

The Gospel Shaped Life

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 January 2022

Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] Right, am I on? Yes, I seem to be on. I must say it seems quite strange to be standing up here. I used to do it quite regularly, but it's a long time now! Since I've stood in front of a live congregation.

So it's, well, we'll see how it goes. But when I was a university lecturer, my students used to complain that my voice was too loud, but nowadays people say they can't always hear me. So if you find I'm too quiet, just wave and I'll try and speak a bit louder. Just make sure this is working.

So the title I was given for this passage of scripture was The Gospel-Shaped Life. I think perhaps it might more accurately be The Gospel-Shaped Service, but it's a moot point really, isn't it? Because The Gospel-Shaped Life is a life of service, so it doesn't really make a lot of difference. So I'd like to start by asking some questions.

[1:11] A basic question I'd like to ask you is do you have faith in human nature? You hear people say things like that sometimes, don't you? He says, it's restored my faith in human nature.

What you're really saying there is do you think that humans are basically good? I can't remember who it was now, but somebody once said they'd been in a seminar at work which was saying that the, basically the attitude was that humans are good.

that if something goes wrong it's because they've had, they've had, brought up in poverty or had a dysfunctional family or was abused as children or something like that.

But you can't deny that people do bad things, so we then ask the question, what do you, what do you do about it? Do we just need better laws?

Or is it a matter of suitable education to solve the problems of society? Now of course these things do have an impact, but really?

[2:24] Are they enough? You can't have missed on the news that in Ireland a young female primary school teacher was murdered on the streets. But what surprised me was that what happened, the reaction of people was to sort of have placards that say end violence against women.

Yes, well, but how are you going to do that? They seemed to think it was just a change of attitude that was required. As if somehow the murderer, whoever he was, was not quite aware that murdering young women was not really acceptable behavior.

He just needed to have that pointed out to him. And yet the world seems to insist that human nature is perfectible. Even when you're confronting someone, for example, over racism, the answer is considered to be education.

What we need is a removal of unconscious bias. I think Richard Dawkins, at the beginning of this century, sort of heralded a new age of reason.

But you may have noticed that Richard Dawkins himself has been cancelled in some circles now. Because this belief in human nature is against all the evidence, isn't it?

[3:43] What do we learn from the 20th century? Surely if there's one thing we learn, it's that what humans are really good at is finding better ways to kill each other.

One comic writer put it, universal bereavement and inspiring achievement. We've got weapons that could wipe out life on earth now. What about this century?

This century got going. People were heralding the internet as a new way of spreading good news, of spreading, bringing people together, giving people a voice.

And of course, to some extent, it does do that. I mean, obviously, we're using the internet today to live stream our message. And yet, what do people really make of it?

This brilliant communication tool. What do we find? We find people being cancelled. We find trolling, scamming.

[4:57] It's almost entertaining to read the ingenuity of some of the scammers, isn't it, nowadays? And you read what the... Ingenuity they put into ripping people off. Catfishing.

If you don't know what that means, it means the romance scam, getting people to set up a relationship deceptively online.

And just old-fashioned bullying, which is so much easier done with the internet now. And that's to say nothing of the even darker and deeper things like drug deals and plotting terror the internet is used for.

Nowadays, you can drive your victim to suicide without even meeting them face to face. such is the technical progress.

Humans are certainly good at technology. Ever since the Tower of Babel they have been. But technology doesn't make you good. It's what you use the technology for that matters.

[6:04] And one thing that's becoming increasingly clear as we sort of listen to the news is that not only is this belief in human nature unreasonable, it actually has all kinds of ill effects.

Because if you think that you are basically good, then the natural deduction is what I am must be good by definition and therefore not open to criticism.

And what's the inevitable result? It's hypocrisy and self-righteousness. This is what led to this cancel culture and that is now beginning to fragment into groups. There are competing LGBT charities that more or less hate each other now.

So is the answer better law? Well, it might help but it only works up to a point. Paul has already explained this in verse 8 of 1 Timothy, hasn't he?

The law can tell you what is right and it can condemn you when you're wrong. But there are two problems.

[7:31] First of all, how does the lawmaker know what is right in the first place? And even if the law itself is good, it can't make you love it.

As you said, we all agree that rape and murder are illegal. That doesn't stop it happening. In fact, actually convicting people of rape is notoriously difficult because it's a crime usually without witnesses.

Jesus himself took an entirely pessimistic view of the goodness of human nature. Remember he said, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled in the world. You don't hunger and thirst when you're already replete, do you? We hunger for when we don't have food for what we don't have. Jesus told, of course, a famous story, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Let me just read it to you. It's Luke 18, 9 to 14. To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable.

[8:47] Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself.

God, I thank you that I am not like other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven but beat his breast and said, God have mercy on me, a sinner.

And what's Jesus' comment on that? I tell you that this man rather than the other went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

So what is the gospel viewpoint?

[9:46] What is the Christian viewpoint? Of course, theologians talk about original sin and total depravity. I'm not going to go in detail as to what these mean.

But basically, they capture the fact that every human being who has walked on this earth with just one exception is broken. Not totally broken, not completely destroyed, but broken at the center. And of course, the world condemns these doctrines as despicable and medieval. But, you know, our passage suggests that this is exactly the route to a good conscience as we are reading in verse 19 and to faith and love as we see in verse 14.

And indeed, it's really the only way to a truly compassionate society. People ignore the fact that what progress has been made in human society is largely the result of religion and most particularly the result of the Christian religion.

why is that? Well, because we have compassion on others when we realize that we could be in the same situation.

[11:10] The story told, I think it was, of Spurgeon who had a drunk pointed out to him. He was drunk and lying in the road. And one of his congregation pointed this out to Spurgeon and Spurgeon said, there but for the grace of God goes Charles Hadron Spurgeon.

Our compassion for the lost is based on the fact that we are lost ourselves or we were lost ourselves. We could be in exactly the same place.

Our feeling for the parents of a dead child comes from imagining ourselves losing a loved one. There was a child killed in a skiing accident a few days ago.

Of course, as you probably know, many of you know, I'm quite a keen skier. And I can just imagine the situation when that would happen. We will get these little crocodiles of children skiing down the slope and people come skiing down too fast.

And that's exactly what happened in this case. And the person skiing too fast was not able to avoid this child when she turned. Of course, I say, as a skier myself, I can just imagine that happening.

[12:24] Both as being the one who was hit and even the one perhaps who was skiing carelessly and out of control. Then I can really feel for that family and their tragedy.

And so, in our passage, we find that Paul is entirely in tune with Jesus' teaching on this subject. what he's doing here is explaining to his protege, Timothy, the key to a fruitful life or as I said, perhaps more specifically, the key to fruitful service.

Verse 12, he talks about his own service and says, he has considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Then in verse 18, he has this command, Timothy, that he will be faithful in his service and that Timothy will fight the battle well.

And it's not difficult to pick out the key to this passage, is it? It's in verse 15. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst.

Christ Jesus But let's just think about this for a minute.

[13:53] What's Paul getting at here? Was he really the worst of sinners? Before we answer that question, perhaps we ought to say what is a sinner anyway?

Nowadays, a sinner seems to be thought of somebody who eats too much chocolate. That's not what the word means, of course. A sinner is simply someone who does not meet God's moral standard of life.

It's as simple as that. So was Paul the worst of sinners? Well, of course, he wasn't really, was he? If you just think back to what went on in the Roman Empire in those days, you would hardly describe Paul as the worst of sinners.

in fact, he'd been a Pharisee and generally probably a fairly moral man. Paul is using hyperbole here, but he's using hyperbole for a very important reason.

Because he'd come to understand that compared even to the law, let alone the heart righteousness that God requires, he was so far short of the mark that he might as well consider himself the worst of sinners.

[15:19] Paul expands this idea in verse 16 and the modern translations actually, I think to some extent, play down the force of this. So I've put on the screen there the King James version, the authorized version.

It says that this, However, for this cause I obtain mercy that in me first, Jesus Christ might show forth all long-suffering for a pattern to them who should believe on him to life everlasting.

Obviously, I put the italics in, but I think those are the key words there. First and pattern. the Greek word actually translated first there is protos, from which we get the word prototype.

You can't take these things too far, but I think that is what is meant here. Paul is saying, when he says the worst of sinners, he's saying, I'm a prototype sinner.

sinner. I'm a prototype sinner, so I can be an example of the grace that's found in Jesus Christ.

That's Paul's advice to Timothy and to all who will follow after him.

[16:42] Understand that you are a sinner and you take them the first step to understanding the gospel. And this has, as we said, both implications for society and for your individual discipleship.

So let's have a just think about this a little more. Christians are sometimes accused of being holier than thou, but actually true Christian morality is never holier than thou.

That's the Pharisees' error. And Jesus actually condemned it as the worst kind of hypocrisy. woe to you Pharisees, he said, in the strongest language.

And if we take this holier than thou attitude today, Jesus will say woe to us as well. Paul's compassion for Timothy and for all sinners proceeds from the understanding that he is in exactly the same predicament.

And this surely is the answer to our cancel culture. To understand why people promote hate, why they lie or rape or murder, we need to understand that beneath our own respectable exterior, we all have the potential for these things.

[18:12] Of course, law and education and the alleviation of poverty can restrain some of the worst effects of this potential. As Christians, we're not against these things.

Christians have always been in favor of education and the rule of law. And we're not saying that people are incapable of genuine acts of charity.

We're not claiming that people are as bad as they could be. But this whack-a-mole approach to the problems of society is never better than the stop gap.

Because you solve one problem and another one pops up. You try to promote toleration and diversity and you soon find yourself suppressing freedom of debate and cancelling those you disagree with.

In fact, Western democracy is really based on the idea of original sin. No one should be totally trusted. someone once said, all power corrupts and in human affairs at least, absolute power corrupts absolutely.

[19:29] We're told as Christians to honor our leaders but not to trust them totally. And why should we not trust them totally? Well, Aaron actually already mentioned this in his prayer, didn't he?

We shouldn't trust them totally precisely because they're humans like us and we shouldn't trust ourselves. And the more society moves away from this consensus, the more the fabric of society starts to unravel, however much people deny it.

But there is hope, change is possible as verse 16 makes clear. There is mercy for the worst of sinners. But you have to start there and there is grace for the worst of sinners, not just mercy that says well, okay, you can't help it, I'm just going to let you off.

Mercy that results in change. And that's what Paul is getting at here, but of course he's not aiming mainly at the problems of society here.

He's speaking to Timothy as an individual Christian. Problems of the social contract are not Paul's primary focus here. Though he does pick this up actually in chapter two, which is the next passage that Mark is going to be talking about, how Christians relate to society, but that's for next week.

[21:08] But the first problem that Paul is addressing, as I say, is to equip Timothy and indeed us, all those who read this letter, for service and to warn of the rocks which might sink his faith.

And his approach to this is quite illuminating and I think again it's worth thinking a little bit about exactly the details of Paul's approach here. I just would like to point out to you that there is something that Paul does not do.

It will take me a little while to get to this point, so just bear with me for a minute or two. Luke tells the story of a woman who poured perfume on Jesus' feet and when the host objected, he replied, therefore I tell you her many sins have been forgiven, for she loved much, but he who has been

forgiven little loves much, loves little, sorry.

Yet it is interesting that even there the woman was not told to list her sins. She already knew in her heart that she was the worst of sinners. Jesus didn't require her to prove it.

The evidence of her conversion was not her full list of sins that she's turned away from, but the love that she has for the Saviour.

[22:44] And it's interesting that in our passage, what Paul doesn't do is exhort Timothy to make a list of his own sins. Paul has already done that, and you might say, well, imitate me and you list your sins, and then we can do something about him.

But interestingly, he doesn't actually say that. In fact, rather, it's almost that Paul is providing the example, so Timothy doesn't have to do that. And this is something that needs thinking about a bit. There is a strand of Christian preaching that says you cannot be truly converted unless you have a deeply emotional conviction of sin. I could get a bit controversial here because there's a book that came out recently that seems to take something about that line, but I'm not going to say what it is. Now, we have to be careful here. Such an emotional experience might well be beneficial. It certainly was for that woman who poured ointment on Jesus' feet.

But it's not an essential feature and I think to insist on it is actually dangerous for two reasons. firstly, people who do not have such a deep emotion might feel they're excluded from turning to Christ.

[24:17] And secondly, you might afterwards think of this experience as proof of your genuine conversion. But it's not. Lots of people have sorrow for sin but are not genuinely converted.

What is the proof of conversion? Well, verse 16 makes that clear. It's the presence of grace, not the strength of your emotion. We read of other conversions that seem to be quite unemotional.

Think of the story of Nathaniel, for instance, in John 1, who appears to have been motivated largely by curiosity, intellectual curiosity, when he came to Jesus, saying could anything good come out of Nazareth?

And yet, Jesus describes him as an Israelite in whom there is nothing false. It is true, of course, that the one who is forgiven much will love much.

And we need to understand that we're forgiven much. But I don't think you should measure that by the strength of your emotion. I think you should measure it by the strength of your repentance.

[25:26] patience. So, with Timothy, Paul takes a different tact, doesn't he? He says, as we already noted, for that very reason, I was shown mercy, so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who will believe on him and receive eternal life.

He's inviting Timothy to learn here from Paul's experience rather than his own. If you, if you, if your mentor, Timothy, your guru, your teacher, understands that he is the worst of sinners, then learn that lesson.

Timothy's spiritual father is a trophy of grace, and so Timothy himself should copy that attitude. As Paul puts it, Timothy, my son, I'm giving you this command, well, what command?

It's not clear exactly what the command is, but presumably he's saying to take notice of what I've said in the last few verses. I'm giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well.

The message of the gospel isn't count your sins. It's rather to acknowledge them, and to acknowledge that you don't know the half of it anyway.

[27:12] The message of the gospel is to repent to turn from your sins, to go in a different direction, and believe, have faith.

We tend to, they are slightly different things to repent and believe, yet in a sense they always go together, because you turn away from the path you were on, onto the path of faith, the path of learning from what Jesus has to tell you, wants you to do.

So you can't really do one without the other. If you repent, you will believe, and you won't repent unless you believe. believe. And what is the aim here?

It is to hold on to faith and a good conscience, verse 19. If you keep the faith, if you keep listening to what Christ has to say, then you will keep your conscience clear.

Not all the time, of course, you will still fall, but when you do fall, you will be able to do something about it, and come back to him and keep your conscience clear.

[28:31] So let's sum up this Paul's recipe for a gospel-shaped life or for gospel-shaped service. First of all, it's to remember that Christ came to save sinners, not those who consider themselves righteous.

He said once, it's the sick who need a doctor, not those who are healthy. But the catch is, of course, that all of us are sick when it comes to sin. There's no lateral flow test you can do that says I'm not infected, because we're all infected.

here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. And so the first step is to acknowledge our guilt. Compared to what God requires of us, we might as well be the worst of sinners, but not to dwell on our sins, but rather to turn away from them and turning to Christ.

But also remember, when we speak to others, we don't do so from a position of moral superiority.

We address our fellow citizens in the world as one sinner to another.

[30:02] Hypocrisy is difficult to avoid, but a clear conscience will help. second point, if we really seek God's favour through repentance, that in itself is a sign that his favour is being shown to us, because that results in the faith and love, which are the evidence of this grace in verse 14.

Jesus said, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened. second, the sign of grace is that we seek for it, we realise that we need it. The third point perhaps is to fight the good fight, verse 18.

The world will try and knock us off course. The devil will try and get a foothold in our individual lives and in church. We do have to fight.

It's not, remember sometimes as people have said, let go and let God. Yes, we're letting God work in us and we're going to sing a hymn in a minute that says precisely that, but it is a fight.

We are involved in it. The world will try to turn us off course. And of course, if you go off course, what happens?

[31:30] You very soon find yourself wrecked and lost. So keep your faith and your conscience clean, as Paul says in verse 19.

Note that Paul exhorts Timothy to be active in holding on. Don't just assume it's going to happen. It's a command to say, hold on to faith and a good conscience.

Because if you don't, the result is going to be disaster. So that's Paul's recipe, if you like, for a gospel-shaped life and for gospel-shaped service.

We're going to sing a hymn. one of the advantages of being the preacher is that you can choose the hymns if you like and you can choose your favorite hymns. The first hymn was when I chose at my baptism many years ago now.

Sovereign grace or sin abounding is the original version. One of the best of the old evangelical hymns. We're now going to sing what I think is one of the best of the modern hymns.

[32:42] It reminds us that it is not I, but Christ in me. It is the vehicle of grace. So let's sing. What gift of grace?

Are you going to come and take over the clicker?