

A Gospel Appeal, by Jay Wegter

It is interesting that the gospel begins with who God is (**Acts 17:23-31**), even before it touches upon our need for salvation (as a fallen race). God's trusted prophets and apostles (in the OT and NT) faced opposition from false teachers who (watered down the message by) by proclaiming a god who was harmless—you might say 'domesticated', 'easy-going', but not holy and just. Now, this 'face off' between true and false prophets is of critical importance, for God is not who we imagine Him to be; He is who He says He is in His infallible Word, the Bible. a

And, in our fallen state, we tend to make a god in our own image—a large benevolent version of ourselves, and one who is dismissive about sin. Historically, false teachers have given 'ear-tickling' messages (**2 Tim 4:3-4**) that did not call for repentance. And, in condemning this self-justifying tendency, God speaks through the Psalmist, and says of the wicked and their deeds: "**These things you have done and I kept silence; you thought that I was just like you;** I will reprove you and state *the case* in order before your eyes. Now consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear *you* in pieces, and there will be none to deliver" (**Ps 50:21-22**). That is hardly a benign deity!

Salvation is inseparable from knowing who God really is; Jesus states this in no uncertain terms. "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (**Jn 17:3**). In stating the gospel, we must start with who God is, because He defines what sin is and what righteousness is; we don't. We must know what He says about our sin, and why it separates us from Him. God defines sin by His moral law, the Ten Commandments, which is the expression of His righteous character.

Now, because people tend to keep their Bibles closed, when you bring up God's moral law, you are going to get answers like this if you ask, "What is the purpose of the Ten Commandments?" A common answer is, "The Ten Commandments tell us what it means to be a good person, hopefully a good enough person to go to heaven."

But the Holy Scriptures tell us that the Ten Commandments are not only what the Lord requires in terms of perfect love to God and neighbor, the decalogue also has a diagnostic purpose. **It identifies sin in us.** "Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin" (**Rom 3:19-20**). So rather than the law being a 'moral ladder' we attempt to climb to heaven, Scripture reveals that is a mirror we look in to show us our sin.

Now all these things I am speaking about are 'counter-intuitive'—in other words,

our default way of thinking is that: **it is possible to be a good enough person to be accepted by God**. You could almost say that the religion we were born with (attached to our hearts from birth) is that a sincere person can be saved by works. We are so stuck in that view that a massive paradigm shift is necessary.

This is why the gospel is called a ‘revelation’, or an ‘uncovering’ of good news about God’s righteousness. The Williams NT words this beautifully. “For I am not ashamed of the good news, for it is God’s power for the salvation of everyone who trusts, or the Jew first and then of the Greek. **For in the good news God’s way of man’s right standing with Him is uncovered**, the Way of faith that leads to greater faith, just as the Scripture says, ‘The upright man must live by faith” (**Rom 1:16-17**).

The gospel ‘reveals’ (uncovers) how sinners can have right standing with God—that means being ‘right’ with God. But, my friends our hearts resist the good news—because we fight against the law’s diagnosis of our hearts. We just cannot accept that in the sight of a just and holy God, our sin is so serious we deserve to be cut off from Him in eternal misery. So we cling to our imagined autonomy with all of our might.

But, the Holy Spirit bringing a person to that sentiment of possessing real legal guilt before God is essential if one is to see his desperate need to flee to Christ. No one really has an understanding of salvation (and their dilemma) until they can truly say the same thing about their sin as God does, agreeing with God in Scripture that **sin is a disaster of immeasurable proportions—deserving death and damnation.**

Jesus Christ speaks of this inner resistance to God’s truth as **‘the love of darkness’ and the hatred of the light**, “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (**Jn 3:19-21**).

Because we tend to define sin primarily as malice and immorality, we see it as a problem in ‘others’ and we give ourselves a free pass (use **Rom 2:1-16** here). The unbeliever reasons: “My case cannot be that serious; surely a little self-reformation and religion should be able to rectify things with God.”

This is why Christ said that the Holy Spirit was sent to convict the world of sin—to gain a verdict in the conscience of men and women of their guilt before a holy God (Jn 16:9-11). Otherwise our slight view of sin will lead us to take slight measures as sin’s cure.

When the Spirit convicts a person of sin; there is trauma—for God invades the secret recesses of the heart and exposes thoughts, motives, and intents (hidden from

the eyes of those around us). “For the **word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword**, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and **able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart**” (**Heb 4:12**). In our lost state, we regard this invasive holiness of God to be a conflict of interest. So, we push the convicting work of God’s Spirit away—like a running back stiff-arming a tackler. But, the Spirit’s power is needed to **‘bankrupt us morally’**, emptying us of our supposed merit, and then bringing us to the end of ourselves so that we see our imagined righteousness for what it really is in God’s sight.

Did you know that this happened to Saul of Tarsus, on the road to Damascus, while he was yet an enemy of Christ and the gospel? For, in Saul’s testimony of conversion, he states that before he met Christ the Lord, he used to place all his confidence in his flesh. And, even in terms of his outward adherence to the law, he said, **“As to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless”** (**Phil 3:6**).

But, once he met Christ, he saw for the first time that his imagined righteousness was nothing but damnable filthy rags in the sight of God (**Is 64:6**). He says, “I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish (manure, barnyard dung) so that I may gain Christ and may be found in Him, **not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith**” (**Phil 3:8b-9**).

This is the heart of the gospel, Christ takes on Himself, the believer’s penalty, that we might receive as a gift by faith, Christ’s righteousness (this is a guilt exchange, or guilt transfer). There are Scripture verses which encapsulate this exchange in a single sentence: “And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed” (**1 Pet 2:24**). “For Christ also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit” (**1 Pet 3:18**).

We see in these two verses in 1 Peter how it is that the living, dying, and rising of a man 2000 years ago is able to change the lives and eternal destinies of millions. He is able to do so because His saving work was done as our Substitute. Scripture says that in Christ’s dying, He became **the ‘curse of the law’**—allowing the law’s curse/penalty to fall on Him, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, **having become a curse for us**—for it is written, cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” (**Gal 3:13**).

My friends, do not be deceived, those who are hoping to be saved by their law-keeping are **under the curse of God**, for no one can keep the law. This is why Scripture states that in the giving of Christ to be the perfect sacrifice, God **did not spare Him**

from, wrath, reproach, and the cross itself. “What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *is* against us? **He who did not spare His own Son**, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (**Rom 8:31-32**).

This is the epitome of love; God did not spare His own Son. Perfect salvation in Christ is to be received immediately in trust and repentance. This issue of ‘what will you do with Christ?’ is the divider of men. For Scripture states that there salvation in no other. “**And there is salvation in no one else**; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (**Acts 4:12**).

God has determined to punish all disobedience and transgression. Christ indicates that for those who do not trust Him as Savior, judgment will be comprehensive. “But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment” (**Mt 12:36**).

Sin must be a horrific disease if it required the crushing Christ’s soul, and the mangling and tearing of His body in order to effect the cure. If God did not spare His only begotten Son, He will not spare those who reject His Son. Listen to what is said in the book of Hebrews: “**How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?**” (**Heb 2:3**). What is one of the great evidences that a person truly knows Christ as Savior? Like Saul of Tarsus, they have abandoned trust in their own righteousness, and have found an all-sufficient Savior in Christ Jesus. In Paul’s testimony of personal salvation, he abandoned his own works in order to find the gift of righteousness in Christ.

My friends, **God sent His Son to be the friend of sinners.** The plan that Christ should be the suffering Substitute for all who would believe was planned in eternity past, and fulfilled 2000 years ago: “He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (**2 Cor 5:21**). This means that there are but two possibilities, either you are relying on your own opinions and imagined merits, or you are trusting Christ alone for pardon and for righteousness.

Perhaps today **you are trusting in your participation in a religious tradition**, or an approach to spirituality, perhaps your baptism, or confirmation. Scripture is utterly clear—the benefits of Christ’s work do not come to us by means of our works, or a religious ritual, or practice, but by trust in Christ alone (**Jn 1:12-13**). We come to God by coming to Christ—and we come to Him as a guilty, habitual law-breaker who needs cleansing and clothing—cleansing from the sin that has defiled us, and clothing in the righteousness of Another, in Christ’s righteousness (**Rom 5:17-19**). “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it” (**Mt 7:13**). As one aging father-in-law has said about stubborn unbelief, “**Eternity is an awfully long time to have gotten this wrong.**”