

## THE VERBAL FORM OF GRACE

Scriptures: Isaiah 61:1-4; Luke 4:16-21

One of the endearing qualities of the English language is our ability to create verbs out of nouns. When the Xerox Corporation gave us photocopy machines they also gave us a new verb: to Xerox something. Now we have Google. Google is not just a website; it is a verb, as in to Google someone, which is not to be confused with ogling someone. The latest version of this is to Pluto something, which means to take away its status. When the planet Pluto lost its standing as a planet, it gave us a new verb. Now if the WSU basketball team loses its national ranking, you don't have to say they Couged it, you could say they plutoed.

The Bible writers did the same thing: creating verbs out of nouns. There is a word in Hebrew, *besorah*, which means “glad tidings.” In the Bible it is used to announce a victory in war. The Greek version of the Old Testament translates *besorah* with the word *euangelion*, which means “good news.” In early English bibles the Hebrew word *besorah* and the Greek word *euangelion* were both translated by an old English word “gospel”—good speech.

In our scripture from Isaiah 61, that word *besorah*—Gospel, good news—has been turned into a verb. Verse 1: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news...”—to “gospel” people. It is like “Googling” someone. The word “Gospel” has been turned into a verb. This prophet was sent to “gospel” people, to “good news” them.

How do you “gospel” people? The answer is given in a whole series of verbs that follow:

- “to bind up the brokenhearted”
- “to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners”
- “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”
- “to provide for those who mourn in Zion”
- “to give them a garland instead of ashes”

Let me explain what these phrases means. To bind up the brokenhearted could mean to comfort anyone who was sad. But in Isaiah’s time, it meant especially to comfort all those who had lost homes, farms, or family members in the wars Israel fought against the Assyrians and Babylonians. Toward the end of the book of Isaiah, the nation of Israel was somewhat like Iraq. Its whole infrastructure had been decimated by war. By the time the Babylonians were finished, many of the people of Israel had been driven out of their homes and lived as refugees or captive slaves for the Babylonians. So when the book of Isaiah talks about proclaiming liberty to captives and release to prisoners, it may be talking about releasing slaves and political prisoners from the Assyrians and Babylonians.

But it may also be talking about economic captives—people in prison or slavery because of debt. As you can imagine, when the farms in Israel were destroyed, many people had to go into debt to survive. It was like the dust bowl years in Oklahoma. People had to sell their farms

to get food, and eventually they had to sell themselves as slaves. Let me show you an example. Turn to Nehemiah, chapter 5, the first 5 verses (OT, p. 434).

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive." There were also those who said, "We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine." And there were those who said, "We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others."

It is like the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* or Will Smith in the new movie *The Pursuit of Happyness*. Adversity creates debt which eventually causes people to lose their homes and their means of making a living. They become captives to poverty.

In this situation the anointed messenger of Isaiah 61 has good news: "The Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor..."

That last phrase, "the year of the Lord's favor," refers to the Jubilee year. Leviticus 25 describes a law given by God to the people of Israel that every 50<sup>th</sup> year there is to be a Jubilee, a year of release from debt or captivity. Leviticus 25:10 says,

And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.

Can you imagine what good news this would be to the people in Nehemiah, chapter 5? Everyone who had sold their land in order to survive could return to it and start over. Everyone who had sold themselves or their families into slavery to pay off debts would be set free and allowed to return to home. That is the good news the anointed prophet is sent to proclaim in Isaiah 61. Your captivity is over. Your homelessness, your servitude, your inability to provide for yourselves and your families is over. The Jubilee has come. The slaves are released. The debtors are set free. The captives are allowed to return home. The people who are down and out have been gospelled.

Now let's turn to our second scripture reading beginning at Luke 4:16. Jesus picks up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and reads this very passage that we just heard from Isaiah 61. He reads it, rolls up the scroll, and says, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." What did he mean? He meant that he is the one who has been anointed with the Spirit of the Lord to do what Isaiah says. Just prior to this in Luke, chapter 3, Jesus was baptized. When he was baptized, the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of God—came down on him. At that moment, as water was poured over his head, he was anointed by the Spirit of God, and now he begins to "gospel" people, just as Isaiah said he would.

How does Jesus “gospel” people? Look at the rest of Luke’s story. Jesus feeds 5000 hungry people in the wilderness. He gospels the poor. Jesus sets people free from demonic powers that are controlling them. He gospels release to the captives. Jesus heals the blind. He gospels those who walk in darkness. Jesus raises a widow’s son from the dead. He gospels comfort to those who mourn. Jesus proclaims the Jubilee—the year of the Lord’s favor. He gospels those who were mired in poverty, and his followers in the book of Acts do the same thing. They pool their resources to help widows, orphans, victims of famine, and anyone else who can no longer make it on their own. They gospel the poor.

You see, gospel is verb, just like Google. The gospel is not just something we hear. It is something we do. It is the verbal form of grace. When groups of youth or adults from our church go down to the Gulf coast to help rebuild homes destroyed by hurricanes, they are gospeling. They are doing what Isaiah said in chapter 61, verse 4: “They shall repair ruined cities.” When people give to the food bank or to Christmas families, or when the Deacons allow a family to stay in their home by helping them catch up on rent or utilities, they are gospeling. They are bringing good news to the poor. When people send cards or give hugs or help serve at a reception for those who have lost loved ones, they are gospeling. They are binding up the brokenhearted. When we give to the One Great Hour of Sharing, which not only provides emergency relief to people in need but helps them organize so that they have power over their means of making a living—when we do that we are gospeling, we are proclaiming release to economic captives. Anytime we support legislation or organization or changes in policy that allow powerless people to regain control of their lives and provide for their own support, we are gospeling.

The gospel is first of all a noun. It is first of all something we hear, something we receive by grace. But it is also a verb. It is something we do in the name of Christ. It is good news carried to others on the back of compassion, service, and love.

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