

God's world – Session 5

As long as it is called 'Today'

Responding to the Gospel of God

Mostly, what we do with news, the kinds of things we see on TV and read in newspapers, is hear it, perhaps mentally file it, but mostly forget it. Rarely does it make a significant impact on our lives. It adds to our store of knowledge, but not much more. This is especially the case as the information age gathers more and more pace, with a virtually unlimited quantity of 'news' accessible at the press of a keystroke. One contemporary commentator has suggested that this information overload increasingly drives us to be LIAR's – that is, people who have a Low Information to Action Ratio! There is another term, 'compassion fatigue' that captures something of the burnout we can feel in light of the barrage of information.

And there is a danger that the 'good news', the Christian gospel, can have the same effect for us – that we understand the facts about Jesus, what he has done and will do, and his place in God's purposes for the world and humanity, and simply leave it at that. But is it possible to really grasp the Christian gospel, and be un-changed? The answer to that really lies in the nature of the Christian message itself, and especially how it differs from all other religions.

Most religions really fall into the category of a philosophy. That is, they are theories about the way life is, and therefore the way we should live if we want to live well. For the most part, they consist of collections of suggested timeless truths, such as 'desire' being the cause of suffering, or 'karma' as the way to understand the things that happen in our lives. Now, the fact that most religion is a form of philosophy is not a big deal in itself – it's just that the kinds of reasons that can be given in support of a particular philosophy are often hard to decide about one way or the other.

But it's at precisely this point that Christianity is so very different from all other religions. Christianity falls under the category, not of philosophy, but of history. That is, it is not primarily about ideas, which need to be argued about, but about events that need to be heard about. It is for this reason that Christianity has often been described as 'an historical religion'. The Christian message really is an announcement; that is, it reports what is best described as an achievement, something that has been done in a specific time and place, which was witnessed by specific people who announced the things that had happened.

You can see how different this is from a philosophy, or a set of timeless truths – philosophy and timeless truths don't in themselves do anything, they seek to educate people so that they will do something. There is no achievement internal to timeless truths, they leave the achievement for the devotees of the truths or philosophy.

Christianity on the other hand, is all about the fact that God himself has done what we couldn't do. That in the realm of objective history, God entered our world in the person of his Son Jesus and did the job. And there is all the difference in the world between a religion which fundamentally says 'Do!', and Christianity which fundamentally says, 'Done!'

Read Acts 2.22-37.

Acts 2:22 "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know — 23 this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. 24 But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

25 For David says concerning him, 'I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; 26 therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope. 27 For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. 28 You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.' 29 "Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30 Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. 31 Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.' 32 This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. 33 Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. 34 For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, 35 until I make your enemies your footstool.'" 36 Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?"

What is the message that Peter announces?

Why do the people call out in v.37 'Brothers, what shall we do?'

This understanding of the Christian message as the announcement of an historical achievement rather than a suggestion of a philosophical truth is reflected in the term 'gospel'. The word itself is so familiar, even in the media, that we can sometimes miss its significance. What's interesting is that, although now it's basically a religious word, its original meaning wasn't specifically religious at all. In fact, in the Greek world where it was originally used, it was (as historian Tom Wright puts it), "a technical term for 'news of victory'. More specifically, it referred to the announcement

of the birth or accession by an emperor ... the coming of a new ruler meant the promise of peace, a new start for the world."

When the Old Testament (originally written in Hebrew) was translated into Greek, there were some key sections which used this word for 'gospel'. One of the highlights of the Old Testament is the book of Isaiah, which points forward to a time when God will rescue his people from the terrible exile into which they had been taken, and restore things to the way they should be. So, for example, in Isaiah 40.9 we read:

'Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings [literally 'O Zion, gosseller']; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings [literally, 'O Jerusalem, gosseller'], lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"'

and again in Isaiah 52.7:

'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger [literally 'gosseller'] who announces peace, who brings good news [literally 'gossels'], who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."'

Often, the word for 'gospel' is translated as 'good news' (as in the Good News Bible), but that is really far too thin. What is clear from these passages is that it is not simply any old good news that is in view, but the quite specific good news that God is coming to rescue his people, to save them from, and defeat, their enemies, and establish his reign. In other words, the 'gospel' is about God's great victory.

And that is precisely what we have seen. The gospel is the announcement of the kingdom of God. Though there has been a catastrophic coup by Evil in God's good world, which we humans opened the door to and in which we have willingly participated, God has remained committed to his world. In the person of his Son Jesus who is Lord, he has and is defeating evil, and is establishing his reign, restoring life and peace to the world. And the point is, this gospel is a matter of history, the historical facts of the death and resurrection of Jesus, not of philosophy.

What implication does the announcement of these historical facts have for us today? Well, imagine you are in one of those countries that seems to regularly suffer the crisis of a military coup. One or more of the high ranking officers in the army has overthrown the proper authorities and established his own military government. It is a harsh dictatorship, and the effects of it are felt even by you and your family, in a village far away from where the action has taken place in the city. Many parts of your life are impacted - you pay more taxes, you have to comply with a strict curfew, you are required to swear loyalty to the new regime and so on. But then some 'good news' (you might even call it a 'gospel'!) comes through - the leaders of the coup have been overthrown, and rightful authority has been restored. What would your response be to that announcement? The only thing that makes sense to do, in light of the achievement by the rescuers, is to recognise what has happened, give thanks for it and act accordingly - that you have been freed, to rejoice that the coup has been put down, and so you no longer need to keep doing the things that were

imposed by the rebel government. Of course, you'd want to make sure of your facts, and be confident that you weren't just hearing the hopeful rumours of ill-informed gossip. But, what's clear is that there's no particular philosophy at stake here – once you had confirmed that it was true, you'd simply acknowledge the facts, rejoice in them, and re-order your life around the rightful government with proper loyalty. The crazy thing to do would be to stay acting as if nothing had changed, and keep sending your oppressive taxes away and obeying the no-longer enforced curfew!

Well, it's a bit like that with the gospel of Jesus Christ. A great rescue has taken place, the most important victory ever has been achieved, the victory over death. There is a new king in town, a new Lord, whose authority is rightful, full of goodness and justice. It is a rightful authority because it is the authority of the one who made us for life and peace, and who knows how life is best lived. The only thing that makes sense now is to recognise this fact and act accordingly, to re-order your life around this one who is Lord. In particular, this means obeying God's command to turn away from sin and Evil and turn to God, entrusting yourself to the saving authority of his Son Jesus and seeking mercy from him; and therefore receiving from him the gifts that he gives, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, holding on to the hope of eternal life.

Of course, the command to turn the orientation of your life around, and the gifts that Jesus gives are directly related to the kind of authority that Jesus has. Because the authority of Jesus is the authority of God, and not just of government, it impacts on literally every area and aspect of life. As Lord, Jesus has authority both to command obedience and to judge disobedience. As the Lord who has defeated sin and Evil, he has authority to forgive sins, including the authority to define what sin is in the first place. As the Lord who has triumphed over death in his resurrection, he has authority to give the gift of new life.

The Lord commands

Most of us are not terribly good at receiving commands. Who hasn't had the experience of being at the mercy of an official or bureaucrat with far too much power in one specific sphere of influence, and finding yourself in a losing battle of wills? Or being under the authority of a boss who tells you what you know perfectly well how to do, and that in fact you could do better than the boss anyway? Or perhaps most commonly of all, we hate those commanding signs on the side of the road with a number inside a circle – they seem so ridiculously small, and we are sure that we can drive in complete safety at a far higher speed!?

I suspect that our squirming when we are commanded is at least partly because we are rarely convinced of the motives of those who issue commands to us. We wonder whether the command is more for their own good than for ours! But what if there was no doubt that the commands were good because the one who was doing the commanding was utterly good? What if we could be sure that in obeying the commands, we were securing our lives, rather than giving life up? What if it was clear that obedience to the commands was the best thing that you could ever do?

Fill out the table by describing how the authors describe the right response to the reality that Jesus is Lord?

Passage	How should we respond?
<p>Acts 26.15–18</p> <p><u>Acts 26.15</u> [This is halfway through a speech that the Apostle Paul is making, describing his encounter with the resurrected Jesus] I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The Lord answered, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. <u>16</u> But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. <u>17</u> I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles — to whom I am sending you <u>18</u> to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’</p>	
<p>Philippians 2.9–11</p> <p><u>Phil. 2:9</u> Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, <u>10</u> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <u>11</u> and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.</p>	
<p>1 Thessalonians 1.8–10</p> <p><u>1 Thessalonians 1.8</u> For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. <u>9</u> For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, <u>10</u> and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead — Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.</p>	

Because Jesus’ Lordship is a victory over Evil, as we have seen in previous chapters, his command is a command to turn from Evil.

This is hardly an unreasonable, or even undesirable thing! Evil has a terrible way of turning on it’s servants, trapping them in deeper and deeper mess. Selfishness simply breeds more and more selfishness; a lie, once begun, often snowballs into more and more lies. To turn from these things, selfishness and deceit and hatefulness and violence, is actually the best thing that you can possibly

do! In that people have aligned themselves with Evil, so they need to hear the Lord's command to repent from Evil; that is, to turn from this alignment, and realign themselves to the will and ways of God.

This turning away from sin and Evil is first and foremost a change of loyalty. Remember how we saw that the basic alternatives to God for the fundamental orientation of our lives are ourselves (called pride) or some other object or cause (called idolatry). To turn away from sin is to set our wills and the direction of our hearts no longer towards pride or idolatry. Of course, this is not just a once for all turning, a single act which is then unrelated to the rest of life. Although, it will be a decisive and defining point, this turning will include an ongoing commitment to put away from you those decisions, behaviours, patterns and habits which are consistent with and give expression to pride or idolatry, and instead to walk in the footsteps of Christ.

Further, as there is a command to 'turn away', so there is always a command to 'turn to', a turning to God in the name (that is the authority) of Jesus, and seek his mercy. In one sense it is a strange thing to command people to seek mercy - and yet, God's commands are always full of grace. We seek mercy because we have sinned, and mercy is our greatest need. But there is something more than just pragmatics at stake here - turning to God is not only the most needful thing, it is also the right thing. He is the source of our life; he is destiny of the universe; it is simply the right thing to have God at the center of life!

Here is the right place for understanding living a good, moral life. It's astonishing how often people misunderstand this. So often people say that because they have lived a good life, perhaps following the 10 commandments, therefore they are right with God. But this puts the cart before the horse, and result is a spiritual train wreck! This approach leads straight to pride ('I'm good enough for God, why wouldn't I be'); but even worse, it renders the death of Jesus nothing more than a tragic irrelevance, or at best some kind of foolish example. No, the order or events is all important - first we find mercy in Christ; then, as we have turned to Christ, so we live our lives walking in his footsteps.

In this way, the truth is full of grace. On the one hand, God reaches out to us even when we have no interest in him; he is faithful to his creation even when we are faithless to him. And his love and salvation are in no way a product of our goodness or worthiness, in fact quite the opposite. On the other hand, since being a Christian is all about taking oneself or any other project out of the center, and putting God in the center, that new fundamental loyalty will spill over into every aspect of life. No part will be untouched - our character as well as our decisions; our thoughts as well as our deeds and words; the way we use our time, money and possessions; the way we approach people who are kind to us, as well as the way we approach people who hurt us.

Look at how the Apostle Paul put it in one of his letters, to the Colossian Christians:

Col. 3:5 Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. 7 These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. 8 But now you must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices 10 and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. 11 In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This is a thrilling vision of what it is to be a turned-around person. God at the center, and self in the position of service, means that life is lived at its best and purest. Notice the commands to put off those things that are destructive of love – sexual immorality, and the thing which gives birth to it, lustful passion; but also anger, in both its physical and violent expressions, and its verbal and psychological expressions. And especially that thing which is most corrosive of love – slipperiness with the truth!

And at the same time, there is the command to put on those virtues and behaviours which are in harmony with the character of God – a basic gentleness and care in dealing with others; a willingness to get past the small things (forbearance) and the big things (forgiveness) that are done to us and which hurt us. To surround every aspect of life with love, because above all things God is love. But of course, this is never divorced from truth, since as love, God is also truth, and so the word of Christ, preserved for us in the Scriptures and the apostolic testimony, are to be the strong foundation for our lives in God. And in living this way, every moment is dignified, every conversation, every interaction, every thought and word and deed, can be done in the name of the Lord Jesus – that is, done in the way that he would do it, done to faithfully reflect the way he has dealt with us!

Another thing. It's very important to see that this life of obedience to the command of Christ is lived out in the context of the Christian community. And that means church.

Again, we need to be careful to get this right. Going to church services, simply turning up on a Sunday to participate in a public ritual, doesn't make a person a Christian. The Christian life is lived personally, in that each person needs to hear the call of the Lord Jesus to turn his or her life around, and respond for themselves; no one else can do that for them.

But personally does not mean privately. One of the primary images for God in the Bible is that of Father - this is how Jesus taught his disciples to speak to God - "Our Father in heaven". The thing is, if we each have God as our heavenly Father, that makes us brothers and sisters to each other, siblings by adoption. And in a sense, that's the case whether we like it or not. To be brought into close and right relationship with God is to be brought into close and right relationship with other Christians, and that needs to find expression by committed involvement in a Christian community, that is, in a church. In other words, the Christian life is personal but not individualistic. But again, the order is important - it's not that being part of a church makes you a Christian; rather, being a Christian means that you will be part of a church!

One final thing. This life of putting away that which is destructive of human fulfilment and community, and cultivating those virtues and habits which promote life and love is not to be inward looking. The Apostle Paul says in his letter to the churches of Galatia: "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith". In other words, although the Christian life is focussed on the church, it is not limited to the church. Here is the basis for the almost limitless works of social welfare, compassion and philanthropy that have characterised Christians throughout the ages.

This is the rich, full life of repentance - a decisive turning around, which results in an entire life turned around. But the loving Lordship of Jesus is even better than this, for just as the Lord commands, so he also gives.

The Lord gives

God's way with us is always to give. He has given us his only Son, the one in whom sin and death have been defeated. Even his command to turn from sin and turn towards him is a gift, since it is for our life and well being. But this is not the end of the gifts of God. Rather than issue instructions and simply leave us to see how we go, God adds to his gracious commands even the strength to obey them and the sure and confident hope that when Christ returns we will be perfected in a way that we only dimly imagine now.

What gifts are given to those who obey God's command to turn from Evil and seek mercy in Jesus?

Passage	How should we respond?
<p>Acts 2.37–39</p> <p><u>Acts 2:37</u> Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” <u>38</u> Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <u>39</u> For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”</p>	
<p>Acts 5.29–32</p> <p><u>Acts 5.29</u> But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. <u>30</u> The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. <u>31</u> God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. <u>32</u> And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”</p>	
<p>Ephesians 1.3–13</p> <p><u>Eph. 1:3</u> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <u>4</u> just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. <u>5</u> He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, <u>6</u> to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. <u>7</u> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace <u>8</u> that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight <u>9</u> he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, <u>10</u> as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. <u>11</u> In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, <u>12</u> so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. <u>13</u> In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;</p>	

The first gift that Jesus gives is the forgiveness for our involvement in evil, for our sins. Just as in Dark Days we bought in to evil, God offers us forgiveness in Jesus. Forgiveness for our wrong, from the guilt we bear from aligning ourselves with evil. This is the free gift of God, as forgiveness is always free, an act of grace. It's interesting that people are often aware of their need for forgiveness, but seek it in the wrong place. It's common enough to hear someone speaking of 'forgiving myself', and perhaps finding that hard to do. In one sense, what they say is fair enough. But more deeply, we can understand that if that's what they really mean, then it constitutes a transparent example of pride. In other words, since they have replaced God with themselves at the center of their lives, it makes sense that the forgiveness they seek should be their own. But our sins, even when they hurt other people, are first and foremost against God, in that we have displaced him as Lord of our lives. And therefore it is from him that we need forgiveness. The gracious promise of God is that that gift of forgiveness is available to you in Jesus.

The second gift is like the first: the gift of the Holy Spirit, the very presence and power of God at work in our lives. God does not and will not simply abandon his re-created people to their own best efforts, but rather grants to those who believe the gift of his own power in their lives. Sometimes this takes very dramatic form. I have seen people leave their substance abuse, or their immoral relationship in a single moment, freed by the power of God. But more often, the work of the Spirit in the life of the Christian is much plainer, simply empowering the believer to keep cultivating that character and making those decisions which reflect the character and priorities of Jesus, in all the ordinary business of life. But the fact that it is undramatic ought not to trick us into thinking it is any less impressive. A life turned over to the consistent pattern of Christ is a miraculous thing. One remarkable way that the New Testament speaks about this is to draw a link between the power that God grants to his people to live for him, and the immeasurable greatness of God's power, and in particular the same power with which he raised Jesus from the dead. And of course, that makes sense, since it is nothing short of a raised-from-death life that God invites us into. In the First Days, God's good intention for humanity was to enjoy the world, living in thankful obedience and trust. Through the Holy Spirit, God empowers his people to live as he intended. It won't be a perfect correspondence to Christ; but it will be real.

These two gifts are for right here and right now; the third promise is for the future, and gives us hope here and now, especially when the awful reality of this present evil age presses itself upon us. That promise is that we ourselves will be raised from the dead, just as our Lord has been. We saw previously how the resurrected Jesus is referred to as the 'firstfruits', and the way that the fact that he has gone ahead is the guarantee that we will follow him in resurrection. It is one of those key moments of adult maturity to really grasp for the first time that I am mortal, and to face the reality of my own death. With this promise of Jesus, backed by his own resurrection experience, we can look death square in the eye, and know that connected to Jesus, death will not be the last word hanging over us. The last word, or rather the first word of what Jesus called eternal life, will be from Jesus, our Lord and Saviour - "well done, good and faithful servant!"

So what?

We have come on a long journey!

We have visited the heights of God's glorious intention for his creation, to be a place of life and peace. We have plumbed the depths of Evil, the rejection of God, and of human participation in it so that each one of us stands as both a guilty perpetrator as well as a helpless victim, above all things in need of a Saviour. We have exulted in the breadth of God's loving grace for his sin-stained world, and seen how Jesus is so much more than a teacher, an example, a guru - he is the Son of God, the crucified and risen One, the Saviour we so desperately need. We have seen the length of God's patience, that he fixedly intends to finish the job that he has begun, to put all things right and to establish the universe again under his loving and righteous rule. And in this chapter we have seen that the one thing that is impossible having seen all this is to be unchanged by it. The only reasonable response is to do as Jesus instructed - to repent, turn your life around so that Jesus is at the center, he is the one who fills your frame of reference, you march to the beat of his drum. And to believe, to entrust yourself, your future, your conscience, your values and your soul to him, to be led and guided by the Master, who knows all there is to know about life and death, from first hand and divine experience!

If the question is 'So what?', the answer is clear.

Will you become a Christian, pray to God the Father now and ask for the gifts he gives in his Son, Jesus?

We might summarise the key ideas from the Bible on the challenge of 'Today' like this:

Therefore, today is a day of hope...

a. Jesus

- as Lord, has authority to forgive and give new life

b. All commanded

- to turn from Evil
- to seek God's mercy in Jesus

c. God's gifts

- forgiveness for involvement with evil
- the Holy Spirit to strengthen you for a life of thankful obedience to Jesus as Lord
- a resurrection like Jesus' on the last day