

What is the Gospel? - by Rev. Robert Griffith

Today is Pentecost Sunday - the day in the Christian calendar where millions of believers across the world turn their attention to that first day of Pentecost when the Church as we know it was born. That was the day when the miraculous birth, exemplary life, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ all made sense and took on its full meaning in the Church He promised to build. That was the day when Peter declared to the people, *"God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."* (Acts 2:36). That was the day when the disciples of Christ received power from on high to fulfil the mission of Christ; the day when the Gospel was released into the world to spread like a fire to every community in every nation – a fire which still burns today.

The Gospel was very clear to those first disciples. Jesus had taught them well and the Holy Spirit continued teaching them as the mission of Christ spread worldwide. There were no Bible colleges back then; no theological degrees; no written qualifications required before you preached and ministered in Christ's name. The Holy Spirit was the One Who guided everyone into the Truth and opened their heart to this Gospel, this good news in Jesus Christ. 'Christ crucified' was the Gospel. The cross of Christ defined this Church which bore His name and all over the world that Gospel produced great fruit as men, women and young people embraced its life-changing truth and power. Those early believers lived and died by Paul's proclamation in Romans 1:16, *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."*

Sadly, when we fast-forward over 2,000 years and look at that same Church which was birthed on that amazing day, the simplicity, the clarity and the power of this gospel has been overshadowed, undermined, diluted, redefined or completely lost in so many parts of the Church. It seems that as we became 'enlightened' in this modern era, we complicated what was simple, ignored what was inconvenient and questioned what is true. Tragically, I believe many people *are* now 'ashamed' of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ and the decline in the Church in our nation is the fruit of that shame.

So as we're reminded of that day when the Gospel was first released into the world, what better time to ask the Spirit of Pentecost to teach us once again as we answer the most important question facing the Church today: *What is the Gospel?*

The Gospel begins with God. The whole problem facing humanity from the very beginning, comes back to the nature of God. Now I need to warn you here, because I am about to share with you the most terrifying and confronting truth in all of Scripture. It is a truth which is stated over and over again and yet we don't realise how terrifying it is. Are you ready? The most terrifying and confronting truth in all of Scripture is this: God is good. Now that's not what you expected, is it? Why is that truth so confronting? What's so terrifying about God being good? Well, the answer is simple. It's terrifying to know that God is good, because we are not. If we are ever going to understand the Gospel, the good news, we must first understand the bad news and that is, God is good, but we are not.

God is good because He is holy. Because God is holy, He is just. Because God is just He cannot do anything other than condemn that which is unholy ... and that includes us. So the problem for God from almost the beginning of humanity, is that He is good and we are not. God cannot violate His attributes. He cannot do something that contradicts Who He is. God is a righteous God, and that is a good thing. We certainly would not want an evil God to be in charge of the universe, would we? It is a profoundly good thing that God is good, righteous, pure, holy and just.

However, herein lies a huge problem for God. If God is just, then what does He do with us? What does a good God do with sinners like us? Yes, politically incorrect as it may be to suggest such a thing today, we *are* sinners. We've sinned against God; we've sinned against each other; we've sinned against creation; we are sinners by nature. All of creation calls for our condemnation.

So if this holy, pure, righteous God is truly just, then what does He do with us? Think about this. Sometimes we just need to be logical, before we can be theological. If a just God simply pardons the wicked, He is no longer just. What do you call a judge who sweeps your crime under a rug? Righteous? No, he is corrupt! In the same way, if a holy God calls the wicked to Himself to have fellowship with Him, then He's not a holy God. Holiness and sin cannot occupy the same space.

The greatest question running through the whole Bible and all of human history, is this: how can a just God pardon wicked men and women and still be just? How can a holy God call unholy sinners into fellowship with Himself for eternity and remain holy? The answer is found in the cross of Jesus Christ. In that old rugged cross, we see this unique revelation of the fullness of God's attributes. God is just so He must condemn sin - but God is also love. So in order to satisfy His justice, God becomes a man and does what none of us could ever do – He lives a perfect, sinless life as a man, and then goes to the cross.

On that cross, the sins of the whole world were all cast upon Him and the justice of God, the full wrath of God that we deserve, came down upon one man, Jesus Christ, God's Son and our Saviour. The exact measure that was required to fully satisfy the justice of God, was brought against Jesus ... and as He took His final few breaths as a man, Jesus declared, "*It is finished.*" That means Jesus has done *all* that was needed to pay the price for *all* sin – past, present and future.

If that truth does not make your spirit explode with gratitude and worship, then you need to check your pulse! As Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians years later, at that very moment on the cross, this Jesus Who knew no sin, willingly 'became' sin. At that moment, He endured the pain, the agony and the torture of seeing His Father, with Whom and in Whom He had dwelled for eternity, turn His back on His only son, as He turned His back on sin. That separation from God which we deserved, was experienced fully by Jesus.

This is so important for us to understand. All those Easter sermons you've heard about the agony of the crucifixion and the torture Jesus endured for us on Calvary – they all miss the real point of the cross! When Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane pleading with God to take this cup from Him, do you think He was worried about the lashes He was about to feel on His back; the crown of thorns they would jam onto His head or the agony of a crucifixion? The martyrs who followed Him all went to *their* crosses singing hymns of triumph! No, Jesus was not agonising over being beaten up and murdered by the Romans. Jesus was crushed by the expectation that His Father would turn away from Him as He 'became sin' for us. It was the weight of your sin and mine and being separated from His Father which crushed Jesus to death, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

The agony of the cross was deeply personal for Jesus and gut-wrenchingly painful as the prophecy of Isaiah 53 was finally fulfilled, a prophesy which said, "*It was the Lord's will to crush Him.*" There was no other way to secure your salvation and mine. The Bible says the wages of sin is death - so *Jesus* died, on *our* behalf – in *our* place. Then on the third day He sealed His atoning sacrifice for all humankind by rising from the dead, conquering sin, death and Satan, once and for all time. Now He is seated at the right hand of God and there's no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He is the **ONLY** way and the **ONLY** truth and the **ONLY** life which can rescue us from condemnation and fully reconcile us to our God for eternity. There is one God and one Mediator between us and God: that is Jesus Christ.

So how should we respond to this amazing Gospel? Like those listening to Peter on the Day of Pentecost, we too should be cut to the heart when we realise what Jesus did to secure our salvation and we too should ask, *“So what shall we do?”* The answer today is the same as it was back then: REPENT and BELIEVE THE GOSPEL. God will do the rest. It's that simple.

Now there's a lot of confusion about the word *repent* today, so let me try and explain what it means. The Greek word which is translated *repent* simply means 'to change our mind.' But we need to understand that in the culture in which the Bible was written, the 'mind' was something very different to what we might understand the mind to be in our modern western culture. In our culture, to change our mind is pretty superficial in most circumstances. For example, tonight I was going to have roast chicken for dinner, but now I've decided to have roast lamb instead. I changed my mind. But *that* is certainly not repentance. In the Bible our 'mind' refers to the mind *and* the heart; the very control centre of our whole being. It's the control centre of our will, our emotions, our intellect and our very thoughts.

So when Paul wrote to the Roman Christians and pleaded with them to be transformed by the renewing of their mind (Romans 12:2), he was talking about a complete transformation of their whole way of thinking, believing and living. *That's* what it means to *repent*. So in the face of this amazing revelation of God in the Gospel, we cry out to Him for mercy and He gives us the gift of repentance. That's right, even repentance is not something we can do on our own. It is a gift from God. When writing to Timothy, Paul spoke about God *“granting His people repentance leading them to the knowledge of the truth.”* (2 Timothy 2:25)

Perhaps the most famous parable Jesus told was the parable of the Prodigal Son. It is a simple story about the human condition and how we are reconciled to God, our heavenly Father. However, 99% of the time I have heard people preach or teach on this parable, they have totally missed the mark! I'm sure you have heard it said that this son *repented* of his sinful life when he was on his face in a pig pen eating the scraps from the ground. He woke up to himself, realised he was a sinner, so he repented and returned to his father. No he didn't. Read the story again! He did no such thing. He thought about his father's servants eating a wholesome meal and sleeping in what used to be *his* home and enjoying a better life than him and so he decided to go home and strike a deal with dear old dad to *employ* him as a *servant*. He would tell dad he was sorry for being a bad boy and ask if he could please treat him as a servant, *not a son*, so he didn't have to eat pig scraps anymore!

So home he goes ... *but* ... before he could even open his mouth and insult his father with such a proposition, his loving dad ran to him, embraced him, loved him, forgave him, poured grace into his life and immediately reinstated him as a son and threw a party to celebrate! *At that* point, his son would have been overwhelmed by repentance! His whole life would have been transformed by the love of his father! That is not the parable of the prodigal son. That is the parable of the forgiving Father and *that's* the gospel in a nutshell. *Repentance is the first fruit of the grace of God in your life.* Repentance is what God gives to you freely when He gives Himself to you freely!

Let me give you the most profound example I know of repentance. Back when the Apostle Paul was still Saul the persecutor, he was sent to Damascus to capture Christians and probably have some of them killed. Now when he left for Damascus that day Paul thought that Jesus of Nazareth was the greatest blasphemer ever to walk the earth. Paul also thought that these followers of Jesus, these Christians, were a terrible sect and they ought to be destroyed. That's what Paul thought and therefore it permeated his intellect, his emotions, his will and it defined his entire purpose in life. But on the road to Damascus that day, Paul had an encounter with the resurrected Christ - he ran head first into the Gospel. At that point his whole thinking changed.

His entire reality proved to be wrong. Everything he was taught and was teaching others was exposed in the light of the risen Christ before him. His entire concept of God was wrong and so the first fruit of this encounter with the living God, in Christ, was repentance. God granted Paul the gift of repentance and he then began to think very differently. This was no superficial change of mind. This was a name-changing, life-changing, purpose-transforming event in Paul's life and he was never the same again. The persecutor became the persecuted. As this one man repented, he had more impact on the spread of the Gospel than all the other Apostles combined. This change of mind, heart, soul and life-mission resulted in Paul writing almost half the New Testament!

Now we are not Paul, but guess what? ... Paul's repentance is the same repentance God will grant to *us*, as He leads *us* to the knowledge of the truth. To repent, is to realise that your entire view of reality was wrong and at that point the Holy Spirit will open your eyes to see and open your heart to submit to the reality of Who God is; Who Jesus is; what He's done for you; who you are because of Jesus and why you are still on this planet.

So my question is, have you repented? Have you been so overwhelmed by the love and grace of your Heavenly Father that you have changed your mind about God? Has that change of mind led to a change in your intellect ... a change of your will ... a change in your emotions ... a change in your attitude to God, to yourself, to others, to money, to fame, to life in this world? Things you once loved, do you now hate? Things you once hated, ignored or rejected, do you now love? The holiness you once dismissed, do you now desire? The Christ Whom you did not allow to be part of your life in any significant way, is He now the most attractive, beautiful, wonderful person you could ever encounter? Do you consider the kingdom of heaven to be a 'pearl of great price'? These are some of the fruits which reveal that a divine work of repentance has been done in your heart.

But not only are we to repent of our wrong thinking and living, we are to then believe the Gospel. Repentance means we stop thinking one thing, and start thinking something new. We let go of one reality in order to embrace a new reality, which is Jesus Christ. We acknowledge every day of our lives that there is absolutely nothing in us which can save us from the holiness of God which burns against all sin. Only Jesus can save us. Only Jesus has saved us. We must get to that point where we live what we sing in that old hymn: *"Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling."*

A vital part of our repentance from wrong thinking is our acceptance of the truth that our salvation and reconciliation with God has all been achieved by Jesus Christ, through His life, death and resurrection. To believe the Gospel is to affirm that you have one hope in this life and the next and all of that hope is found in Jesus Christ. Our salvation was achieved 2,000 years ago when Jesus bled and died for us. That salvation and new life becomes real in our experience today, through repentance and believing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But that repentance is not a one-off event. Repentance is a daily choice. Every day we are being bombarded with lies about us and God and Jesus Christ and every day we need to reject wrong thinking and turn back to Jesus. We need to affirm our belief in Jesus and His finished work on the cross every day. We should embrace our times around the Lord's table with minds which continue to be renewed by the incredible truth which is embodied in that bread and that cup. The only way you will really know if you have received the Gospel and accepted the free gift of salvation in Christ, is when this new life in Him becomes your daily experience. You won't always be on the emotional high you were when your eyes were first opened, but every day of your life, in some way, you will re-affirm that God is good, God is real, you are forgiven, restored and heaven-bound, because of the finished work of Jesus Christ. Little by little, you will be transformed more and more into the image of Jesus Christ - for that is God's will for us all.

You will deepen in your lifestyle of repentance and renewal. You will grow in grace. Your relationship with God will intensify in its intimacy. Your faith will be strengthened. Your discernment will develop. Your desire to be in the presence of God in worship will grow every day. *This* is the fruit of true God-given repentance and the manifestation of Jesus Christ in your life.

Perhaps God has revealed the truth of the Gospel to you for the first time today. Or maybe God has reminded you of a truth you had forgotten. Either way, if the Spirit of God is at work in your heart right now, you will know it and I want to encourage you to respond to God today. Embrace the life-changing truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ today.

Print the following affirmations and put them somewhere obvious. Read them every morning as you greet a new day and let the Spirit of God release the power and reality of this Gospel into every area of your life!

**While were sinners,
CHRIST DIED FOR US**

**While we were dead in our sin,
GOD MADE US ALIVE IN CHRIST**