

October 28, 2018
When the Jailhouse Rocks (with Good News)
Acts 16:16-34

Because we know Jesus, we want our friends, our family members, our neighbours, our colleagues to know Jesus as their Saviour – to become Christians. And we try, by our gracious words, consistent lifestyles, and prayers to make a difference. But what is it we are trying to communicate? What is the “gospel”? What is the “good news”?

Karl Barth, one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century (and author of many books hundreds or even thousands of pages long) was visiting the University of Chicago. He was asked, *“Dr. Barth, what is the most profound truth you have learned in your studies?”* Without hesitation he replied, *“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”* That’s the good news right there – *“Jesus loves me.” “Jesus loves you”* – three words say it all.

There is nothing we can do to make God love us LESS

During a conference on comparative religions, leading experts debated what, if any belief was unique to Christianity. They began eliminating possibilities. Other religions had versions of gods appearing in human form. Other religions believed in versions of life after death. The story goes that CS Lewis wandered in, *“What’s the rumpus about?”* When he heard their dilemma, Lewis responded, *“Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”* Grace is simply God’s love, free of charge, no strings attached. Grace is the fact Jesus loves you.

That, very simply is the “good news” or the “gospel” which we share with people. Jesus loves them. He loves them unconditionally. He forgives them. It’s that simple. That is the message Paul conveyed to the jailer (Acts 16:31).

It is nice to say that God loves us, but then He doesn’t know us very well, does He? That’s what you might be thinking. That may have been what the jailer was thinking. Jailers in those days were not known for being the most kind and compassionate sort of people. They were rough, tough, and nasty. There were probably things in his past that he wondered about. People whom he would never have the chance to make things right with. Things too terrible to name. Paul’s message? Jesus loves even you.

Jesus tells a story about a prodigal son (Luke 15:1-2, 11-32). Notice the context – Jesus is with rather despicable people, not unlike this jailer (jailers were right up there with sinners and tax collectors as among the most despised of people.). And Jesus tells a wonderful story about a father’s mercy and love – God’s “grace” – his complete, unconditional love for all people.

The “prodigal son” is a great story as it stands. But Philip Yancey describes how, when

this story was told to Lebanese people by a missionary, Middle Eastern folks were even more moved by it. In their culture, to ask for your inheritance early, says to your father, "I wish you were dead." It was a horrible insult. Then, at the end, when the father sees the son, and *"filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him"* – well. In the Middle East men of stature never run, they walk slowly, with dignity. This father gave up his self-respect and *ran*. This son is treated mercifully, not as he deserved. It was an unthinkable, profound act of love and grace. The message? Jesus loves even the prodigal.

When Jesus is on the cross, *"One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, "So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you're at it." But the other criminal protested, "Don't you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn't done anything wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom"* (Luke 23:39-43). This was not just a petty thief. To warrant crucifixion he had to have been a notorious criminal. Perhaps a murderer. Jesus knew the man had "come to faith" out of plain fear. This man never studied the Bible. He would never attend synagogue or church. He would never make amends to those he had wronged. Yet the love of God reaches out to him and Jesus says, *"Today you will be with me in paradise."* Jesus loves even this man.

Paul, speaking to the jailer, personally knew all about God's grace. It was Paul who was, in part, responsible for the murder of Stephen. It was Paul who was responsible for Christians being beaten, thrown into prison, or worse.

Listen to Paul: *"I used to scoff at the name of Christ. I hunted down his people, harming them in every way I could. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. Oh, how kind and gracious the Lord was. He filled me completely with faith and the love of Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – and I was the worst of them all. But that is why God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life"* (1 Timothy 1:13-17). Jesus loves even Paul.

Paul's message to the jailer in Philippi – our message to the world around us – is that God loves us – each one of us – absolutely and completely, no matter what our past. Is there something you think keeps you from God's love? Something you think God cannot forgive? Is there someone whom you would love to talk to, to ask for their forgiveness, but that just isn't possible? God specializes in those kinds of situations. He has for thousands of years. The good news is that God loves you and does forgive you.

There is nothing we can do to make God love us MORE

There is something fundamental in human nature that believes we get what we deserve.

We work hard; we should get paid better. The better we are, the more God should love us. There is another brother in the prodigal son story. An older brother, who stays faithful and true to his father. At the end of the day, he should get everything – his just desserts – right? The younger brother should be cast out as the disgrace and reprobate that he is, right? He shouldn't get another cent. One pastor retold the story just this way: the older son gets it all and the younger son gets nothing. A lady in his congregation shouted, *"That's the way it should have ended."* But that isn't the way Jesus tells the story, is it? Because the parable is about grace. It's about God's love not our human sense of right and wrong.

In a similar way, Jesus tells a parable of some workers and some paycheques (Matthew 20:1-16). Different people start work at different times of the day, but all get paid the same no matter when they start. It isn't "fair." The other workers are quite put out by the wages these laggards receive. But the workers who worked all day got their just promised pay. They suffered no hardship. They were just grumpy the late-comers received grace.

Jesus' story doesn't make economic sense. It wasn't supposed to. It is a parable about God's grace not human nature. Grace is not about finishing first or last. It is not about counting how many good things we do. It is not about earning brownie points. Grace is about receiving God's free and unconditional love. Anyone is welcome, anytime.

The good news of God's love is so incredibly simple it almost scandalizes us. We hear of deathbed conversions – or worse yet, death row conversions, and our sense of right and wrong cannot accept that. It's not fair.

It doesn't seem "fair" that people can come to faith at the end. Part of our self-righteous indignation may come from a suspicion they've been having all the fun while we've been faithful and good. In fact, we have to ask ourselves if those who spent a lifetime without Jesus, only to come to faith at the end, really had much of a life at all compared to those of us who have known Jesus for decades. The younger son was not having a great time: he was miserable and desperate. The men waiting all day to be hired were not having a good time: they were stressing about how they would keep their families from starving to death. They were miserable and desperate. I'm convinced those of us who come to faith early are the truly blessed ones.

God isn't "fair" – praise the Lord. Or who among us has a hope? None of us is really "good enough" for God. All of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. By God's grace, through faith, none of us gets what we deserve.

The jailer got that. And, in response, he followed Jesus' command to be baptized. Baptism is our glad response to God's grace. Baptism is our way of publicly sharing the reality of the new life we have found in Jesus.

The good news is simply this: "Jesus loves you."

Martin Luther, the great reformer, was originally a Catholic priest. He did all the right things to be religious. He prayed. He studied. He fasted. He did all the right religious things. He was a "good" person. Being a "good" person made him right with God, right? Then he read Romans 1:17: "*The righteous will live by faith.*" It wasn't his efforts, his "goodness," or his religious activities that were going to save him. It was the gift of God's grace – free of charge, no strings attached.

We can add verse after verse of Scripture which emphasize that God loves us, and His love is a love of grace – free, no strings attached, undeserved: "*Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved ... For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.*" (Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9)

It seems too simple. We assume there must be strings attached. We WANT strings attached. We're not totally sure what they all are (probably keeping the ten commandments, at least). And probably the person must be baptized (yes, they should be, but it is not essential to salvation). The person needs to change their lifestyle (yes, they should, but it is not essential to salvation). The person needs to make amends for their sins (yes, they may be convicted to and should, but it is not essential to salvation). The person needs to be part of a church, to grow, be encouraged, and share fellowship (yes, they should, but it is not essential to salvation).

These are NOT the good news. In fact sometimes we turn the good news into bad news with all the rules and regulations we add to it. There are people who give the impression that the good news is not good at all.

The good news IS simply this: Jesus loves you. Then, after we come faith, God's Spirit changes us. That life transformation comes after we receive His grace, it's not a precondition for it. We come to faith, we choose obedience and baptism, we grow in our faith in community with other believers. Those are part of our response, not a precondition.

God loves you. That's the good news. God loves _____ (fill in the blank with someone in your life who needs Jesus).

Let's pray, that we might be able to share with that person the good news.

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