

## Bridging the Gap

### *Part 7: 'What is the Gospel?'*

In our study of *Relationship Evangelism*, we have spent six weeks now looking at the process and the practical aspects of building relationships, sharing our faith and introducing the good news of Jesus Christ into someone's life. There is really not much more I can say in that regard and I would encourage you to go over those six sermons a few times and become familiar with the process I outlined so you can then focus on putting it into practice as I know many of you have already.

Believe it or not, the relational aspect of evangelism is relatively simple - it takes time (lots of time!); it takes prayer (lots of prayer!); it takes commitment (lots of commitment); but building bridges for the Gospel is not a difficult task.

However when we get to the point of bringing the Gospel message, the good news of Jesus Christ, across that bridge and into someone's heart and mind - we can get weak at the knees and the bridge all of a sudden narrows in our perception, the other side disappears from view, it starts to sway as the winds of doubt and uncertainty reach gale force; we may start to feel like we are on one of those dangerous suspension bridges you see in the movies!

This is the point at which *Relationship Evangelism* hits a dead end for so many people. The most common point of failure, far and above all others, in *Relationship Evangelism* has to do with our lack of understanding of the Gospel.

So today we will take a step back and ask a pretty important question, one which I fear many Christians in the world never ask and worse still, they don't know how to give a clear answer if they are asked. The question simply is: What is the Gospel? I've answered that many times over the years but it never hurts to recap and do some revision. So let's do that now, shall we?

The best place to start is at the very beginning – as we look at the Church Jesus birthed over 2,000 years ago. The Gospel was very clear to His first disciples. Jesus taught them well and the Holy Spirit continued teaching them as the mission of Christ spread worldwide. There were no Bible colleges back then; no theological degrees; no written qualifications required before you preached and ministered in Christ's name. The Holy Spirit was the One Who guided everyone into the Truth and opened their hearts to this Gospel, this good news in Jesus Christ.

The cross of Christ defined this new Church which bore His name and all over the world that Gospel produced great fruit as men, women and young people embraced its life-changing truth and power. Those early believers lived and died by the Apostle Paul's proclamation:

**Romans 1:16** *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."*

Paul considered the Gospel to be very important and so should we.

So let's take a closer look.

The Gospel begins with God. The whole problem facing humanity from the very beginning, comes back to the nature of God. Now I need to warn you here, because I am about to share with you the most terrifying and confronting truth in all of Scripture. I have shared this before. Do you remember? This is a truth which is stated over and over again and yet we don't realise how terrifying it really is. Are you ready? The most terrifying and confronting truth in all of Scripture is this:

## **God is good.**

Why is that very positive truth so confronting? What's so terrifying about God being good? Well, the answer is as simple as it is shocking. It's terrifying to know that God is good, because we are not. So if we truly want to understand the Gospel, the good news, we must first understand the bad news and that is, God is good, **but we are not.**

God is good because He is holy; because God is holy, He is just; because God is just He cannot do anything other than reject that which is unholy – and that includes us. So the problem for God from almost the beginning of humanity, is that He is good and we are not. God cannot violate His attributes. He cannot do something that contradicts Who He is. God is a righteous God and that is a good thing. We certainly would not want an evil God to be in charge of the universe, would we? It is a profoundly good thing that God is good, righteous, pure, holy and just.

Herein lies a huge problem for God, Who loves us and desires that we will dwell in His presence for eternity. If God is just, then what does He do with us? What does a good God do with sinners like us? Yes, politically incorrect as it may be to even suggest such a thing in 2022, we are sinners. We've sinned against God; we've sinned against each other; we've sinned against creation; we are sinners by nature. We are sinners from birth. All of creation calls for our condemnation. So if this holy, pure, righteous God is truly just, then what does He do with us?

Think about this. Sometimes we just need to be logical, before we try to be theological. If a just God simply pardons the wicked, He is no longer just. What do you call a judge who sweeps your crime under a rug? Righteous? No, he is corrupt! In the same way, if a holy God calls the wicked to Himself to have fellowship with Him, then He's not a holy God. Holiness and sin cannot occupy the same space any more than you can go forward and backward at the same time. It's just impossible.

Therefore the greatest question running through the whole Bible and all of human history, is this: how can a just God pardon wicked men and women and still be just? How can a holy God call unholy sinners into fellowship with Himself for eternity and remain holy? The answer is found in the beautiful, terrible cross of Jesus Christ. In that old rugged cross, we find this a revelation of the fullness of God's attributes. God is just so He must condemn sin – but God is also love and so He does whatever it takes to save His lost, rebellious, much-loved children and bring them home.

In order to satisfy His justice, God's love compels Him to become one of us and that man, Jesus, does what none of us could ever do – He lives a perfect, sinless life as a human being, and then goes to the cross where the sins of the whole world are cast upon Him.

So the justice of God, the full wrath of God against all unholiness, came down upon one man, Jesus Christ, God's Son and our Saviour. The exact measure that was required to fully satisfy the justice of God, was brought against Jesus. As He took His final few breaths as a man, Jesus declared, "*It is finished.*" When He spoke those profound words Jesus was not just talking about His human life as it came to an end, He was talking about His mission to secure the salvation of God's lost children.

This means that Jesus has done all that was required to pay the price for all sin. That truth should cause your spirit to explode with gratitude and worship! As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthian Church many years later, at that very moment on the cross, this Jesus Who knew no sin, willingly 'became' sin for us. At that moment, Jesus endured the pain, the agony and the torture of seeing His Father, with Whom and in Whom He had dwelled for eternity, turn His back on Jesus the man – as He took on the sin of the world. That feeling of separation from the Father which we deserved, was felt fully by Jesus the man. The Father could never turn from Jesus, the Son of God, for they are one and the same, but Jesus the man, felt the isolation and judgement of God on all sin.

This is so important for us to understand. All those Easter sermons you've heard about the agony of the crucifixion and the torture Jesus endured for us on Calvary – they all miss the *real* agony of the cross! When Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane pleading with God to take this cup from Him, do you think He was worried about the lashes He was about to feel on His back; the crown of thorns they would jam onto His head or the agony of a crucifixion? The martyrs who followed Him all went to their death singing hymns of triumph!

No, Jesus was not agonising over being mocked, beaten up and murdered by the Romans. Jesus was overwhelmed by the expectation that His Father would turn away from Him as a man as He 'became sin' for us. It was the weight of your sin and mine, separating Him from His Father which crushed this innocent man to death physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. The agony of the cross was deeply personal for Jesus and gut-wrenchingly painful as the prophecy of Isaiah 53 was finally fulfilled, a prophesy which said, *"It was the Lord's will to crush Him."* There was no other way God could secure your salvation and mine. The Bible says the wages of sin is death – so Jesus died, on our behalf.

Then on the third day He sealed His atoning sacrifice for all humankind by rising from the dead, conquering sin, death and Satan, once and for all time. Then for the first time in history, a resurrected human being entered the glory of heaven and Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God. That's why there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He is the ONLY way; He is the ONLY truth; He is the ONLY life; He is the only One Who can rescue us from condemnation and fully reconcile us to our God for eternity. There is only one God and one Mediator between us and God: that is Jesus Christ.

So how should we respond to this amazing Gospel? Like those listening to Peter on that amazing day of Pentecost, we too should be cut to the heart when we realise what Jesus did to secure our salvation and we too should ask, *"So what shall we do?"* The answer we hear is the same as Peter's answer on the day of Pentecost: REPENT and BELIEVE THE GOSPEL. God will do all the rest. It's that simple.

Now there's a lot of confusion these days about the word *repent*. So let me explain what it really means. The Greek word which is translated repent simply means 'to change our mind.' But we need to understand that in the culture in which the Bible was written, the 'mind' was something very different to what we might understand the mind to be in our modern western culture. In our culture, to change our mind is pretty superficial in most circumstances. For example, tonight I was going to have roast chicken for dinner, but now I've decided to have roast lamb instead. I changed my mind. But that is certainly not repentance.

In the Bible our 'mind' refers to the mind and the heart; the very control centre of our whole being. It's the control centre of our will, our emotions, our intellect and our very thoughts. When Paul wrote to the Roman believers (Romans 12:2) and pleaded with them to be transformed by the renewing of their mind he was talking about **the total transformation of their whole way of thinking, believing and living**. That's what it means to repent.

So in the face of this amazing revelation of God in the Gospel, we cry out to Him for mercy and He gives us the gift of repentance. That's right, repentance is not something we can do on our own. It is a gift from God. When writing to Timothy, Paul spoke about God "*granting His people repentance leading them to the knowledge of the truth.*" (2 Timothy 2:25)

One of the most famous parables Jesus told was the parable of the Prodigal Son. It is a simple story about the human condition and how we are reconciled to God, our heavenly Father. However, 99% of the time I have heard people preach or teach on this parable, they have totally missed the mark! I'm sure you have heard it said that this wayward son repented of his sinful life when he was on his face in a pig pen eating the scraps from the ground. He woke up to himself, realised he was a sinner, so he repented and returned to his father. No he didn't. Read the story again. He did no such thing.

This rebellious son thought about his father's servants eating a wholesome meal and sleeping in a warm bed in what used to be his home, enjoying a far better life than he was. So this son decided to go home and strike a deal with dear old dad to employ him as a servant. He would tell father that he didn't expect to be treated like a son anymore but asked if he could please treat him as a servant so he didn't have to eat pig scraps anymore! So the son heads home to bargain with his father.

Before he could even open his mouth and insult his father with such a proposition, his loving dad ran to him, embraced him, loved him, forgave him, poured grace into his life and treated him as the son he always was and always will be. Then Dad threw him a party! At *that* point, I believe his son would have been overwhelmed by grace and full of repentance! His whole life would have been transformed by the love of his father! This is not the parable of the prodigal son – this is the parable of the forgiving Father and that is the gospel in a nutshell. Repentance is the first fruit of the grace of God in your life.

### **Repentance is what God gives to you freely when He gives Himself to you freely!**

Let me give you the most profound example I know of repentance. Back when the Apostle Paul was still Saul the persecutor, he was sent to Damascus to capture Christians and probably have some of them killed. Now when he left for Damascus that day Paul sincerely thought that Jesus of Nazareth was the greatest blasphemer ever to walk this earth. Paul also thought that all these followers of Jesus, these *Christians*, were an absolute abomination - a terrible sect that needed to be destroyed.

That's what Paul thought and therefore it permeated his intellect, his emotions, his will and it defined his entire purpose in life. But on the road to Damascus that very day, Paul had an encounter with the resurrected Christ Himself – Paul ran head first into the Gospel.

At that point Paul's whole thinking changed. His entire reality proved to be wrong. Everything he was taught and was teaching others was exposed in the light of the risen Christ before him. Paul's entire concept of God was wrong and so the first fruit of this encounter with the living God, in Christ, was repentance. God granted Paul the gift of repentance and he then began to think very differently.

This was not some superficial change of mind. This was a life-changing, name-changing, purpose-transforming event in Paul's life and he was never, ever the same again. The persecutor became the persecuted. As this one man repented, he had more impact on the spread of the Gospel than all the other Apostles combined. This change of mind, heart, soul and life-mission also resulted in Paul writing almost half the New Testament!

Now we are not the Apostle Paul, but guess what? Paul's repentance is the same repentance God will grant to us, as He leads us to the knowledge of the Truth. To repent, is to realise that your entire view of reality was wrong and at that point the Holy Spirit will open your eyes to see and open your heart to submit to the reality of Who God is; Who Jesus is; what He's done for you; who you are because of Jesus and why you are still on this planet.

So perhaps I should ask you today, have you truly repented? Have you been so overwhelmed by the love and grace of your Heavenly Father that you have changed your mind about God? Has that change of mind led to a change in your intellect, a change of your will, a change in your emotions, a change in your attitude to God, to yourself, to others, to money, to fame, to life in this world?

- Things you once loved, do you now hate?
- Things you once hated, ignored or rejected, do you now love?
- The holiness you once dismissed, do you now desire?
- The Christ Whom you did not allow to be part of your life in any significant way, is He now the most attractive, beautiful, wonderful person you could ever encounter?
- Do you now consider the kingdom of heaven to be a 'pearl of great price'?

These are just some of the fruits which reveal that a divine work of repentance has been done in your heart. But not only are we to repent of our wrong thinking and living, we are to then believe the Gospel. Repentance and belief go hand-in-hand.

Repentance means we stop thinking one thing and start thinking something new. We let go of one reality in order to embrace a new reality, which is Jesus Christ. We acknowledge every day of our lives that there is absolutely nothing in us which can save us from the holiness of God which burns against all sin. Only Jesus can save us and only Jesus has saved us. We must get to that point where we live within the truth of that line in the old hymn: *"Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling."*

A vital part of our repentance from wrong thinking is our acceptance of the truth that our salvation and reconciliation with God has all been achieved by Jesus Christ, through His life, death and resurrection. To believe the Gospel is to affirm that you have only one hope in this life and the next and all of that hope is found in Jesus Christ. Our salvation was achieved over 2,000 years ago when Jesus bled and died for us. That salvation and new life becomes real in our experience today, through repentance and believing and embracing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

However this repentance is not a one-off event. Repentance is a daily choice. Every day we are being bombarded with lies about us and God and Jesus Christ and every day we need to reject wrong thinking and turn back to Jesus. We need to affirm our belief in Jesus and His finished work on the cross every day. In fact, repentance is more important than ever for Christians today because false teaching is threatening to bring the Church to its knees! Paul warned us all those years ago that there would be false Christs, false teachers and even doctrines taught in the Church by demons!

So how do you know if you have accepted the truth and not some counterfeit 'gospel?' You will know by the fruit in your life. You will know that you have received the Gospel and accepted the free gift of salvation in Christ when this new life in Him becomes your daily experience. You won't always be on the emotional high you were when your eyes were first opened, but every day of your life, in some way, you will re-affirm that God is good, God is real, you are loved and forgiven, restored and heaven-bound, all because of the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Little by little, you will be transformed more and more into the image of Jesus Christ – for that is God’s will for us all. You will deepen in your lifestyle of repentance and renewal. You will grow in grace. Your relationship with God will intensify in its intimacy. Your faith will be strengthened and your discernment will develop. Your desire to be in the presence of God in worship will grow every day.

This is the fruit of true God-given repentance and the manifestation of Jesus Christ in your life. Perhaps God has revealed the truth of the Gospel to you for the first time today. Or maybe God has reminded you of a truth you had long forgotten. Either way, if the Spirit of God is at work in your heart right now, you will know it and I want to encourage you to respond to God today. Embrace the life-changing truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ today.

Print these two affirmations and place them somewhere prominent. Then read them out loud every single morning as you greet the new day and let the Spirit of God release the power and reality of this Gospel into every area of your life!

***While we were sinners, CHRIST DIED FOR US***

( Romans 5:8 )

***While we were dead in our sin, GOD MADE US ALIVE IN CHRIST***

( Ephesians 2:5 )