reckon with the Law before the Gospel will be good news. In the absence of a gracious presentation of the Gospel, all others will see of us will be hellfire and damnation. What a blessing to show the beauty of Mt. Zion to those who only know God through Mount Sinai. What a privilege to share Jesus to those who are in desperate need of God, whether they know it or not. On the basis of all we have seen here, how shall we remove any obstacles from the view of those who need to see the cross? Three ways:

1. Allow grace to flow freely in our community

When we live under the Law, we tend to be suspicious of others. We certainly compare ourselves with others, making certain that we are on the right side of the curve with regard to behavior. But, God does not grade on a curve. Either you are perfect or you are not. We only find perfection in God's grace to us through Jesus. Jesus had a lot to say about extending the kind of grace to others that God extends to us. Oh, we ought to be members of a gracious church! Do your part to allow grace to flow freely in our community. Forgive one another. We are to restore gently, Galatians 6:1 says, when someone falls, remembering that we are only human as well. And let the grace flow freely to those who happen upon our community or into our sphere of influence. Second:

2. Love so well that our relationship with one another is contagious

It may be a good thing that rugged individualized Christianity in our land is becoming a thing of the past. We need one another, and when we live in close relationship with one another, it will make a positive difference. The world is a cruel and tricky place for those living at Mt. Sinai under the Law. You never know when you are going to say the wrong thing and be ostracized by the very ones you

live to impress. Relationship within the church ought to be attractive to the world, which is why unity is so very important. In fact, we ought to love one another so much that our condition is contagious to many who observe. Last:

3. Engage in such joyful worship that it will attract those in bondage

We spend a lot of time worrying about the direction of our country. Brothers and sisters, our citizenship is in the heavenly Jerusalem! If joy was to be found in A.D. 64-65 for these believers who faced intense persecution, it ought to be available to us. Ultimately, it comes down to belief. Do you believe or not? If you do, let the world know. Those who are under the Law are under bondage. Worship joyfully as those who are free!

This would be a great place to end the sermon. Our text, though, does not end here. This Word of Mt. Zion is a wonderful word, but if it is rejected, the consequences are serious. It is bad enough to reject the Law. It is worse to reject the Word of grace so freely offered. The ground shook at Mt. Sinai. The heavens will be shaken at the end of time, and those who do not belong to Jesus will be shaken out and miss the heavenly Jerusalem and be judged on the basis of the Law.

You have heard the term, “You are playing with fire.” Whether you want to acknowledge God or not, if you are breathing, you are playing with fire. The specific point in Hebrews is that if you are thinking about walking away from Jesus, you are in danger of being confronted with the holy nature of God as one who is unforgiven and unprepared for eternity. Believe the good word of the Gospel. Believe Jesus. There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. Let’s pray.