

Believe

We'll be taking a break from our journey through Matthew's Gospel for the next four Sundays for a short series we're calling *Transformed* about how the New Testament says we grow to spiritual maturity. So let me ask you a question. If you could change anything about yourself, what would it be? Would it be a weakness you'd love to become a strength; or a character trait or a talent you want to develop? Or would it be a fear or an addiction to you want to defeat? The good news of the gospel is that Jesus changes lives. I am so glad I'm not the man I was when I first came to know Christ and you should be too. I'm not yet who I will be but I'm very thankful I'm not who I was. Paul writes in 2 Cor. 3:18, *"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."* Every born-again Christian is in the process of being transformed into who Jesus would be if Jesus were you because that is God's ultimate intention – to make us just like His Son – in whom God's glory and character was perfectly realized. Paul says the more we look at Jesus, the more like Jesus we become. That's why the most common word for Christian in the New Testament is disciple; a student or apprentice who attaches himself or herself to a master in order to become just like that Master. So for the next four weeks we're going to look at the New Testament path to Christlikeness and how that path shapes everything our church does. We describe the New Testament path to transformation with four verbs: believe, belong, become and bear fruit. We become more and more like Jesus as we believe in Him and in the gospel more deeply; as we belong to His body and live together in community; as we abide in Him and His word abides in us and we labor with Him in the mission He has called all of us to and bear fruit, making more disciples of Jesus. This morning we're going to look at the first and foundational step in transformation, believe; and how this step shapes what we do at Creekside. Next week Jeff will be speaking on "Belong" and how it is impossible to grow in Christlikeness by yourself.

This morning we'll talk about "Believe." Romans 1:17 says, *"The righteous shall live by faith."* We become disciples of Jesus by faith and we grow as disciples of Jesus by faith and this morning I want to talk about what the gospel is and is not, what belief is and is not, and how belief in the gospel transforms us; because there can be no transformation apart from a continual belief in the gospel. So what is the gospel? Let's look at Romans 1:13-17. Paul is writing to the Christians in Rome whom he has never met. *"I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, for my part, I am eager to preach the **gospel** to you also who are in Rome."* Paul had already preached the gospel throughout the eastern Roman Empire and now he is eager to preach the gospel in Rome itself. Getting the gospel to every person in the world – Jews, Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians - was Paul's great passion. Why? When Paul wrote to the Romans, the word "gospel" wasn't a religious but a political word. It meant good news about the reign of a new king. Think Washington DC on Inauguration Day; especially if the new president is from the party that's been out of power. The band is playing, "Happy Days are Here Again." Political appointees are dusting off their resumes. There's a feeling of hope in the air. Things are going to change now! Our long, dark night is over! The same thing happened when a new Caesar came to power. Heralds would travel around the Empire with the gospel of Caesar, the good news of a new king. Things will be different now; your problems will finally be addressed, your needs will be met, the old, corrupt administration is gone. Over time, the word, "gospel" came to mean good news about some life-altering event. The gospel is not about rules to follow or about something we need to do but about something that has been done for us. So what is this good news? Paul tells us in Romans 1:16-17. *"For I am not ashamed of the **gospel**, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith."*

I have always skipped over the first part of vs. 16, *"For I am not ashamed..."* But lately I've realized that the reason many of us don't share our faith in Christ as often as we should is because of the powerful fear of shame. Shame is

the feeling of humiliation, disgrace or embarrassment. We feel guilty when we know we've done something wrong but we feel shame when other people think we've done something wrong. We're embarrassed and humiliated and just want to escape. It is our fear of shame that keeps us from sharing the gospel. We don't want to be rejected or look weird and so I'm very interested in why Paul was not ashamed of the gospel, especially since the gospel alienated him from his fellow Jews and sounded crazy to everybody else in that culture. Paul explains why he is not ashamed of the gospel. First, the gospel is the good news that we have been rescued or saved; the gospel is "the power of God for salvation." If you noticed your neighbor's roof was on fire, you wouldn't be embarrassed to start banging on their door and disturbing their dinner because their lives would be a stake and the stakes are even greater with the gospel. So what exactly do we need to be saved from? Everybody agrees that this world is not perfect and that a ton of problems remain to be solved. But we can't find the cure for those problems until we properly diagnose the disease. Communism says our problem is the right to own private property, that if there was no private property, all human problems would be eliminated. Feminism says our problem is a patriarchal society, dominated by men. Freud said our problem is our parents. Educators say our problem is ignorance, activists say our problem is racism, environmentalists say our problem is the irresponsible exploitation of the earth; and globalists say our problem is nationalism – and all are correct to one degree or another. But the history of the world indicates that if each of those problems were solved, another would appear immediately in its place. Paul shows in Romans 1:18-32 that our fundamental problem is our alienation from God; and every other problem is just a symptom of that alienation. Rather than relying on our Creator for all that we need, we look somewhere else, and as a result we are separated from God and enslaved to a deformed human nature. We aren't sinners because we sin, we sin because we're sinners; and we each need to be rescued from a nature which is enslaved to rebellion and to evil. All of the weaknesses, attitudes, addictions and behaviors which alienate us from each another are symptoms of our alienation from God and that alienation is what we need to be saved from. Second, the gospel says we cannot save ourselves because the gospel is the power of God for salvation; and it is at this point that Christianity differs from every other religion. Religion says this is what you must do to be accepted by God. Christianity says there is nothing we can do and only God can save us from our sins and from our fallen nature which endlessly produces those sins. Third, the gospel teaches that God saves those who trust Him. Notice the gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes. In fulfillment of hundreds of years of promises in the Old Testament, God sent His Son to become a man as our substitute: to live the life we failed to live so that we might be credited with His perfect record of obedience as a gift from God; to die the death we deserved to die, dying in our place on the cross and bearing the just punishment for our sins, so that we might be pardoned and then rising from the dead and conquering death in our behalf that we might be reconciled to God and live with Him forever. And we are saved from sin when we place our faith in Christ and the gospel. Fourth, the gospel teaches that God saves us by making us righteous; because in the gospel the righteousness of God – the way God makes people righteous - is revealed from faith to faith. When we put our faith in Jesus, God declares that everything that is true of Jesus is true of us and Jesus comes to live in us, makes us new people, and begins the process of transforming us and making us righteous in our attitudes and behaviors, as we continue to grow from less faith to greater faith. Finally, the gospel is not a new plan of salvation but is the fulfillment of what God always promised to do. The gospel is the story of the Bible; which is why Paul writes, "In it, (gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, just as it is written, (in the OT) "But the righteous shall live by faith." God has always saved people on the basis of faith. So what is the gospel? "The good news of what God has done through Christ to save sinners." The Bible tells us where we came from, what went wrong, what Christ has done to make things right and how we respond to Him by faith. The gospel is both personal; what I must do to be saved; and corporate: what hope is there for the world? Christ not only saves us personally but is in the process of saving the world and will eventually defeat evil and death and restore the world to what God originally created it and us to be. So the gospel is the solution to every human problem and that is why Paul says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel."

Before we talk about what belief is, let's talk about what the gospel is not; because down through history, the church has always been in danger of seeing the gospel merely as the minimum standard for belief rather than the beginning, ending and foundation of the entire Christian faith. Historically, the gospel has two great enemies: religion and irreligion. Religion says we have to live a moral life to be saved. Irreligion says that God loves and accepts everybody so it doesn't matter how we live. Both of these enemies of the gospel deny our need for righteousness before God. Religion says I'm righteous enough for God to accept me and irreligion says God doesn't

care about righteousness. Both religion and irreligion deny the need for the cross. If I can earn my way to God by myself, Jesus didn't have to die and if God doesn't care about sin, Jesus didn't have to die. Jesus only had to die if God is holy and takes sin seriously and God loves and saves sinners. Religion says, "I obey; therefore I am accepted." Irreligion says, "I am accepted and therefore don't have to obey." The gospel says, "I'm accepted. Therefore I obey God out of gratitude for all He has done for me in Christ and out of faith in His great love for me."

If I am religious, I obey to get things from God. If I am irreligious, I believe I am entitled to things from God. If I believe the gospel, I obey God to get God; to enjoy Him and to become like Him.

If I'm religious and life gets hard, I get angry at God or at myself, since I believe that anyone who is good deserves to live a comfortable life. If I am irreligious and life gets hard, I get angry at God for how unfair He is. If I believe the gospel, when life gets hard, I struggle but I remain confident that God loves me because of what He has already done for me in Christ and is only allowing this for my good.

If I'm religious and people criticize me, I am either furious or devastated because it is essential that I think of myself as a good person. If I am irreligious and people criticize me, I either go on the attack or ignore them because who are they to criticize me? If I believe the gospel and am criticized, I learn anything I can that's constructive from their criticism and then move on because my identity is not based on what people think but on what God thinks about me.

If I am religious, I look down on the lazy or immoral. If I am irreligious, I look down on the prudish and unliberated. If I believe the gospel, I treat people the way Christ treated me, realizing that it is only by His grace that I am what I am, and I can extend that same grace to others.

The gospel is the good news about what God has accomplished in our behalf through Christ. What does it mean to believe the gospel? The traditional view is that true faith requires three things; understanding, agreement and trust. First, I need to understand what I'm to believe. Biblical faith is not a vague hope that everything will work out; it always has content; what is it that I actually believe? That's why real faith begins with knowledge. Believing in Jesus begins with understanding who the Bible says Jesus is. And I not only need to know what I believe, I need to agree with it. Knowing that the Bible says that Jesus is the Son of God is not the same as agreeing that Jesus is the Son of God. But biblical belief goes beyond both knowledge and agreement. In the Bible, to believe means to trust. Years ago, a tightrope walker was performing on a high wire suspended over Niagara Falls. He walked across several times, juggling, standing on his head, and performing other feats of daring. For his finale, he brought out a wheel barrow, set it on the wire and asked the crowd, "How many of you think I can push this wheel barrow across to the other side." The crowd cheered. Everybody thought the artist would succeed. But then he said, "Who would like to ride in the wheel barrow?" Finally the artist's manager volunteered and the tightrope walker pushed him across to the other side. Then the performer asked, "How many of you believed I would reach the other side?" The crowd cheered again. But the artist said, "You're mistaken. Only one man believed." That's the biblical definition of faith; trusting something or someone so much that we're willing to stake our life on it. James makes the distinction between real and false belief in James 2:19. "*You believe that God is one. (You believe in one God.) You do well; (Your view of God is correct) the demons also believe and shudder.*" (Having the correct information about God doesn't make you a Christian. Demons have that information but they're still demons.) *But are you willing to recognize, your foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless.*" Real belief always produces action. If my faith doesn't affect my choices, it isn't real faith. Real belief always produces a change in behavior. I grew up in the church and for years I thought I believed in Jesus because I knew He was God's Son who was born on Christmas, died on Good Friday and rose from the dead on Easter. But that knowledge didn't affect the way I lived at all. When I was 20 however, I realized that all my problems were of my own making and that I needed a Savior to

save me from myself and I asked Jesus to come into my life, forgive my sins and make me the man He wanted me to be; and my life changed rapidly from then on; because I realized that if I believed in Jesus, I would obey Jesus.

That's why believing the gospel transform us. Pastor Tim Keller says that the gospel is not the ABCs but the A to Z of Christianity. We don't start with the gospel and then graduate to deeper truths. We are saved by believing the gospel and we are transformed in every area of our life by believing the gospel more and more and applying it to every area of our life. Remember, the gospel is the power of God for salvation; saving us from the eternal penalty of our sins when we first believe; and then saving us daily from the power of our sins as we believe. That's why New Testament obedience is always tied to the gospel. The gospel of God's great love and mercy toward us is the reason we obey. The New Testament never says, "Do this so that you can become this." It is always, "You are already this by God's grace in Christ – just live like it." Paul tells the Philippians to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel. "Love one another as Christ loves you, accept one another as Christ has accepted you, forgive one another as Christ has forgiven you." The Christian life is really applying the truths of the gospel to every area of life and so every issue is a gospel issue. Living worthy of the gospel means living as if the gospel is true; living like a person who believes God could not love you any more than He does; which brings us to our third point, how does believing the gospel transform us?

Specifically, we are transformed as we apply gospel motivation, gospel means and the gospel model to every issue in our life. The gospel provides us with the right motivation to obey God; not to be accepted by God but because we have been accepted, not to be loved but because we are loved and not to get something besides God but to get more of God. The gospel provides the means to obey. Just as we're not saved from the penalty of our sins by what we do but by what Christ has done, so we can only obey by what He does in us as we live in dependence on Him. And the gospel provides the model for how we're to obey as we imitate Jesus and do what He would do. For example, let's apply the gospel to marriage. Almost every problem between a husband and a wife is a failure to apply the gospel and to treat each other the way Jesus has treated us. You see, every married person here this morning has one thing in common. We all married sinners. That's all that was available. And unless we learn how to apply the gospel and the way Jesus handled our sin, our marriage is doomed. Most people get married for what they hope to get from their partner. Most enter marriage with high expectations. "Finally I'll have someone who will listen to me, understand me, go to bat for me, admire me, take care of me, and make me happy." But because we all marry sinners, we're all eventually disappointed because our spouse turns out to be less than perfect and fail to meet our expectations. And then we think, what have we done, or we begin our spouse training project. When our spouse behaves the way we expect them to, we're nice. When they fail, we're not. I mean, how else are they going to learn? Except they have their own training program for us and so over time, we nurse disappointments, wait for them to give in before we'll give in and find ourselves growing further and further apart; because we just don't know how to handle our spouse's failures. If I'm nice to them even if they fail, they'll never change. But even when I'm mean to them, they don't change; and we begin to lose hope that our marriage will buck the odds and be a happy one. And we find ourselves wondering, "Maybe I should have married somebody else," except they would be a sinner too, because that's all that's available. Our problem is not compatibility; our problem is sin and that's a gospel problem. So how do we as believers in the gospel apply the gospel to our marriage? Let's start with gospel motivation. God commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church and wives to respect their husbands as the church respects Jesus. Why do I love my wife? Not so she'll shape up or love me better but because God loves me when I obey Him, I experience His great love. God meets my needs. He is my hope and the more I trust Him and do what He says, the more I discover how sufficient He is. That's gospel motivation. We don't obey so that we'll be loved, we obey because we are loved and the more we obey the more we know that love. The gospel not only provides me with the motivation to love and to forgive my wife, it provides me with the means; the power and capability to love her. As I choose to obey my wife as Christ loves me, Jesus gives me the power and joy

to actually do it, regardless of what the outcome is. Laurie and I will celebrate our 40th next year and I honestly love her more than I ever have. She is a very lovable woman but because of my sin and selfishness, I know I wouldn't be able to recognize the treasure God gave me in her if Christ didn't live in me and give me the grace to love her. So the gospel provides me with the motivation and the means to love my wife and the gospel shows me how to love her. I'm to imitate Jesus. "Husbands, love your wives as Jesus loved the church and gave Himself for her." From Jesus, I learn that real love is sacrifice; meeting her needs instead of my own, doing what she wants instead of what I want, serving her, protecting her, nurturing her. And I've discovered that the more I imitate Jesus in my marriage, the more like Jesus I become which is the goal of every disciple. I don't know how to be happily married without the gospel. I don't know how to parent or how to relate to my neighbor or how to conquer my bad habits or to really enjoy life without the gospel. The gospel is my compass; my motivation, means and model for every decision in life. Every issue is a gospel issue. The gospel is the answer to every question and the solution to every problem.

For example, if I believe that I am saved wholly by Christ and His blood, then I will not look for anything in myself to boast about or find my identity in; but depend wholly upon Him and the righteousness God credits to all who believe in Him. If I believe that Christ has saved me to be part of His body, then I will see myself as inextricably bound to every believer and never attempt to live independently of them. If I believe that Christ has set me free from the rule of sin, then I will obey His commandments. If I believe that Christ died to save me to be His servant, then I will embrace His mission for my life over my own. If I believe that Christ loves me, I will love others the way He loves me. If I believe that Christ has forgiven me of all my sins, I will forgive others. If I believe that Jesus suffered to bring me into incomparable glory, then I will walk with Him through suffering to glory. And if I believe that Jesus sacrificed His life for me while I was His enemy, then I will sacrificially love my enemies.

The more I understand and believe the gospel and trust Jesus with every aspect of my life, the more I will be transformed. That's why Creekside is a gospel-centered church and why the gospel and all that Christ has done and is doing for us is the theme here every Sunday because faith in Christ and in the gospel is the way God changes us. We begin a relationship with Christ by understanding, agreeing with and trusting the gospel. (Invitation) And we grow in Christlikeness by understanding, agreeing with and trusting the gospel. Spiritual growth is not the result of events or activities we participate in. Spiritual growth is driven by believing the gospel today; and each day brings a new opportunity to believe and apply the gospel to some area of life. And so the question we must ask each day is "Am I viewing everything that happens to me through the lens of the gospel; gospel motivation, gospel means and the gospel model or through some other lens." Belief alone makes me a disciple and belief involves not only knowledge and agreement, but also trust.

