

The Gospel in a Nutshell (Acts 13:38-39)^a

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Context

1. The “first missionary journey”
2. Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark
3. Upon reaching Antioch in Pisidia, John Mark departs
4. Paul and Barnabas visit the local Synagogue on the Sabbath
5. When asked if they have a “word of exhortation,” Paul begins his evangelistic message concerning Jesus
6. A review of Israel’s history, interspersed with reminders of how Israel has frequently been disobedient to God’s working in history
7. Paul appeals to the Old Testament do demonstrate:
 - A. Jesus is the promised offspring in the line of King David: the Son of David
 - B. The death and resurrection of Jesus fulfills the predictions of the Old Testament
8. Today:
 - A. Why was Jesus the subject of so many OT predictions?
 - B. What is so special about this man Jesus?
 - C. What was purpose of His coming?
 - D. What did His death and resurrection accomplish?

Passage (Acts 13:38-39)

[38] Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; [39] and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.¹

Heart of the Gospel

1. This is Paul’s equivalent of John 3:16, which Luther referred to as the “Gospel in a Nutshell” [and which reads . . .]

2. **A distillation of Genesis through Revelation down to two verses.**
3. **66 books: 31,102 verses summarized in just these two!**
4. **The core of Christian theology expressed in four words:**
 - A. #1 - Law
 - B. #2 - Forgiveness
 - C. #3 - Justification
 - D. #4 - Belief
5. **How much simpler could it be . . . yet how exasperating to preach and teach!**

Word #1 - Law

1. Dictionary terms

- A. regulation, statute, decree, edict, rule, ordinance, order, directive, dictate, regulation, injunction, commandment
- B. Feel the weight of these words. Let them drape heavily across your shoulders, feel the burden of their weighty responsibility.
- C. Concerning that last term: commandment . . .

2. Biblical context: *the law of Moses*

- A. The two tablets of stone that Moses carried down from Mt. Sinai.
- B. Containing the Ten Commandments² written by the very finger of God (Ex. 24:12; 31:18; 32:16; 34:1).

3. What about “The Big Ten”

- A. Have you kept them?
- B. Can you even name them?
- C. What about the other 603 the rabbis have identified in the rest of the law, or *Torah*: including Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy — all the hundreds of *thou shalt*s and *thou shalt not*s?

4. And, even *if* you could have somehow kept the “do’s and don’ts” — and we all know you haven’t — what about your *thought* life?

- A. Jesus said, *You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart* (Mat. [5:27-28](#)).

5. Purpose of the law

- A. If we can't keep it, of what purpose is the Law?
- B. *Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law [is] the knowledge of sin* (Rom. [3:19-20](#)).
- C. *What shall we say then? [Is] the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." (Rom. [7:7](#))*
- D. The law reveals God's high standards and, due to our fallen condition, it is also intended to get our attention—to make us realize our desperate condition: IN GOD'S SIGHT, WE ARE OUTLAWS!
- E. One great purpose of the law should drive us to Christ!
- I. *Therefore the law was our tutor [to bring us] to Christ . . . (Gal. [3:24a](#))*

6. What should we understand regarding word #1: LAW?

7. "The defendant is found guilty, as charged!" [smack] NEXT CASE!

Word #2 - Forgiveness

1. **Why is forgiveness needed? SEE WORD #1!!**
2. **Forgiveness of sins, . . . *let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins* (Acts [13:38](#)).**
3. **Forgiveness is the Greek word ἄφεσις [aphesis]**
 - A. Meaning: *pardon, release, liberty, deliverance from obligation, debt, guilt.*
 - B. We need forgiveness because we are guilty in the sight of a Holy God.
4. **If you are impressed with your goodness, your feeble offering of self-righteousness before God, consider the zealous performance of Paul the Pharisee:**
 - A. *If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, [of] the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews;*

concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless (Php. 3:4b-6).

B. Yet, elsewhere, Paul writes, *For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but [how] to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will [to do], I do not do; but the evil I will not [to do], that I practice. . . . O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?* (Rom. 7:18-24)

C. Remember one of the meanings of the Greek word for forgiveness? Deliverance!

5. **If Paul, the “super Apostle,” was in need of forgiveness of sin, how much more you and I?**
6. **Our culture today utterly fails to appreciate the huge gap between the puny efforts of man at goodness in comparison with the holiness of Almighty God.**
 - A. Every day we hear the same tired refrain: “people are inherently good.” It’s just the *environment* or *education* or *upbringing* that result in all this pain and suffering.
 - B. After thousands of years and billions of murders, we persist in this stubborn unwillingness to recognize reality.
7. **To obtain forgiveness, we must admit our need, see ourselves as God sees us. We must ditch our Pharisaical pride.**
 - A. Jesus said to [the Pharisees], *If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains* (John 9:41).
 - B. Do you think you see? Then your sin remains?

Word #3 - Justification

1. **What is *justification*?**
 - A. The Greek term is **δικαιῶν** [*dikaioō*] meaning *to be put right with to declared righteous, to be acquitted, to clear of transgression*.
 - B. We might hear such phrases used during legal proceedings in a court of law: *declared righteous, acquitted, cleared of transgression*.
2. **Word appears twice in this passage: two potential justifiers**
 - A. By Him
 - B. By the Law
3. **These potential justifiers are opposite in their approach and effectiveness**

A. Their approach

- I. By the law - success depends on *you*
- II. By Him - success depends on *Him*

B. Their effectiveness

- I. *by Him everyone who believes is justified from all the things from which you could not be justified by the Law*
 - a. By Him — justified
 - b. By the law — not justified

4. Only two paths *potentially* lead to God

A. Universal

- I. This very instant, everyone is traveling down one or the other of these paths.
- II. Everyone who has ever lived has walked one path or the other.

B. By the law

- I. Requirement: perfection
- II. Only one man has ever walked this path
- III. His name is Jesus
- IV. How could this man walk the path of perfection, the path of performance: because Jesus is God, sinless perfection
- V. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, “. . . [Jesus] was in all [points] tempted as [we are, yet] without sin” (Heb. [4:15b](#)).
- VI. As John tells us, *[Jesus] was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin* (1Jn. [5:5](#))
- VII. For anyone but Jesus, the path of perfection is a path: of performance, of presumption, of penalty, of panic as death approaches, and ultimately, the path of perdition.

C. By Him

- I. Requirement: belief, faith, trust.
- II. Belief and faith in what, in Whom?

- III. In the only man Who ever successfully walked the other path!
- IV. By trusting in the One who perfectly kept the law, we meet the requirements of the law.
- V. By walking down the path of faith, we journey “piggy-back,” if you will, down the path of the law, carried by Jesus, if you will.
- VI. By walking the path of faith, we are seen as *if* we walked as Jesus down the path of perfection!

5. So, there really is only one path to God!

- A. The path of perfection
- B. You either try to walk it alone, carrying your feeble self-righteousness on a road that *never ends*.
 - I. Never ends? Yes: it never ends: how much good must you do to be accepted by God?
 - II. There can never be peace on this road, only work, work, worry and more work.
- C. Or, by faith, you let Jesus walk it in your stead.
 - I. When you walk this road, your arrival at the destination is instantaneous.
 - II. The journey down the road came an end at the cross.
 - III. This is the path of peace, of propitiation: you are instantly and forever accepted by God.

6. Justification before God

- A. In the legal system of justice, if we are *declared righteous* it is because we were *found to be righteous*.
- B. The biblical situation is entirely different.
- C. Why? Because your actions will never be found righteous before a Holy God.
- D. Therefore, any righteousness you attain before God is granted on your behalf, apart from any merit, you are declared to be righteous even though you are not!
- E. A more thorough definition of the biblical meaning of justification

Justification is a divine act whereby an infinitely Holy God judicially declares a believing sinner to be righteous and acceptable before Him because Christ has borne the sinner's sin on the cross and has become “to us . . . righteousness” (1

Cor. 1:30; Rom. 3:24). Justification springs from the fountain of God's grace (Titus 3:4–5). It is operative as the result of the redemptive and propitiatory sacrifice of Christ, who has settled all the claims of the law (Rom. 3:24–25; 5:9). Justification is on the basis of faith and not by human merit or works (3:28–30; 4:5; 5:1; Gal. 2:16). In this marvelous operation of God the infinitely holy Judge judicially declares righteous the one who believes in Jesus (Rom. 8:31–34). A justified believer emerges from God's great courtroom with a consciousness that another, his Substitute, has borne his guilt and that he stands without accusation before God (8:1, 33–34).³

7. Those who are justified stand acquitted of sin and escape the fire of God's judgment!

- A. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire (Deu. 4:24a).
- B. What was it that caught the attention of Moses about the burning bush?
- I. *He looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed* (Ex. 3:2).
- C. What was it that caught the attention of Nebuchadnezzar when Daniel's friends were thrown into the fiery furnace?
- I. *Look! . . . I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God* (Dan. 3:25).
- II. And what was even more amazing when they exited the furnace?
- a. . . . *they saw these men on whose bodies the fire had no power; the hair of their head was not singed nor were their garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on them* (Dan. 3:27b)
- D. These passages are a picture of the immunity from fire which justification provides.
- E. We will all stand before the Consuming Fire that is God, but *the fire [will have] no power over those who are justified!*
- I. *Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? [It is] God who justifies* (Rom. 8:33).

Word #4 - Belief

1. Not the "foggy faith" bandied about by the world

- A. Not like the theme of Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade: "Believe!"
- B. The mystical act of throwing off the shackles of reality and asserting whatever provides spiritual goosebumps.

- C. The object of your faith—that in which you believe—is not important: so long as you “believe!”
- D. The destination where your belief leads is irrelevant, it's the experience—the journey—which matters!
- E. This is completely foreign to what the Bible means by belief.
- F. Biblical faith is anchored in an individual and His accomplishments.

2. This Man

- A. *Through this Man . . .*
- B. It is . . . *this Man [Who] is preached to you . . .*
- C. It is . . . *by Him everyone who believes is justified*

3. Biblical faith

- A. is not some mystical feeling, it is about placing one's trust in *this man*.
- B. The object of justifying faith is critical - Jesus.
- C. Belief that Jesus is Who He claims to be
- D. Belief that Jesus accomplished His ministry
 - I. Perfectly kept the law so as to have no guilt of His own to account for.
 - II. To die on the cross, so as to bear and pay the penalty for the sins of others.
 - III. To provide His righteous legal standing to those who simply ask.
 - IV. Jesus was, . . . *born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law . . .* (Gal. 4:4b-5a).
- E. This is the “Great Exchange,” *For [God] made [Jesus] who knew no sin [to be] sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him* (2Cor. 5:21).

4. It is all about trusting in Him

- A. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (John 3:16-18).*

B. He who believes - has eternal life.

C. He who does not believe - is condemned.

5. **Therefore the law was our tutor [to bring us] to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:24-26)**

The “Aha” Moment

1. **Have you had your “aha” moment yet?**
2. **When the coin finally drops and blindness, arrogance, skepticism, uncertainty, and fear dissolve into trust?**
3. **Consider the great reformer, Martin Luther**

A. An “act of nature” started him down the wrong path, the path of attempted perfection

Walking out into the fields one day, [Luther] was struck by lightning so as to fall to the ground, while a companion was killed by his side; and this affected him so sensibly, that, without communicating his purpose to any of his friends, he withdrew himself from the world, and retired into the order of the hermits of St. Augustine.⁴

Luther probed every resource of contemporary Catholicism for assuaging the anguish of a spirit alienated from God. He tried the way of good works and discovered that he could never do enough to save himself. He endeavored to avail himself of the merits of the saints and ended with a doubt, . . . sufficient to destroy his assurance. . . . He sought at the same time to explore other ways, and Catholicism had much more to offer. . . . This only was required of them, that they should confess all their wrongdoing and seek absolution. . . . [Luther] confessed frequently, often daily, and far as long as six hours on a single occasion. Ever sin in order to be absolved was to be confessed. Therefore the soul must be searched and the memory ransacked and the motives probed. As an aid the penitent ran through the seven deadly sins and the Ten Commandments. Luther would repeat a confession and, to be sure of including everything, would review his entire life until the confessor grew weary . . . Luther’s question was not whether his sins were big or little, but whether they had been confessed. . . . He learned from experience the cleverness of memory in protecting the ego, and he was frightened when after six hours of confessing he could still go out and think of something else which had eluded his most conscientious scrutiny. . . . So acute had Luther’s distress become that even the simplest of helps of religion failed to bring him heartsease. Not even prayer could quiet his tremors; for when he was on his knees, the Tempter would come and say, “Dear fellow, what are you praying for? Just see how quite it is about you here. Do you think that God hears your prayer and pays any attention?”⁵

Luther wrote,

My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience and I had no confidence that my merit would

assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him.⁶

- B. Although Luther started out on the wrong path—seeking God’s approval through performance, in the mercy of God he came to a turning point and found the path of peace, the path of faith.

Luther continues,

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that “the just shall live by his faith.” Then I grasped that the mercy of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.⁷

Summary

1. The problem:

- A. God is perfect.
- B. We are not.
- C. God doesn’t grade on a curve.
- D. We get an F—, we are destined for hell, forever separated from God and all His goodness, suffering eternal death!

2. The solution:

- A. God is perfect.
- B. He sent His Son, who kept the law, who walked in the path of perfection, to die in our place.
- C. By accepting His substitution.
- D. Our failing grade is erased and an A++ is written in its place — we are considered as righteous as Jesus, absolutely perfect before God, forever to be in God’s presence, having eternal life!

3. Then most important question everyone will answer:

- A. Which path are you following . . . betting your eternal destiny on?
- B. Do you really believe your feeble efforts, your flawed selfishness, will suffice before a Holy God?

- C. Why not bow before His Perfection, fall on your face and cry out for His mercy, forgiveness, and salvation?
- D. You can attain peace with God right now, in the privacy of your own will.
- E. There's no need to raise your hand, walk an isle, or jump through any man-made hoop.
- F. Just place your trust in the finished work of Jesus and He will cover your sin and clothe you with His righteousness!

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Endnotes:

1. [Acts 13:38-39](#), NKJV
2. Literally: "ten words."
3. [Ref-0184](#), s.v. *justification*
4. [Ref-1306](#), para. 9462
5. [Ref-1395](#), 40-41,43
6. [Ref-1395](#), 49
7. [Ref-1395](#), 49-50

Sources:

- Acts 13:38-39** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- Ref-0184** Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001). See also [www.basicsofbiblicalhebrew.com], [www.oaksoft.com].
- Ref-1306** John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (1563).
- Ref-1395** Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York, NY: Penguing Books, 1977). ISBN:0-452-01146-9^d.

Links Mentioned Above

- a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/43_Acts_13_38-39/index.htm.
- b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.
- d - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?0-452-01146-9>.