

The Hard Truth at the Heart of the Gospel

I saw recently where a well known Christian psychologist and author Larry Crabb said, *"If you don't think Jesus and the gospel are the answer to whatever you're facing right now, you haven't understood your problem correctly."* We're always talking about the gospel, but with Palm Sunday next week and then Easter, we're taking a break from our series on the story of God to devote four weeks to *"The Heart of the Gospel."* The gospel is the good news of what God has done through Jesus to reconcile us to himself and to redeem all of creation.

This week we begin with the hard truth at the heart of the gospel. It is a hard truth in two ways. On the one hand, it is difficult to face honestly, it is humbling. On the other hand, it is hard truth in that it is factual. It is natural, perhaps deeply human, to come to church because we want to feel better about our lives. That is understandable. When we are moved in sincere worship, or listening to encouraging truths about God and us, that is a good thing. But it is important to understand that the message contained in the Bible does not derive its validity from whether or not we are moved by it emotionally.

The word *"gospel"* reminds us of this because *gospel* means good news. It's news because the gospel doesn't begin with our feelings but something that actually happened. In the death and resurrection of Jesus God did something bigger than our feelings. It is often only as we embrace the realities of the gospel in faith that we begin to experience profound changes not only in our feelings but in all of life.

One thing we see when we look at the cross is the depth of our need for God's grace.

I. THE GOSPEL REVEALS THE HARD TRUTH OF OUR DEEP NEED.

The Scripture we've read today reveals two hard truths that show why we need the gospel. First,

A. We need the gospel because of the sin we cannot deny.

We're *all* in the same boat. **Verse 22** says, *There is no distinction* **Verse 23** tells why *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*. Notice it doesn't just say we have all sinned. That means there are specific things we do or fail to do. We've been wrong and caused

harm. But there also an underlying problem, *we fall short*. All of us are always falling short of the life God that glorifies and enjoys God. We are self-glorifiers, self-pityers, self-serving. We see the flaws of others but not our own faults. As **verse 10** said, *None is righteous, no, not one*. Albert Einstein said, *"The real problem is in the hearts and minds of men. It is not a problem of physics but of ethics. It is easier to denature plutonium than to denounce the evil spirit of man."*

This hard truth is part of the good news and it is helpful...

First of all, if you accept this radical view of human sin, you can rest more fully in the love of God. **Romans 5:8** says, *God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*. Only by accepting this radical view of sin do you get the radical view of God's sovereign grace in election and salvation! That frees us from performing or pretending to rest in the love of God.

Second, if you accept this radical view of human sin, it gives you a reason to be kinder toward everyone. One of the most persistent human tendencies is for some people to think they are better than other people. In the ancient world the Jews, who tried to honor the ten commandments thought they were better than the pagan Greeks who tended toward sexual promiscuity and idolatry. Paul as a Jew was part of a social and religious culture that would have encouraged him to think of pagan Greeks as bad people, to be looked down on. In that setting, and in ours, **verse 9** makes a fantastic claim: *⁹What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin* Then he follows with a list that begins, in **verse 10**, with the words, *as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one;* He relentlessly builds his case and concludes, at the end of **verse 22**, by saying, *For there is no distinction: ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* Those words, "There is no distinction" were radical in Paul's days and they are radical in our day. Theologians call this teaching the doctrine of total depravity. It means every person is infected and corrupted by sin and evil in every aspect of their humanity. Some people think that sounds very negative and yet the truth is it is radically humanizing because it means we all share the same problem. You can't look down on any person or any class of people. Criminals? *There but by the grace of God go I!* This gives you good reason to be humble and look kindly on all people. Why? Because you are no better than they are!

We need the gospel because of the sin we cannot deny and...

B. We need the gospel because of the Law that we do not obey.

Romans 3:19 says, *Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.*

The words “accountable to God” tell us the issue of guilt is not just about our feelings. I read an article online entitled, *“How to Get Rid Of And Heal All Guilt.”* It said, *“Guilt is a feeling caused by improper thoughts. Ultimately, those thoughts cause guilt is because you are not loving yourself.”* The article said guilt is just a bad feeling caused by unrealistic expectations put on you by family, culture or by yourself. So the answer proposed is to just realize guilt is unnecessary and stop it. Well, there is false guilt. But not all guilt is false. True guilt is the hard reality of moral accountability. You may *not* feel it, but true guilt is the reality of things you and I have done wrong for which we are accountable to God whether we feel it or not.

And the important point that the Bible is making here is that...

You can not resolve true guilt by trying to obey God’s law.

Verse 20 says, *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law.* The law that this is talking about is the moral law of God. The most famous summary of the law is *The Ten Commandments*. What the Bible tells us is that if you want to deal with guilt by keeping God's laws you have to line up with all God's commandments, and you have to take them in their real intent and fulfill them not just in your actions but your attitudes! No one does that. No one can and so **verse 20** is a categorical statement it allows for no exception at all. It says, *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law.* Earlier Paul had said, *There is no difference, for all, have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* This offends some people. Does this mean there is no difference between someone who tries to live a good life and someone who has robbed people and ruined lives?

Well, think of it this way. As best I can remember if you head due East of Daytona Beach across the Atlantic, you will run into the coast of North Africa, Morocco I think. Let's say we get up a group from church and go jump off the Daytona Pier and start swimming to Morocco. What will happen? Some of us will swim for a few hundred yards, maybe. Some will make it a little farther. Some of us who are athletic might make it for miles. But it is 4,382 miles! So, to use the words of

Paul, there is no difference. *No one will make it like that.* The problem is not just that we fall short but that even our efforts to be good are often corrupted with self-serving motives and pride. Jesus said, we often do good to impress people. That's why Isaiah said even our good works are just filthy rags in the presence of God.

The law is like a diagnostic test, like a CAT scan; it shows what is wrong. It isn't a cure. None of our effort to do or be right can fix the problem of sin and guilt. This is a hard truth that is true when we feel it and when we don't. Our feelings are not the final authority when it comes to our true situation before God.

There is an old fable about a man who dies and stands before the angel Gabriel wanting to get into heaven. Gabriel says, Here's how this works, you need a hundred points to get into heaven. So tell me what you've done. Okay, the man says, *"I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her."* Gabriel says, "I met her. We gave her points for that, but I'll give you minus one point for all the trouble you gave her." "Minus one point!" the man said incredulously and with a little bit of panic. "Well, I opened a shelter for the homeless and fed needy people in my city." "That's good," said Gabriel. "You get 2 points for that. It might have been more, but you always bragged about that and felt superior to the people you helped." "TWO POINTS for that!" the man cried in desperation! "At this rate, I'll only get to heaven by the grace of God." "Ahh, come on in then," said Gabriel. In the gospel – God is inviting you to give up on establishing your own value and righteousness and rest in what he alone can give you. You can not establish a record of righteousness that will satisfy your own heart much less God. What if you didn't have to pretend or perform but could just rest in God's grace?

So this is the first thing to see here: the gospel reveals the hard truth of our shared sinfulness and our inability to save ourselves. To say something is hard does not mean it is bad. Hard steel can bear the weight and stress needed to build a bridge. A diamond is hard, and because it is hard, it can cut through almost anything. Hard truths can cut through our misguided indifference, pride, and ingratitude and lead us to embrace the beauty of the gospel. That's good.

II. THE GOSPEL REVEALS GOD'S TRUE GIFT OF GRACE.

Verses 22-24 speaks of *the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

A. God's grace is freely given to all who believe in Jesus.

Verse 22 says it comes *through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe*. Be clear about that. Faith is not just a passive acknowledgment that Jesus existed or that he died and rose again. It is entrusting your salvation to Him, turning to Him as your Lord and relying on him for your salvation.

B. What you receive when you believe in Jesus is righteousness.

Verse 22 says, *the righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe*. Just as clearly as it says all of have sinned and fall short – it promises that all who believe are righteous in Christ. **Verse 24** says those who believe are *are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*. To be justified means to be declared righteous. God declares you righteous, and he does this it *freely by His grace*. So the full penalty for our sins has been paid, and the perfect righteousness of Christ is put to our accounts. So we no longer fall short in any way. The only judge you need to care about says, *You are now righteous in my eyes, and you will be thought of and treated as righteous for Christ sake because of the gospel*.

C. How is this possible?

Verse 24 says *it is through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*. When someone was a slave or a prisoner you would have to pay a ransom in exchange *for* or in place *of* the prisoner who would then be given their freedom. To pay that ransom was to redeem the person. The idea here is that we were enslaved in our sin and facing God's judgment, but Christ redeemed us. Some people feel that sense of bondage and accountability to God. Some people don't. The Bible is not saying this is the way you feel, but this is the way it is. What Christ did for us on the cross is bigger than our feelings on any given day. Our feelings do not change the reality, mystery, and majesty of what Christ did for us on the cross. Clearly see and believe the gospel. Look at every struggle and issue in light of the gospel. Keep at it until it seeps into your feelings and brings healing.

CONCLUSION

There was once a famous Christian Poet and Hymn writer named William Cowper. He was one of the most popular poets of his time. Most people don't know that early in his life when he was 28 years old,
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he had a breakdown and tried three different ways to commit suicide. He became convinced that he was beyond hope or help. He was eventually committed to St. Alban's Asylum in England. Dr. Nathaniel Cotton was in charge there. He was also a strong Christian believer. Dr. Cotton showed Cowper tremendous compassion. Dr. Cotton repeatedly held out hope to him and for him through the gospel. One day, about six months into his stay, Cowper, found a Bible lying on a bench in the garden. First, he looked at **John 11** Which the ladies are going to be looking at at the women's day retreat this weekend, and as he put it he saw "*so much benevolence, mercy, goodness, and sympathy with miserable men, in our Savior's conduct*" that he felt a ray of hope. Then he turned to **Romans 3**. He read the words that we have been looking at today. This was a crucial turning point in his life. Here's what he said:

Immediately I received the strength to believe it, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone upon me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement He had made, my pardon sealed in His blood, and all the fullness and completeness of His justification. In a moment I believed, and received the gospel.

He began to believe that in spite of his disgust with himself and his struggles, there was forgiveness, hope, and through Christ a caring, relationship with a God who truly and amazingly loved him. He experienced such a profound recovery he left St. Alban's and lived and 35 more years. He weathered several battles with depression in the course of his life, but not without perseverance and great spiritual growth. Faith in the gospel not only changed his life but enabled him to serve others. He wrote the famous words; "*God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.*" In 1778 he also wrote a poem titled *The Negro's Complaint that describes slavery from the perspective of the slave*. It became very famous and was used in the fight to end slavery in England and was often quoted by Martin Luther King. The gospel gave him his life back and sustained him in it. It can do that for anyone.

To live by faith in the gospel means to live every day looking beyond what you are facing and feeling to focus on Christ, the way he reveals the beautiful certainty of God's love, the mysterious depth of his wisdom, the sweet assurance of His grace.

Amen