

THE GOSPEL: THE BAD NEWS

SUNDAY 13 SEPTEMBER 2026 • 08:00 • CITYHILL CHURCH

When Steve invited me to preach at this series of meetings, he suggested 7 big subjects as possibilities: God, the gospel, sin, holiness, judgement, hell & heaven – and we have devised a series that will cover them all.

In these 10 sessions, we will be placing (or re-aligning) some of the ‘big rocks’ of Christian doctrine and mission – of what we believe and therefore broadcast.

I want to start in these first 2 sessions where we all started – with the gospel.

The word “gospel” is so much part of our life and vocabulary that it can easily lose its meaning or power. Even the world uses it – as a synonym for truth or trustworthiness: ‘that’s the gospel truth’, or ‘his word is gospel’. It appears 96x in the NT and, as we probably all know, means “good news”.

There is a wider and a narrower meaning to the word “gospel” (cf. main and starter motor): [wider] the whole body of NT truth/teaching, the totality of God’s saving work for and in man (it’s all good news, isn’t it?); [narrower] the kernel at the centre of that truth, the ‘starter’ message that brings us into that salvation.

In these first 2 sessions, I want to speak into aspects of this latter, narrower meaning of the word “gospel”.

Note that in doing so I am not attempting to preach the gospel to you or to give you an outline of the gospel for your preaching of it to others. By default, I may do either or both; but most of you already know the gospel (have an outline of it) and you have amongst you those far more skilled than me at preaching it. My purpose is a theological reflection on some of the components of the gospel, particularly on those parts often neglected in contemporary presentations of the gospel – a prophetic correction of where we have allowed our understanding of the gospel to be too-much shaped by contemporary culture (or even contemporary church-speak) and the spirit of the age – and so to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the gospel and ensure that what we believe and broadcast is the *biblical* gospel – complete, balanced and marvellous.

1 THE PLAN: GOD’S LOVE

Why did God create man and the cosmos? Not out of need for love/fellowship or to demonstrate/realise his Deity. There is no answer, except that he freely desired and chose to create a creature in his image with whom he could share his love, goodness and blessedness.

JE 31/3 *I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.*

RE 4/11 (KJV) *for you have created all things, and for your pleasure they are and were created.*

What God later told Israel was the reason for his creating and choosing them, could (with due qualification) be taken as what he ‘said’ to the whole human race at creation (before the Fall): For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you...to be his people, his treasured possession. The Lord did not set his affections on you and choose you because you were numerous...But it was because the Lord loved you... (Dt 7/6ff)

Similarly, with even more careful qualification, his words to the Jewish exiles in Babylon could be taken as expressing his heart and plan for all mankind at creation, before the Fall: ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’ (Je 29/11) Of

course, this is *not* the whole story, *not* what he is saying to all men today. It wasn't even what he was saying to all Israel in Jeremiah's time: I have determined to do this city harm and not good, declares the Lord...For I am watching over them for harm, not for good (Je 21/10, 44/27). We do not speak truth (the gospel) if we say/imply this or leave room for people to interpret our message to mean this. As we will shortly see, the current state of affairs between God and man is very different. Nevertheless, this good intention of God towards those that belong to him (once justified by and reconciled to him) is representative of what his plan was for all mankind when he created them.

So God created, and initially the plan was realised (Ge 1-2): God-like man knew and walked with God, enjoying his presence and blessing; he reflected and represented God on the earth, bringing his rule (dominion) to the whole earth. Had he never sinned, his life and this paradise would have lasted forever.

The gospel / good news of God starts then with his loving plan for man: relationship, partnership, covenant! I will be your God and you will be my people. I will live and walk with you and you with me – forever!

It is best to start the gospel here and not with man's sin (i.e. with a problem that needs solution). I shall very shortly emphasise the critical importance of sin to the true gospel. But if you start with man's sin, there is 'nowhere to go' once you remove the problem – what then for man? You solve the problem but to what effect, for what purpose? God's good news, the eternal plan and picture, doesn't start with a negative but a positive, and works through a negative back to that positive: the gospel is a rescue or restoration story.

It's good to show people at the outset God's original plan and intent – which, like his will in Ro 12/2, is "good, pleasing and perfect". Immediately they are given some idea of what he is like, what he intends for them, and their hearts may be opened to the story that follows.

2 THE PROBLEM: MAN'S SIN

But man fell, he sinned. Man's relationship with God (and his fellow man), the image of God in him, God's loving and good plan for him, and creation itself, were fractured.

It is this component of the gospel that is most neglected (downplayed or wholly bypassed) in many gospel outlines and much gospel witness today. Even the evangelical church has allowed itself to be more influenced by western humanism, eastern mysticism and plain proud human nature than it realises. It is contended that we shouldn't preach this part of the gospel in our day as it's 'offensive', or that we should replace the word "sin" with some other word (e.g. guilt, shame) as "sin" is not a concept understood in our secularised society. In illustration of this trend: the gospel booklet used most widely in the English-speaking world for 25 years, Norman Warren's *Journey into Life* (1964), used the word sin 41x and explained it clearly; the 1991 booklet used most widely since (I do not want to mention its name or author as it is otherwise a good booklet and its author a good man whom God has used greatly) only mentions the word "sin" 2x (one of which is a biblical quotation and so unavoidable) and doesn't explain it.

In response to this trend and these arguments, let me say the following:

- (1) Talking about (confronting people with) sin is offensive? Truth (often) offends before it sets free! And people have always found this truth offensive. Everyone who was self-righteous, who sought to justify themselves before God, was offended by Jesus. Nothing has changed. It's those who knew their own sinfulness who loved this 'friend of sinners'. None of us should be happy to cause *unnecessary* offence because of our personality or behaviour, but if you're not willing for truth from your lips sometimes to give offence, I'm not sure you can be a faithful messenger (of the gospel).
- (2) We should use some other word that is more easily understood in today's world? There is no other word which accurately and adequately replaces "sin". "**Shame**"? Not everyone experiences shame; if they do, they don't feel shame about the same things or to the same extent; they may not feel shame about the right things (and vice-versa); they may feel shame only superficially; people can be taught not to feel shame (by contrary belief or ethical systems, popular culture and peer pressure, psychology and therapy/counselling); we can be relieved of shame when the person we've offended forgives us – but we may still be unforgiven by God. Shame can (indeed, should) be one of the *consequences* of sin (cf. Adam & Eve) but is not sin itself; shame is a subjective feeling whereas sin is an objective fact; shame is far less serious than sin.

“**Guilt**”? While guilt can be an objective fact as well as a subjective feeling (and the former is, and the latter should be, a consequence of sin), all the other arguments against “shame” apply here too. Worst of all is the downgrading of “sin” to “**mistake**”. If I take a wrong turn while driving, or pick the wrong product from the grocery shelf, that’s a mistake; if I plunge a knife into someone (in action or word), that is *not* a mistake! At most, it may be helpful with some people to start by talking about shame or guilt as something they can identify with – as long as we go on to talk about the reality, seriousness and objective fact of sin behind it.

- (3)** “Sin” is not a word commonly used or understood in today’s society? How about doing what the first preachers of the gospel have done in every pagan context throughout church history: just explain it! It is not difficult to describe or demonstrate sin to any honest person.* All true seekers will recognise – in the world and themselves – what we’re talking about. We only have to point them to the world around us (look in the newspaper); more to the point, we only have to get them to take an honest look at their own hearts and lives (look in the mirror). If they’re still not convinced of their sin and consequent guilt before God, take each commandment and ask your hearer(s) if they’ve ever broken any of them (according to Jesus’ words in Mw 5). Very quickly you establish that every one of us is a covetous, thieving, adulterous (etc) murderer!

“Sin” is the unique and irreplaceable Bible word describing man’s present state and condition. We can seek to make this truth accessible to our context but there is no way of bypassing it and no room for diluting it. Beware of pseudo-spiritual, worldly-wise arguments that we should back off proclaiming man’s sin & need.

A friend told me about his witnessing to a girl. All that she had heard from several Christians previously was, ‘God loves you’. Her response equated to, ‘Well, that’s nice; I’ll take what he offers if and when I feel I need or want it.’ But when my friend told her about God’s judgement resulting from sin, her response was altogether different: ‘This is serious – I’ve got to do something about it – who or what can help me?’

Even worse was what a church leader wrote in the literature we were meant to use in a joint outreach to our city: “God loves you...He is not angry with you.” At best, this is a half-truth; at worst, it denies truth. God *is* angry with sinful humanity, justly and righteously angry towards us and our sin: Paul began his great teaching on the gospel with God’s wrath at and judgement on the wickedness of man (Ro 1/18 – 3/20). This is a seductive but dangerous statement. It introduces people to a half (false) God and therefore a half (false) salvation; it is ‘another gospel’. It is calculated to lead to superficial salvations and consequent falling away: when God is merely a nice option rather than the only rescue on a doomed flight, our ‘commitment’ cannot be anything but superficial and based on wrong or inadequate motives – cf. parachute illustration. It’s not that we nec.y dwell on God’s anger in sharing the gospel (we may barely mention it) but to actually deny it!

The centre of the gospel is elsewhere, but this second component is the necessary preparation for that centre. In fact, without it there *is* no gospel! And this is the only gospel we’re commissioned to preach. We need to demonstrate just how serious our predicament is and how much we need salvation. The Holy Spirit may have already brought this conviction (Jn 16/8 cf. Lk 7/37f); if not, we must trust that he does so as we speak to our hearer(s) about The Problem: Man’s Sin. Only when we see ourselves as we truly are (as God sees us) are we ready to hear the rest of the gospel and able to receive it as we should.

a) What is Sin?

(i) Sin is proud, rebellious independence from God (wanting to be [like / equal to] God)

GE 3/5 *the serpent said, ‘...you will be like God.’ (Cf. Is 14/13f: You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God...I will make myself like the Most High’; Ek 28/17: Your heart became proud; 1 Jn 2/16: the boasting of what he has and does [KJV: the pride of life] comes not from the Father but from the world.)*

IS 53/6 *We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.*

(ii) Sin is lawlessness – when we abandon God’s law for us, lawlessness must be the inevitable result.

1 JN 3/4 *Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. (Cf. Ps 2/2f: The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. ‘Let us break their chains’, they say, ‘and throw off their fetters’; 2 Pe 2/7f, 3/17: the filthy lives of lawless men...lawless deeds...the error of lawless men; in 2 Th 2/3,7ff the antichrist is called the man of lawlessness.)*

(iii) Sin is falling short – every human being who has ever lived falls short of what God intended & requires

RO 3/23 *There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Gr. 'miss the mark')*

JA 2/10 *For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*

(CF. MW 5/48) *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect; 1 Pe 1/15f: But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy because I am holy.'*

ILLUSTRATIONS omelette with one bad egg; 'just' 3 sins a day (= 1095 each year, 87,600 in average lifetime)

b) The Effects of Sin

(i) Sin separates

IS 59/2 *your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. (Cf. Ha 1/13: Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.)*

This separation is from both sides: sin leads to shame and guilt, so we hide from God (Ge 2/25 vs 3/6-10).

(ii) Sin enslaves (and spreads)

JN 8/34 *Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.'*

RO 7/14,23 *I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin...a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.*

Anyone who has ever wanted to do right but couldn't, would be able to identify with Paul's cry in v14-24.

And we all know that when we think we can sin in just a 'little' way, it quickly spreads.

(iii) Sin stains (spoils, corrupts)

TT 1/5 *To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. (Cf. Jx 23: the clothing stained by corrupted flesh)*

Every part of our being (body, mind, emotions, will, etc) has been corrupted by sin.

Sin diminishes us – it fractures the image of God in us and tarnishes our glory.

c) The Consequences of Sin

(i) Judgement – God's righteous, just and necessary judgement on sin, evil and everything that opposes him

GE 18/25 *Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?*

EX 34/6F *The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes...*

PS 130/3 *If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, who could stand?*

ILLUSTRATION lenient human judge

(ii) Death – spiritual death immediately (x), physical death eventually (y), second death (hell) ultimately (z)

X GE 2/17 *you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die. (cf. Ep 2/1: As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins)*

Y RO 5/12 *sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned (cf. 1 Co 15/21f: For since death came through a man...For as in Adam we all die)*

Z RE 20/14 *Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (cf. v6)*

IN SHORT Ro 6/23a: For the wages of sin is death...

(iii) Powerlessness – man is powerless to do anything about his predicament: he cannot save himself

RO 5/6 *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.*

This is what all religions claim they can help us to do – but no religion can, for we cannot save ourselves.

IN SUMMARY The 2nd part of the gospel, then, is that all men have sinned, are separated from God, enslaved, stained, dead, facing God's just judgement (culminating in hell) and are powerless to do anything about it.

This doesn't sound like *good* news! But it is a vital and necessary part of it. Without it, what follows is not good news but (at best) only news; at worst, no more than interesting but ultimately optional information. The central part of the gospel (#3) is good news (only) because there is first *bad* news. It is this bad news that gives the gospel urgency, relevance, attractiveness and power. Downplay, dilute or dismiss this component and you remove the appeal and force of everything you say after.

And we must go further: the gospel must first be bad news for (those who imagine themselves to be) 'good' people before it can be good news for bad people (which all of us are). So many of us think we are good people and so not really in need of the good news bought to us. But the Bible is quite clear: They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no-one who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside [Everyone has turned away], they have together become corrupt; there is no-one who does good, not even one (Ps 14/1,3 || 53/1,3); There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins (Ec 7/20). See how Paul heaps up these and other quotations in Ro 3/9-20, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. So the gospel must first open our eyes to the bad news in order for it to be good news.

This is what CS Lewis stated so powerfully in *Mere Christianity*: p37f [but see all of Bk I Ch 5, p34-38]

Ditto AW Tozer in *The Knowledge of the Holy*: p13f.

IN CONCLUSION God had a loving plan for us but now, Like the rest, we are by nature objects of wrath (Ep 2/3), without hope and without God in this world (v12). Is there *any* hope for me, for doomed humanity?...

PS Sin can blind people to their need for God/salvation or harden people against the truth/light of the gospel.

Some are simply too proud to recognise their sin: An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes. For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin. (Ps 36/1f)

Others resist the gospel because they sense or know that it will mean having to change their way of life, to stop doing certain things that they don't want to stop. "[The gospel] is a serious business affecting our present way of life and our future destiny. It is our hesitation to become too morally committed which hampers our search. Because we are not prepared to obey, we say we are not able to believe. Of course there are such things as genuine intellectual problems; but too often our vaunted unbelief is a respectable screen for our secret disobedience. It is significant that very often in the Bible the opposite of 'truth' is not 'error' but 'evil', since it is moral evil that most frequently keeps people from seeing [or submitting to] the truth. Thus Paul writes of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth (Ro 1/18), and of others who will be condemned because they have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness [had pleasure in unrighteousness: RSV] (2 Th 2/12). Their real problem is not intellectual but moral" (Stott, *Basic Christianity*, p16f) – i.e. an unwillingness to turn from their sin. This agrees exactly with John 3/19ff: This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth, comes into the light... (cf. 1/4f,10f).