

A Contagious Message

We all love stories of bravery, courage, and selfless-sacrifice. We admire people who have the strength of character and intestinal fortitude to act selflessly to help others. In my 29 years of military service I have seen my fair share of selfless acts of bravery committed by Soldiers to save their comrades. The nation's highest award for such actions is the Congressional Medal of Honor. In the armed conflicts dating from WW I through Vietnam, 968 MOHs were awarded. Of these 57% were awarded posthumously – a figure which somberly reflects the selflessness of the recipient.

While reading the accounts of MOH recipients will bring a lump to your throat and gratitude to your heart, it is important to realize that you don't have to be a Soldier to be a hero or commit acts of self-sacrificing love. We see accounts of such actions being performed by common, everyday people every week in the news. One such story that struck me hard since I had children the same age follows.

An eight-year-old boy had a younger sister who was dying of leukemia, and he was told that without a blood transfusion she would die. His parents explained to him that his blood was probably compatible with hers, and if so, he could be the blood donor. They asked him if they could test his blood. He said sure. So they did and it was a good match. Then they asked if he would give his sister a pint of blood, that it could be her only chance of living. He said he would have to think about it overnight.

The next day he went to his parents and said he was willing to donate the blood. So they took him to the hospital where he was put on a gurney beside his

six-year-old sister. Both of them were hooked up to IVs. A nurse withdrew a pint of blood from the boy, which was then put in the girl's IV. The boy lay on his gurney in silence while the blood dripped into his sister, until the doctor came over to see how he was doing. Then the boy opened his eyes and asked, "How soon until I start to die?"

Jesus said in John 15:13 (NLT): "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." And no story is more moving or more powerful than that of Jesus himself, who demonstrated the power of his words by willingly laying down his life for the sake of us, his friends.

That story—that contagious message called the gospel which has been spreading around the globe for two thousand years—is what we're going to focus on today. We want to get a real grasp on what that message is and what it means, and then next week we want to invite all of our friends to hear it presented from a little different angle, as we talk about "God's Contagious Love."

But before we talk about Jesus' act of sacrificial love, I think it's important that we set the stage by looking at what we'll call four key characters. These are four primary players in God's redemptive drama, and we need to get clarity on what the Bible, God's revelation to us, tells us about each one. This will give us a good overview of the central message of the Christian faith

Since I recently preached the sermon series on basic Christian doctrines, much of what we will cover today will be a review for you. But there's not a more important topic anywhere, nor one more essential to helping you apply that knowledge to your life and become contagious as a Christian. So let's dive in!

The four key characters we need to know about are: **God, Us, Christ,** and **You.** You will find those listed in the sermon outline in your bulletin. We'll discuss three important truths about each of them.

The First Key Character: God

The first thing we need to know about God is that **He is LOVING.** And that's a really good thing, isn't it? It's out of his compassion that he made us and wants to have a relationship with us. God's love pursues us and tells us in so many ways that we matter to him.

From my interactions with people with people who don't know Jesus, I'd say most would readily agree that God is love, but they'd want to leave it right there. As long as they can think of God in some mystical, abstract fashion they are satisfied. We have a tendency to reduce God to something He is not and to try to turn Him into something we want Him to be. So, if people can view him as merely a warm and benevolent force for good, then that feels comfortable and safe.

The problem is that in the Bible God reveals other important characteristics about himself as well. One of these is that **He is HOLY**, which means that he is absolutely pure and separate from everything that is impure.

Billy Graham wrote years ago about an experience that illustrates this well. He tells of a time when he was to be interviewed in his home for a well-known television program. Knowing that it would be on national television, they took great pains to make sure everything was clean and nice—including vacuuming and dusting the entire house, and going over the living room, where the interview was to take place, with a fine-tooth comb. By the time the TV crew arrived, they felt everything was spic-and-span. But then, when the powerful television lights were turned on they could suddenly see cobwebs and dust where they had never seen them before under normal room lights!

The point of Billy's story is that no matter how well we clean up our lives and convince ourselves we have them in order, when we see them in the brilliant light of God's holiness, the many cobwebs, faults, and imperfections will suddenly show up with embarrassing clarity.

That leads us to one other characteristic of God: **He is JUST**. In other words, He's like a good judge who must deal with our "cobwebs, faults, and imperfections." He must mete out justice for everything we've done that falls short of His holy standards.

Years ago in Scotland, a man murdered a family member. But by the time he was brought to trial, the softhearted judge decided he'd punished himself enough already and let him go free. Guess how the public responded? "What? That's not fair," they said. "We want justice! Get rid of that judge and replace him with one who will uphold the law."

Well, God loves us and wants to have a relationship with us, but He is also holy and just, and as the perfect judge He must dispense justice to everyone fairly.

The Second Key Character: Us

The Bible makes it clear that when God first created humans, He made us good, without sin. But we abused our freedom, rebelled against Him, and **we became SINFUL**. This began with Adam and Eve's sin in the garden—and it has continued right down into the lives of every one of us.

Furthermore, as we've just discussed, God's holiness exposes us for who we really are, and his justice deals with the sin we've committed. Unfortunately, according to his just judgment, **we deserve DEATH**. Romans 6:23 says it clearly, "The wages of sin is death." This means both physical death and spiritual death, which is separation from God in a very real place called hell. And to complete the bad news, **we are spiritually HELPLESS** to do anything ourselves that will change our grim situation.

One way to look at it is that when we sinned, we incurred a moral debt, and we're "morally bankrupt," having nothing in our moral bank accounts with which to pay off our debt. Obviously not good news—but, thankfully, the story doesn't end here!

That said, it is very important that we understand, and that we communicate honestly to our friends, the situation we're all in when trying to deal with God based on our own track records and efforts at self-improvement. The Bible is so clear when it says in Romans 3:23, that we "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Compare it to a situation where a group of friends are having fun swimming together near a boat out in the ocean. You can stand in the boat, throw them a rope, and shout out to them to grab onto it—but they're just going to laugh at you and ignore your silly rope. "The water's warm and the swimming's great," they'll say, "why don't you lighten up and join us!"

If, however, you first get their attention and point out the sharks that are circling the waters around them, they'll suddenly become much more interested in your rope!

The same is true with the gospel; people need to understand the hard-to-hear news about their sin and the spiritual predicament they're in before they'll become very interested in the solution you offer through Christ and the payment he made

on the cross. Sometimes the most wise and loving thing we can do is to impress upon our friend the bad news first.

The Third Key Character: Christ

But thankfully there is good news! Jesus Christ was uniquely able to solve our dilemma because **He is GOD** as well as man. As God, He had the authority and power to devise a plan for our salvation. As man, He was able to execute the plan by taking upon Himself the punishment we deserved.

The central truth of the gospel is that **Christ died as our SUBSTITUTE**. Please underline that word, “substitute,” because it is the key concept of the gospel message. Jesus paid the spiritual death penalty debt that we owed—in our place. First Peter 3:18 says it like this, “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.” And in doing this, He expressed the love of God, upheld the holiness of God, and satisfied the justice of God.

Look back to our first point about Christ – **He is God** who also became a MAN. This means that he’s not some reluctant bystander who God forced unwillingly onto the scene as a whipping boy to take our punishment. Rather, he is, as we pointed out earlier, the God we sinned against!

Philippians 2:6–8 spells this out when it says that Jesus was “in very nature God,” but that he was willing to temporarily let go of his lofty position for us. It

says he “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”

Jesus himself said in Matthew 20:28 that he was here on a mission to “give his life as a ransom for many.” That means he intentionally came to lay down his life as the payment for our sins. We’re going to look at this more when we present the message next week, but that’s a pretty good picture of what God did for us through the person of Jesus, who now says to us, “I’ve paid your penalty. Would you trust and follow me?”

He did all of that for us, and He freely ***offers us his forgiveness and leadership as a GIFT.*** We don’t deserve it, we didn’t pay for it, and we can’t earn it. That’s what the word “grace” means—it’s a free, undeserved gift! The only way we can receive it is to humbly bow before Christ, admit our sin, and say yes to his incredible offer.

When we do that, our sin-debt is paid in full and we receive God’s promise of eternal life in heaven. We also gain the ongoing companionship of the Gift-giver Himself, who will be there to lead us, guide us, and lovingly bring us correction when we need it.

The Fourth Key Character: You

After hearing that, the ball is in your court, and it's up to you to decide what you're going to do with it. Jesus paid the price of salvation for the whole world, but each of us **must RESPOND**. His gift is not applied to us automatically. We must receive it.

It's like going to the airport, standing in the terminal, watching airplanes come and go, and believing in the science of aviation. That's not going to get you anywhere. You've got to finally put your understanding into action by climbing on board an airliner. Similarly, we must do more than nod our heads in agreement to the message of the gospel.

It's frightening that, in spite of the Bible's emphasis that we must individually receive Christ and his gift of salvation, this is the most misunderstood part of the message by so many people today. They think that if they go to church, or participate in keeping various rules and rituals, or are born into a Christian family, or try to be moral and religious, then they are automatically made right with God.

But that's not true. Anyone who relies on their personal efforts to get into God's family is going to eventually experience eternity's worst nightmare. Jesus warned in Matthew 7:21–23: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will

enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

We’ve got to be crystal clear, for ourselves and for the sake of the people we influence, about the fact that a personal response must be made. Each of us must respond by ***asking Christ to be our FORGIVER AND LEADER.*** And when we do, the Bible assures us that the Holy Spirit will immediately take residence within us and begin ***a spiritual TRANSFORMATION*** in us.

Please make certain that you’ve taken that step yourself—putting your trust in Jesus to forgive your sins and to lead your life. You may have gone to church all of your life, but still be like the person standing in the terminal at the airport and never climbing aboard the airplane. If that’s you, please don’t let fear or pride keep you in spiritual confusion or playacting. Come clean with God and the people around you, and begin to get in on the action and adventure of really following Christ! You can do this today, if you’ll just come and talk to me after the service.

And concerning our friends, we can’t make this decision for them and we shouldn’t push them to make it prematurely. But we do need to make sure they understand that this is what they need to do. We are going to learn a lot more about how we can do that—and master some helpful illustrations that you can draw or

say to you friends—at the *Contagious Christian* training tonight. It's not too late to join in!

God, Us, Christ, and You. I hope that by learning about these four key characters you've been able to improve your mastery of the basic elements of the gospel message.

Next week is the final weekend in our Contagious Christianity series. We're going to learn about "God's Contagious Love," and the service will be designed to connect with and communicate to your family, friends, and neighbors that you'll bring.

I'll end with this: Colossians 4:5 tells us to be wise in the way we act toward outsiders and to make the most of every opportunity. So I urge you, make the most of this opportunity by boldly inviting people to join you next week. Offer to give them a ride and to provide them with a meal. Don't wait until Friday or Saturday! Pray, prepare, and make bold invitations early this week—and let's watch God work among us!