

The Gospel

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[0 : 00] how good is the gospel? That is the good news of who God is and what he's done in Jesus. How good is God? Because God is the gospel.

God is the good news. But I guess the question is, is he good news in your life? Now, we know what the answer should be, or at least the gist of it. You know, he's great. He changes everything. I wake up every morning singing psalms of joy. But is God in reality making a difference to your anxiety or your fear?

Is God in reality satisfying you, filling you with joy? Is he so good that you can't help but tell other people about him? Is he so good that you're busting to tell your non-Christian friends about Jesus because you know he's the answer to the questions that they're asking?

Again, we know the answer should be yes. But for many of us, that's not our day-to-day experience of following Jesus.

[1 : 05] We read in the New Testament that the fruit of the Spirit, that is the fruit of God's presence in our lives, is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, self-control. But then we live lives marked by fear, anxiety, worry, anger, hurry, and depression.

Why the gap? Well, I want to suggest two possible reasons. Firstly, we don't actually know the gospel that we claim to believe. Now, we know about Jesus, but we don't actually understand who he is or what he did and how that changes everything.

Or, second reason, we don't actually believe the gospel that we claim to believe. So we say we believe we've forgiven, but then when we sin, we're crushed by guilt and we feel like we can't pray or read our Bible to God until we've kind of done some good deeds to balance the ledger.

We say we believe that God's in control, but we are dominated by fear and anxiety and the apparent instability and uncertainty of our lives. The message that we carry, the centre of our mission, the message we have heard and responded to, if you're a Christian, is good news for us, but first, it's good news about God.

Which is then, because of God, good news for us, but at its core, the gospel message, the good news, is good news about God because God himself is the gospel.

[2 : 43] And so much of our Christianity, so much of our faith, so much of following Jesus and our church culture suffers because we skip what is first and most important and instead focus just on how and if the gospel is good news for me, good news for my circumstance, and we miss the goodness of a God who is the very definition of good.

We focus on the results of the gospel rather than its foundation and power. So we measure the goodness of God, we measure the goodness of following God based on the circumstances of my life rather than measuring the circumstances of my life and the goodness of them based on the immovable goodness of God's incredible character and faithfulness.

We focus on the results and miss the foundation. Now, just to be clear, there are results. The gospel works. The gospel does something in your life, but if you start there and you focus there first, you miss the power of the God who brings the results and brings the transformation, and then when you miss that power, you don't actually get the transformation.

If all you're looking for is the result and change, you miss it. What I want to do this morning is take us back to our roots, to the gospel, to what it means to believe in and follow Jesus.

If you're a Christian, this is the immovable foundation that we must never depart from. You will never graduate this.

[4 : 14] You might think, gospel, I've got this, I've heard it, I know this, but we need to hear this and hear it again because this is everything. If you're not a Christian, first off, I'm just glad you're here.

I'm glad you are in the room. I want to tell you, this is what we believe as Christians. This is the message of the gospel. This is what it means to believe, and it's yours to decide what you do with it. But I firmly believe that in the gospel, you will encounter a God who is better and more generous and more loving than you ever imagined. So let's get stuck into the passage.

We're going to open up in Luke 18, which is one of the biographies of Jesus. And in chapter 18, we find a number of parables. In fact, I think Steve opened up the parable of assistant widow last week from this same passage.

Parables are stories that Jesus tells to give us a glimpse of himself and the nature of what it is that he is doing in the world. And this short story, just a few verses, gives us the core of what it means to be a Christian and certainly the heart of the message of what you believe and preach here as a church at St. Paul's.

[5 : 23] So let me run back through this passage with you and pick out the main bits. First off, you've got two people going to pray. Two very different people, but they're both going to pray.

On one side, you've got the Pharisee. Now, just to be clear, in this story, the Pharisee is the good guy. We're so trained in hearing this that we kind of skip to the end and go, I know how this plays out, the Pharisee's bad, but actually in the story, the Pharisee is the good guy.

He's done the good things. He has a resume of goodness that he brings to this story. I mean, the Pharisees in Jesus' day were the guys who worked hard to be good.

They kept all the rules that you and I try and keep as followers of Jesus and the ones that we've given up and said they're completely unattainable. If you knew them now, you would look at them and be impressed.

On the other side, we have a tax collector. This is the bad guy in the story. Don't think employee of the ATO. Think qualified, military-sanctioned thief.

[6 : 31] In Jesus' day, tax collectors had military backing and clout to not only collect the actual taxes they were supposed to collect, but also, on top of that, whatever they wanted for themselves.

So they got rich, ripping off their neighbours and friends and countrymen. They were universally hated. Think kind of like a parking ticket inspector. Have you ever seen somebody put a parking ticket under your windscreen wiper as you got back just too late and thought, I'm so glad that they are fulfilling their duties with faithfulness.

You probably have some less spiritual thoughts at that moment. That's the tax collector. So everybody listening to this story is clear on who the good guy is and who the bad guy is and they're thinking, we know where this story is going to go.

This story is going to end well for the good guy because Jesus is supposed to be the good guy.

They expect if they're both going to pray, God's going to hear the good guy's prayers.

In fact, the moral of the story might be something like the tax collector misses out and so be good so God hears your prayers. But that's not where it goes. Jesus finishes in verse 14 there, I tell you, this man went down to his house, pointing to the tax collector, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

[7 : 58] So two people go to pray but the tax collector goes home justified and only the tax collector, not the good guy. So how do we make sense of this story?

Let me show you two things that the story teaches us. First one, we all need mercy. We all need mercy.

In 2006, which is getting to be quite a while ago, a documentary was released starring the former United States Vice President Al Gore. It chronicled his attempt to raise awareness of the dangers of global warming and the need for a change in the way that humanity lives and uses the planet. It was titled An Inconvenient Truth. There's been a sequel because no one wanted to hear that inconvenient truth. No one wanted to believe him regardless of what evidence he put out, regardless of what evidence has come since because if it was true, it meant that there would be a loss of money, a loss of lifestyle, that there would be painful change and to put it bluntly, no one could be bothered.

In the same way, at the core of the gospel message, the message of this story that Jesus shares is an inconvenient truth. Namely, that we are all sinners who deserve God's punishment.

[9 : 27] That's uncomfortable to hear. Something the Bible teaches us repeatedly is that the issue with our world is that people, all people, sin. Romans 3.23 says, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Now again, pay attention. Notice it says, all have sinned. The Pharisee, the tax collector, me, you, all have sinned.

And so even as we speak the gospel, as we go on mission to speak about Jesus to a world that doesn't want to hear that it is a sinful world in need of mercy, we must do it with humility and self-awareness that knows that that inconvenient, uncomfortable truth is true for us too.

We need mercy. All the hurt and pain and brokenness we are surrounded by and experience in our lives is the result of sin.

But what is sin? Because when the world hears Christians say something is sin, they know it's not good, but what does it actually mean? Because often people inside the church and outside the church tend to think of sin as a list of naughty things that we're not supposed to do, that we're to avoid if we want God to love us.

[10:48] And with that misconception comes the understandable offence when something is called a sin. Because it has this self-righteous be more like us vibe, don't do that thing, do what we do.

And nobody wants that. Nobody wants to be told they're not as good. Nobody wants to be told they're less than. And when we do that, sin becomes this competition, this comparison sport, which is exactly what is happening in this story between the Pharisee and the tax collector.

The Pharisee looks at the bad guy and figures, by comparison, he must be a good guy. But that's not what the Bible means when it talks about it.

It uses the word sin. In fact, the story Jesus told, you've got two guys that are clearly being set up against each other, as opposite alternatives. And if sin is merely a list of things you shouldn't do or good things you should have done, then the story makes no sense.

Because the Pharisee is the good guy who's done good things and the tax collector is the bad guy who's done bad things. But notice what the tax collector prays.

[12:03] He says, have mercy on me, a sinner. Sin is an identity marker.

Sin is a relational category. It describes your relationship to God. See, when sin enters the human story back in the beginning of the Bible, the infamous forbidden fruit, in that moment, not only are they disobeying God and a rule that he gave them, what they're saying is, God, you don't get to decide what's right and wrong, we do.

So they look at the fruit, it looks good, and so instead of listening to God, they figure, we know best, our way makes more sense than yours does and so they do what they want to do.

Now, that's not just naughty or wrong, it's actually a break in relationship. It's a rejection of God.

See, we either do what God says and enjoy all the benefits of that or we reject him and we live with the consequences. That's what sin is. It's rejecting God and his right to rule and as a result, we find ourselves alienated from him and deserving of his judgment.

[13:25] And again, that's every one of us. Not bad people out there, good people in here, all sinners, all in need of mercy.

And here's the thing, we actually know that. Whether you're a Christian or not in this room, you know it. Our world and our lives are marked by a restlessness.

So much of our division is fuelled by fear and a need for some external validation of who we are and how we live. We talk like we're independent, like we need no one, like others' opinions doesn't matter, you do you.

follow your heart. But the insecurity that we feel, the offence we feel when someone questions us doing us is evidence that the choices that we're making are not dealing with the restlessness.

Redefining right and wrong hasn't delivered the peace that it promised it would. We still clearly long for that external approval. And so sin, that is, our separation from God, our opposition to Him, is the problem.

[14:44] And when you hear the Bible say that you are a sinner, don't be offended because it's calling out a specific action in your life or a lifestyle or an orientation. It's bigger than that. When you hear Jesus tell this story, when you hear the tax collector who recognizes his identity as a sinner, as the good one, as the justified one, when the Bible says that you are a sinner, it is not saying you do things that are wrong.

It is saying you are an enemy of God in need of His mercy. Not based on your sexuality or any other number of hot-button topics, but because you reject the God who made you.

Back in the garden again, Adam and Eve didn't get in trouble for eating the fruit. They got in trouble because eating the fruit was their way of saying, God, we want your job. We want to be in charge.

We want to choose right and wrong.

And the gospel is uncomfortable and maybe even offensive, but not in the way people are usually offended. If you hear right, the gospel message is a bunch of forgiven sinners, that is sinners who have received mercy, telling a bunch of not yet forgiven sinners that they need to receive mercy as well.

And the crazy good part of the gospel message and this story is that God provides the mercy we need even though we don't deserve it. That's the whole point of this story.

[16:12] God offers mercy. So the tax collector asks for mercy and goes home justified. That is, he's declared innocent, his guilt is gone, he's forgiven, he's loved, he's brought into the family.

Why? How? Because he asks God for what he needs. If anything, this is the scandalous part of the gospel.

Not that the gospel calls you out as the one who has rejected God, but that despite that, God seeing you and knowing everything about you, knowing your deepest, darkest secrets, your hidden guilt and shame, the things you hope no one ever finds out about you, seeing all of that, knowing you've rejected him and still offers mercy and love to all who ask.

I've been following Jesus for 26 years now and this still blows my mind. I don't care if you've been a Christian for a week or for your whole life.

This is a scandal. God knows you. You need mercy. You don't deserve mercy and yet he offers mercy.

[17:34] It's even on offer for the Pharisee. I mean, God is so good and so generous that his grace is enough for anyone. For the tax collector, for the liar, for the racist, for the thief, for the murderer, for the adulterer, even for me and even for you.

The reason the Pharisee misses out on God's mercy and grace in this story, the reason anyone misses out on the mercy and grace of God in the gospel is not because they are worse but because they are unable or unwilling to recognize that they too are a sinner in need of mercy.

One of my favorite old TV shows and I'm dating myself although it's back on Netflix now is The Simpsons and there's this amazing episode of The Simpsons where Homer, the dad kind of character is, and this is classic him, he's driven by impulse, led by his stomach, he gets his arms stuck in a vending machine and a rescue crew is called in to kind of help him get his arms out and they're sitting there strategizing, trying to figure out how they can do it and then suddenly one of them realizes and asks and says, Mr. Simpson, are you still holding on to the food in the vending machine?

To which he sheepishly releases and takes his arms out. He is able to be free from his trap if he lets go of the food that is inside. This is a picture of how we engage the grace that God offers us.

We are trapped in the habit of trying to bring something to God, trying to present this resume of how good we are, how worthy we are. We bring our serving in ministry record, we bring our evidence of all the money that we've donated, kind of the good things that we've done and the result is that we miss mercy.

[19:34] Our hands are so full of what we are bringing to God that there is no room left to receive what he is offering, to receive the thing that we actually need. We feel like somehow we can contribute, we can convince God to give us mercy.

But in trying to do that, we actually stop ourselves from taking what has been provided. Receiving mercy means coming with empty hands.

In fact, worse than that, it means the only thing we bring is our sin, our failure, our worst bits and trust that his mercy is enough.

The Christian message is not first about you or me. It's about Jesus. It says that you are not good enough, you are not excited, you are not appealing enough and yet he is glorious and he is gracious and he is loving and he is merciful and he meets you exactly as you are and if you would just ask, he would give you mercy.

He would meet you as you are and offer you the security of a mercy and love that meets you at your lowest and so is sure in every circumstance and situation. the Christian message is all about Jesus.

[21:06] The cross is the picture we get. It is the moment in which Jesus takes the punishment we deserve and even as he dies, hanging there on the cross, he is praying for the very people who put him there, who crucified him.

His mercy is sufficient for everyone in every moment. His mercy is offered to anyone who asks and his love is sufficient for the worst of sinners and when he has forgiven you there is no longer any condemnation.

There is no longer a need to fear your failure. There is no longer a need to pretend that you are better than you are. There is no longer a need to come to God only when you feel like you have something to offer because that's not how he works.

He is the one who brings mercy the mercy that we need and long for is found only in Jesus and finding it in Jesus means letting go of the delusion that you can make yourself good enough. Letting go of the lie that you aren't as bad as anybody else. Hearing the truth of the gospel that you are a sinner in need of mercy and coming to Jesus empty handed not with a resume like the Pharisee but with an honest cry for help like the tax collector.

[22 : 27] I love that you guys take time each year for mission month. I love that you come back and want to hear a fresh God's call to mission locally and globally.

I love the heart of this church. I was formed by the heart of this church in my time here and I've been incredibly blessed and encouraged by your generosity as we have sought to be on mission on the Gold Coast but I want to finish our time in this passage with a warning and a call.

The risk of any talk about mission is that you walk away from this month feeling guilty into doing what you are supposed to do or you walk away from this month with a new set of things that you can take to God instead of empty hands.

You walk away priding yourself on what you do for Him. you feel a pressure to satisfy His demands on you but that is not the Gospel. In the Gospel in Jesus we meet God and we meet a God who is gracious and merciful and generous and even the call to mission is a good gift of His mercy.

Carmen expressed it just before it is something that He invites us into for our sake. it is a chance for us to be reminded to encounter afresh that His mercy is available to all and is sufficient for all.

[24 : 07] True Gospel mission whether that's as a missionary in Japan a scripture teacher in Chatswood High an engineer a teacher a nurse a full-time parent or a church planter on the Gold Coast true Gospel mission only happens as a result of and the overflow of an encounter with the mercy of God in the Gospel of Jesus.

The call to mission is a call back to the Gospel. It's a call back to God. You don't come to mission with full hands you come to mission dependent on God's mercy.

This moment this month like every moment is a call to recognize our need for mercy to confess our sin before God because He is faithful and just and sufficient to forgive and cleanse you.

The call to mission is a daily cry for mercy and grace because you and I need it as much today and tomorrow as we ever have. To not live every day every moment every breath in a posture of humble dependence on the mercy of God is to deny the Gospel.

It is to reject the mercy that God offers in His grace. And so the way forward the next step for every person in this room whether this is your first time hearing the Gospel or your millionth time hearing the Gospel the way forward the next step for you as an individual and for us as a church community is to cast ourselves on the mercy of God and find Him sufficient.

[25 : 51] It is to let go of the things that you think make you attractive to God and recognize that His love for you is enough. It is to confess again and find Him good find Him generous gracious and forgiving and satisfying because when you do you won't be able to help but speak of what you have seen and heard.

You won't be able to help but give generously you won't be able to help but serve and forgive and love because in Jesus God has done all that for you and more I started by asking you how good the gospel is how good God is in your life and wrestling with the distance that we feel between what we know should be true and what isn't ultimately the gap is there because we come to God with closed hands and stop receiving what He offers.

Jesus is enough. for your fear, your anxiety, your uncertainty but only when you come to Him in humble dependence and confession will you encounter Him as enough.

So long as you hold Him at arm's length because you're busy depending on your ability and your strength and your gifting and your resourcing and your maturity and whatever else it is that you bring He will never be enough because you're busy trusting in other things.

The call to mission is a call back to the gospel. Let me pray for us. Father, forgive us for rejecting your mercy and trying to navigate life in our own strength.

[28 : 02] Help us to see how far short our lives fall of your holiness and majesty. Forgive us for our sin and make us more like Jesus. Jesus, thank you for your death in our place, our punishment taken and the promise of your irreversible forgiveness and sufficient mercy.

Thank you for your resurrection. Please take our guilt and our burdens and fill us with the joy of your presence and power. God, we ask this in the name of your precious Son, our Savior Jesus.
Amen.