

Gospel in Action

Obadiah 8-18; Mt 10:5-15; 3rd John 2-12



The Gospel is more than a formula, more than a decree, more than words, and more than the registry of names in a book. It is more than an announcement. It is more than a way of life. It is more than a relationship, for it is dynamic. As new wine in new wineskins, it brings about change, for it is active. So what does the gospel in action look like? How do we know when it is present and authentic? How can we recognize it and not pass it by?

In *Yahweh's* word through Obadiah, it is easy to see how Edom did not exhibit the love and grace of the gospel. It is easy to relate to the natural desire for retaliation and judgement on Edom's betrayal and treachery. If we are not careful, we will get so caught up in judging Edom that we miss the undercurrent as it comes back upon us. Edom's sin was in focusing on itself, having no thought for the benefit of others. They gloated over the destruction of Judah, with no thought of stepping in to aid a brother in need. When the tables turned, there would be no protection for Edom in the face of the approaching destruction.

Edom was ignoring its responsibility for the welfare of others. Edom was ignoring even its sibling relationship with Israel and Judah, preferring to place sibling rivalry and animosity above a basic responsibility to protect and support one's kin. The descendants of Esau and Jacob were still working out their shared animosity with more energy than their familial ties. Such a posture would crash down around Edom. Could Judah hope to escape without a changed attitude? It was easy to for Edom to focus on Judah's ruin. Judah's challenge was to look beyond its brother's doom to Judah's responsibility.

Obadiah's prophecy was a challenge to the bystander looking upon an enemy's destruction. It is a call for self-evaluation. It is all too easy to get wrapped up in a zeal for revenge and gloat in another's pain. It is quite another thing when we are reminded by Obadiah's words that that enemy is family, and betrayal of family is a betrayal of self. *Yahweh's* word to Obadiah was much more than gloating over Edom's failure. It was a call for Judah to see their own reflection in the actions of an errant brother. It was a call to remember that redemption brings the responsibility to care for others, even those who treat us as enemies.

When Jesus commissioned the twelve to preach throughout the land of Israel, he sent them to the neglected among their own people. He gave them a message of redemption and hope. He sent them to offer that hope and redemption in a visible way. They were to heal. They were to seek out the lepers whom society cast away, bringing them back into the fellowship of the people. They were sent to raise the dead. They were to hold before them the needs and interests of others, rather than their own. They were to grant new life, God's acceptance, forgiveness, and restoration to those cut off from their families and nation. They were to trust God's provision, even as they provided for those among whom they ministered.

If *Yahweh's* word through Obadiah was a challenge not to gloat over an enemy's downfall, Jesus' words went further. "Seek out the fallen and restore them to full standing." "Meet the needs of the desperate, and trust God to meet your own." "Allow the good news you have heard to become

an active reality in your lives.” “Trust the truth you have heard of God’s faithfulness—live it, for a change.”

We like to take comfort in the fact that these were Jesus’ words to the disciples in the context of a short-term experience. This was a short trip around the countryside among their own people. It was “no big deal,” just a few days to try God out on providing for their needs. The disciples came back reeling with joy over the marvelous experience. Perhaps it was like a spring break mission trip that took them to a new “spiritual high.” Where do we get the idea that this was any different from Jesus’ day-to-day instructions for the disciples’ living? How were these instructions for trusting God any different from what we heard in the Sermon on the Mount? Yes, this was like trying on a new outfit in the fitting room, but the idea was to take the new clothes home from the store to wear over and over again.

Jesus challenged the twelve to try on the Gospel for size. He was calling them to a life of faithful action—living in accord with the gospel’s demands to put others ahead of self. He really wanted them to trust God to meet their needs. He knew that the disciples would only be able to serve others with abandon once they were confident in God’s provision. This was a short term experience, but it was also a test of their confidence in God. It was to be an exercise in trusting God.

When John wrote his third epistle, he was concerned with issues of unity and the acceptance of fellow believers within the community of faith. Hospitality was a key element of the issues raging among the believers he addressed. Some were willing to receive Jews committed to reaching Jewry, while others wanted to brush them away. These were not willing to accept all who came to the Christ Jesus as Lord. Rather than receiving their faith siblings, they created dissension, cutting them off from the fellowship.

Their focus was on self, rather than others. They desired to cast away any who were different, unwilling to share grace beyond their comfort zones. Rather than receive all who Christ would receive, they were uncomfortable reaching beyond themselves. They were more concerned with privilege and status than love and grace. They lived as though there were not enough grace to go around. They had not understood the unending character of God’s love, provision, and care. They had never learned to allow the gospel to become active in their lives. They would not allow God to love through them and beyond their selfishness.

We are called to accept those others would exclude. We are called to trust God to meet our needs as we reach out to those we more naturally brush aside. We are called to be more than bystanders. We are to allow the gospel to take action within our lives, becoming the means whereby God’s love reaches others.

Shall we live as though we are all siblings who share responsibility to care for one another? Shall we take up the call to be more than bystanders who watch the turmoil of life around us? Shall we allow the gospel to take up life within us, transforming us from the inside out? Shall we allow the gospel to live through us? Can we trust God enough to extend grace and love through us even to those we would rather call enemies? If we do not allow the gospel to become an active reality in our lives, how can we claim its blessings?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*