

Good news for God's world

Advance in Faith Unit 108
Week 1 — What's good news?



Series introduction

Over the next six weeks, we'll be discussing how we communicate the good news of Jesus to the world we live in.

To do that, we'll need to make sure we've understood Jesus' Good News. We'll also need to understand how people in our world (twenty-first century Australia) thinks about Christianity. Then we can think about how we bridge the gap—communicating the good news to God's world.

Those are the three topics that will occupy us for the next six weeks.

When we start talking about evangelism, some people respond, "Wow, I love this stuff! This is why I'm alive! Bring on the Good News!" Others go quiet, feeling inadequate, unsure how to talk about Jesus without seeming weird, feeling guilt for "not doing it enough."

If that's you, you're in the right place. My prayer is that our time together will set you free from those expectations. I want you to be free to live your Christian faith, and to discuss who Jesus is and what he means.

To help us break free, we'll start by dismantling some misunderstandings about what the gospel is and how we share it.

Selling guilt?

As a teenager, I (Allen) attended a class on evangelism. It was designed to help me convert my friends, to get them to invite Jesus into their hearts. First, I had to convince them they were sinners, so I could offer them Jesus as the answer.

Sound familiar? No wonder we hate it! Telling my friends that they are terrible people ("sinners") is not good news! That's not the gospel.

Instead of the Good News of Jesus, we've substituted a sales technique. Enrol in a course on marketing, and you'll be taught the same steps:

- a) The salesperson makes a client aware of a significant need.
- b) The salesperson convinces the client that the product on offer solves that need.
- c) The salesman clinches the deal, by signing up the client.

The "gospel" salesman follows the same steps:

- a) You're a sinner.
- b) Jesus is the Saviour who can save you from your guilt.
- c) Pray this prayer now to accept Jesus into your heart.

Starting with condemnation is a tough sell, so some versions of this marketing “gospel” add an extra step to lead people in. A popular tract named *The Four Spiritual Laws* started with “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life,” followed by the three steps above.¹

This is not what Jesus did. It is nothing like the Good News of Jesus. Could you even imagine Jesus wandering around Galilee and saying, “You’re a sinner. So please invite me into your heart to be your personal saviour.” Have you read the Gospels?

The Gospels tell us that there were people walking around Jesus’ world labelling people as sinners. Yes, that’s right: the Pharisees. Oops: we’ve followed the Pharisees, not Jesus!

Not convinced? Do a study in the Gospels for every place where Jesus used the word *sinner*. You’ll find 7 or 8 different occasions (some recorded in more than one Gospel). In every case bar one, Jesus was echoing a label given by the Pharisees. We should therefore read it as “sinner” in quotes—not as something Jesus initiated. (The one exception is where Jesus accused the high priests and temple rulers of being sinners—something the Pharisees would never do.)

How did we lose the good news?

So how did the church become preoccupied with announcing guilt instead of good news? It goes back a long way.

As early as the second century, people began to worry about what happened if they sinned after they were baptized. Some decided to keep baptism until the end of your life to ensure you didn’t die guilty.

By the fifth century, Augustine developed the doctrine of original sin. By this, he meant that every human is born with sin, not because of what we’ve done but because it’s passed on from fallen parents (all the way back to Adam). Augustine believed that this original sin was removed by baptism. Consequently if a baby died without being baptized by the church, they died without grace, meaning they were doomed forever. It became really important to baptize a baby as early as possible.

What Augustine had done was to proclaim that the church had the power to decide people’s eternal fate.

If you sinned after baptism, you needed to confess it to the church. The church had the power to set the penalty for your sin, and you must perform that penitence. Only then could you attend the mass. At the

¹ *The Four Spiritual Laws*, Campus Crusade for Christ. <http://www.mesacc.edu/~thoqh49081/handouts/bright.html>

mass, the priest sacrificed Jesus again for your sins, and gave you the body of Christ so you were forgiven.

Throughout the Middle Ages therefore, the church believed it had the power to decree whether you were forgiven or not. The church had the keys of the kingdom so it decreed whether you went to heaven or hell.

If you were still partly sinful when you died, you went to purgatory to be cleansed. Paying money to the church helped speed up that process.

In the 1500s, a Catholic monk named Martin Luther began reading the New Testament in the original Greek (not Latin). He discovered that the church did not have the power to decree who was forgiven—that it's God who justifies people, through faith. Justification does not come from the church through confession, penitence, the mass, or purgatory payments.

This discovery caused major upheaval. As a priest, Luther had struggled with a guilty conscience. He'd never found relief for his guilt from the church. Now he realized that it was God, not the church, who justified people (declaring them not guilty), by faith. It was revolutionary!

Luther had rediscovered a crucial aspect of the gospel message. But Luther never questioned why the church was trading in guilt in the first place. The guilty conscience remained at the centre of Luther's thinking.

For example, Luther wrote a commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatians. The word "conscience" turns up on every other page of Luther's commentary (200 – 300 times). Do you know how many times the word "conscience" appears in Galatians? Zero. Luther brought this concern about guilt to the text with him, for that is what the church had been trading in for centuries.

500 years after Luther, we're still trading in guilt!
We still haven't recovered the good news Jesus proclaimed.

What was the good news Jesus proclaimed?

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Here's the twist: if you think Luther's message (guilt and justification) is the gospel, **Jesus never preached the gospel** (or almost never).

Scot McKnight tells this story:

At an airport, I bumped into a pastor I recognized ...
He asked me what I was writing, and I replied,
"A book about the meaning of gospel."

"That's easy," he said, "justification by faith."

After hearing that quick-and-easy answer, I decided to push further, so I asked him Piper's question:

"Did Jesus preach the gospel?"

His answer made me gulp. "Nope," he said, "Jesus couldn't have. No one understood the gospel until Paul. No one could understand the gospel until after the cross and resurrection and Pentecost."

"Not even Jesus?" I asked.

"Nope. Not possible," he affirmed.²

What a tragedy, when church leaders don't know Jesus' gospel!

What was the Jesus' gospel?

The Gospel writers summarize Jesus' whole message as *the gospel*:

Mark 1:14-15

Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming God's **good news**:
 "The time has come! The kingdom of God has arrived.
 Turn to him! Believe the **good news**!"

Luke 4:43

He [Jesus] said, "I must proclaim the **good news** of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent."

Luke 8:1

Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the **good news** of the kingdom of God.

Matthew 4:23

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming **the good news** of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

Matthew 9:35

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming **the good news** of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

Matthew 24:14

This **gospel** of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations ...

So, Jesus preached the gospel. He wasn't on about justifying sinners. He wasn't explaining his death to everyone. And he certainly wasn't asking people to "invite him into their heart."

² Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Zondervan, 2011).

What was the *good news* that Jesus announced? Every one of the verses above has a word that identifies the content of Jesus' gospel. What is it?

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The good news *is* the kingdom of God? What does that mean?

The good news according to Jesus is that he is bringing the world back under God's reign. He's restoring the earth to where it was designed to be — under heaven's governance.

This is good news:

- It's good news for those who've suffered injustice, for everything wrong will be set right.
- It's good news for the poor, because those who've missed out will finally get their fair share.
- It's good news for the political prisoners, because they will no longer be held in jail by powerful rulers.
- It's good news for those who've been oppressed by evil powers, because evil will lose its grip when God's anointed king reigns over the earth.
- It's good news because earth will be released from evil, back into the care of our gracious heavenly sovereign.

That's the good news Jesus announced. As God's chosen ruler (anointed, Christ), he has authority to set everything right:

Luke 4:18–19

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim **good news** to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The good news Jesus preached is far more than forgiveness for personal sins, or the restoration of individuals. It's **the restoration of community under God**.

Restored community under God: that's the kingdom of God.

The good news of the kingdom is the good news that God is restoring his world from all that currently oppresses it, back under God's reign.

Announcing Jesus' gospel

If we only understand God is saving us from our personal failings (sins) then that's all we have to tell the world. Once we realize that God is saving the world from the crushing oppression of evil, back into his governance, we have the best news for the planet.

Imagine you were a Jew hiding in Nazi-occupied Poland during World War II, and then the news arrived that the war was over. At first, you could scarcely believe it. Once you realized it was true, could you imagine the sense of release?

When the world received the news that World War II was over, this is what it looked like:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDi74iU4P4Q>

We have the ultimate good news—announcing the demise of evil, and the restoration of God's reign through his Christ (anointed king). That's the good news of the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

So how do we recover Jesus' message of good news?

How do we share that message of restored community in our postmodern world that's so focused on the individual self?

These are some of the questions we'll ask in coming weeks.

Group Questions

1. Did Jesus preach the gospel? If so, what was the good news he proclaimed?
2. Discuss how our understanding of the gospel differs from the gospel Jesus preached. What are we missing?
3. How can we recover the way Jesus understood the gospel. What did he mean by *the good news of the kingdom*?
4. In what sense is the gospel good news for the world? What are the major problems faced by the world today? How does the message Jesus preached resolve those issues?

Memory Work

Mark 1:14-15 (NIV)

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Take Home Exercise

Interested in what Tim Healy had to say about this topic? This link takes you to a summary of a message he gave in November 2016: <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/11/15/what-is-the-gospel/>

Interested to see how Jesus used the word *sinner*? When was it his label, and when was he responding to a label applied by others? How should his approach shape the way we use the word?

Here are all the references:

1. **Matt 9:13 || Mark 2:17 || Luke 5:32** After Jesus healed the paralytic, Pharisees criticised him for eating with *sinners*. Jesus responds by picking up their word: the people they reject as “sinners” (i.e. disreputable and unclean) are his friends. He sends the Pharisees away from his presence, to learn how to treat these people with empathy rather than exclusion.
2. **Matt 11:19 || Luke 7:34** Jesus is accused of being “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and *sinners*!” Once again, Jesus is not the one giving this label. It might look like he’s not following the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (such as Psalm 1), but he is operating with a different kind of wisdom that doesn’t label and exclude.
3. **Luke 6:32-34** Jesus calls Israel to a radical kind of love that goes beyond reciprocity, because even *sinners* love those who love them. Once again, it’s not Jesus’ label; he’s applying a category his audience uses.
4. **Luke 13:2** Jesus undermines the belief that bad things happen to people because they are worse sinners than everyone else. Once again, he’s correcting a mislabelling.
5. **Luke 15:7, 10** Responding to the Pharisees’ complaint that he accepts *sinners* (15:1), Jesus tells three stories to show that it should be party time when “a sinner” comes back to join in again. Again, it is the Pharisees’ category that Jesus is responding to, not a label he chooses to place on people.
6. **Luke 18:13** Jesus tells a parable of two men praying within earshot of each other. The Pharisee congratulates himself that he isn’t “like other men, extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or even like this *tax collector*.” Instead of fleeing from this tirade, the tax collector accepts the Pharisee’s labelling him a *sinner*, cries out to God, and finds acceptance. Once again the labelling comes from the Pharisee, not from Jesus. Luke is quite explicit that this parable is about labelling people “with contempt” (18:9 ESV).
7. **Matt 26:45 || Mark 14:41** At last we find a case where Jesus used the word *sinner* without reflecting back someone else’s label. The only people to whom Jesus intentionally applied the label sinners were the high priests and rulers of Jerusalem!

8. **Luke 24:7** (?) At the empty tomb, angels reported Jesus saying, "The son of man must be delivered over into the hands of *sinner*s ..." If you take this as a quotation of Jesus (as the NIV does), this is a second case where Jesus labelled the Sanhedrin and chief priests as sinners (compare Luke 9:22).

The crucial thing is that Jesus does not go around applying the label *sinner* to everyone so he can sell them his solution. When he does use the word, it is usually in response to a label (spoken or thought) given by the Pharisees, a label of rejection that Jesus is actually arguing against.

There is an exception: Jesus does label the temple rulers as *sinner*s. They are rebels against God's authority, refusing God's governance, colluding together to kill the King of the Jews. So perhaps we can use the condemning label "sinner" of church leaders who act to protect their own power, but if we are following Jesus we cannot apply labels of rejection like this to people in general.

What do you think? How should we follow Jesus in this regard?

Recommended Reading

If you would like to read further, we recommend:

- Christopher J H Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Zondervan, 2010).
- Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Zondervan, 2011).
- John Ortberg, *Who Is This Man? The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus* (Zondervan, 2012).
- Philip Yancey, *Vanishing Grace: What Ever Happened to the Good News?* (Zondervan, 2014)
- Randy Newman, *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did* (Kregel, 2017)

