

# Lest we forget the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ

By Jay Wegter

It is breathtaking just how far a ‘Christian’ culture or people group can move away from the gospel in just one generation. Church history certainly attests to that fact. Therefore, how we need frequent instruction in the gospel, for our propensity to forget the gospel seems to be boundless.

Growing in ‘gospel fluency’ is a community activity in the body of Christ in which we enjoin one another afresh to heed the numerous imperatives in the book of Hebrews *to hold fast, to continue to boast in, to pay closer attention to—the gospel*. “For this reason, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away *from it*. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (Heb 2:1-3a).

**Good news is great news, especially when it comes on the heels of tragic news.** And, that certainly is the case of the gospel. For, the outline given in so many portions of the Bible is a proclamation of the good news on the heels of the bad news. The biblical sequence is: **1) *Ruin by the fall*, 2) *Redemption through Christ*, and 3) *Regeneration by the Spirit***. What the Holy Scriptures describe as: *the good news, the words of life, the word of His grace, the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ* is the polar opposite of natural religion. So, before we say a word about each of these three elements of the gospel above, let it be stated that the innate religion in each one of us (the religion with which we were born), puts forth a man-centered counterfeit to the three biblical elements of the gospel. These counterfeit elements are definitely worth knowing if we are to be effective in our evangelism and preaching. For, these counterfeits are deeply rooted in the heart of man and are not easily dislodged.

**The counterfeit gospel of man-made religion is a kind of distorted, mirror image of the truth.** Let’s examine the three counterfeits which depart from the true gospel. First, *ruin by the fall*. Instead of *ruin by the fall*, natural religion views mankind as only mildly incapacitated by the fall, as if Adam fell but ‘a few inches’ and still possesses an island of internal righteousness. Natural religion envisions man as basically good, and only in need of some improvement, some assistance with his personal reformation, and some ‘polishing up’ by means of religion.

Second, *redemption through Christ* has its counterfeit in natural religion. For, the ‘natural man’ as described in 1 Corinthians chapter two regards the gospel as foolishness. “He is unable to understand it” (1 Cor 1:18; 2:14). Because the gospel is ‘spiritually discerned’, it makes no sense to the unregenerate mind and heart. As a consequence, natural men subscribe to a form of religion which regards salvation to be a synergistic effort—man and God working together, combining their efforts.

The natural man never doubts for a moment that it is quite reasonable to think that ‘a truly sincere person’ will be seen by God as trying his or her best, and thus, God, in recognizing that effort, will reward him by making up for any deficit. How many immeasurable light years away this sentiment is from the true salvation which is granted through the shed blood of Christ alone (Heb 9:12, 22).

And third, *regeneration by the Spirit*. Like Nicodemus of Jesus’ day, the natural man chafes at the idea that he is utterly hamstrung by inability, and that he requires the work of the Spirit of God in order to apprehend salvation. The default position of natural religion is that of attributing religious ability to fallen man. And, accompanying that mistaken notion is a closely related ‘companion error’. For, unregenerate men not only reject the truth of their utter dependency upon the Spirit, but concordantly place their trust in religious activities which the flesh is capable of performing. “But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithes

of mint and rue and every *kind of* garden herb, and *yet* disregard justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others” (Lu 11:42).

This companion error inherent in natural religion is rife in Christendom; we see it in the numerous religious rituals and practices which are touted as able to impart saving grace. Entire sub-Christian (non-evangelical) religious institutions are constructed around the lie that religious activity has the power to lay hold of God, and obligate Him to bestow saving grace (i.e. the Roman Catholic sacraments, baptism, the mass, penance, etc.).

Now, let’s examine the three elements of the gospel as proclaimed in the infallible Word of God. **1) Ruin by the fall:** the rebellion of our first parents plunged the human race into spiritual darkness, sin, death, and decay (Eph 2:1-3). This is a ‘not normal’ world in which we live; it is abnormal because of our alienation from God. Scripture diagnoses the problem; it is the sinful heart of man filled with enmity toward his Creator (Rom 5:10; Col 1:21-22).

Notice what the Bible says about the human condition: “We have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, ‘THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD; ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS, THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE’” (Rom 3:9-12).

*The text does not say*, “There is no one who is religious.” Or, “There is no one seeking a god of his own imaginings.” Scripture reveals that fallen man is a ‘studious’ habitual suppressor of God’s truth (Rom 1:18ff.). Therefore, man’s ‘religious seeking’ takes him down the futile path of darkened understanding: “So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness” (Eph 4:17-19). Yet, almost every unsaved person I have ever evangelized regards him or herself to be a truth-seeker.

*Apart from Christ, the human race does not, and cannot know the God of the Bible (Jn 1:18; 14:6).* Jesus captures the human dilemma of possessing a ‘bad heart’ in His discourse in the Gospel of John, chapter three: “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (Jn 3:19-21).

*Did you grasp what Jesus is saying about our spiritually ruined state?* People imagine that their minds are in fine working order—able to think truthfully about God, but Jesus says otherwise. (If you doubt this, just dialog for a few minutes with an unbeliever and you will notice how he trusts his mind implicitly; even in things of God).

Christ, the Lord exposes our spiritual condition as loving the lie, and dead to God (Jn 8:31-47; Col 2:13). The Word of God brings this crisis to the fore in a dramatic way. For, as proof that we do not know God in our natural state, we imagine that moral exertion and religious works can satisfy God and make us worthy of heaven. But, the Scriptures overturn this misconception.

Listen to this passage in Romans ten: “Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for *their* salvation. For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to

everyone who believes” (Rom 10:1-4). This attempt to generate the kind of righteousness that is acceptable to God is part and parcel of all false religion around the world.

In addition, Romans 3:19-20 completely deconstructs the notion that man can, of himself generate righteousness in God’s sight: “Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:19-20). (Ever used God’s Name in vain? Lied? Stolen? Dishonored your parents? Gossiped? Lusted? Hated? The 10 Commandments reveal our sin, and in doing so they diagnose our spiritual and moral state. The fact that these commandments are not a scheme to get to heaven is nearly scandalous to an unbeliever as he hears this for the first time.)

**2) Redemption through Christ:** we hear much today about the love of God, but little about the fact that the most loving thing God can do for you is reveal your lost spiritual condition, remove your false hope, so that you might flee to Christ. Romans chapter 8 verse 3 highlights both the impotence of the flesh, and the sufficiency of the gospel: “For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, . . .” (Rom 8:3-4). It is the weakness of the flesh in the face of the Law’s requirements which necessitated that salvation come from outside of us.

***It is not sensible to our natural reason that God should Himself, in the crucifixion of His Son fully pay for the sins of each and every rebel who would ever believe.*** The marvel of redemption through Christ flies in the face of religious common sense (1 Cor 1:18). No natural man could ever conceive that the Creator of the universe should take on mortal human flesh in order to die for the ungodly (Rom 4:5).

In order to highlight the divine origin of the ‘non-intuitive gospel’ preached by Christ and His apostles, Paul sets up a pronounced contrast between religion that is ‘of man’ and the ‘gospel of God’ (Rom 1:1). “For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but *I received it* through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:11-12). Something that is ‘not according to man’ is not of human origin, the gospel is not of human origin (Ronald Y. K. Fung, *NICNT*, pp. 51-52).

If the saving knowledge of God were ‘according to man’, depending upon man’s reason, there would be no need to proclaim the gospel of God, for everyone would already know what God requires for salvation. But, the gospel overturns all of our natural religious instincts; for the gospel is not God looking for a righteous, virtuous, believing person, it is God granting faith and bestowing a righteous status upon a guilty person, as a gift (Rom 6:22-23).

***Please hear again this good news of God’s incredible love and compassion for the helpless, for the legally guilty before God:*** “For Christ also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit” (1 Pet 3:18). Notice Peter says, “once for all.” That statement is so significant because Christ’s sin-bearing is a finished work (Heb 9:26-28). Scripture states that He is never to be sacrificed again. “By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10). 500 years ago, hundreds of true believers were burned to death for believing that Christ was sacrificed once, and that He is not repeatedly sacrificed in the Roman Catholic mass.

***This gospel message of Christ’s finished work is to be preached to every tribe, tongue, and***

*nation—that God has, once for all put on Christ’s account the guilt and punishment of every one who would ever believe.* “He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21). The cost of reconciling sinners to Himself has been paid entirely on God’s side. The proclamation of this message of reconciliation with God is nothing less than the ‘terms of peace with God’. Every true believer is an ‘ambassador of reconciliation’ (2 Cor 5:18-20).

Now to the third, and final aspect of the gospel—the need of a new heart. **3) Regeneration by the Spirit:** do you think it is far easier to believe this good news of Christ substituted for sinners than it is to leap over the Empire State Building? It is not. For, this gospel message goes against all of our ideas of religious common sense. This is why the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin, and righteousness, and judgment (Jn 16:8-11). The Spirit is sent to gain a verdict in the sinner’s conscience—He is sent to convince people that Christ holds the key to their salvation, and that they do not.

*Apart from the Spirit’s convicting work we will remain self-justifiers.* Jesus identified the crux of man’s spiritual problem when He diagnosed the hearts of those within the religious establishment of His day. These religious leaders were scoffing at Jesus because they endorsed a standard of righteousness approved of by men, but not approved of by God: “Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him. And He said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God’” (Lu 16:14-15).

*When the Spirit of God brings conviction of sin, He reveals to us that the heart with which we are born, cannot love God (Mt 7:15-23).* In so doing, the Spirit of God prepares a person for the reception of the Savior; but He does so by showing a person their guilty, helpless state. When He convicts a sinner of his legal guilt before God, He ‘bankrupts’ that person of merit, religious works, and false hope in themselves. He strips them even of the value of their religious efforts so that they find no refuge from judgment in self-justification. That hurts, it cuts to the quick, it humbles and humiliates deeply!

*It is insulting to the natural man for him to discover that he has absolutely nothing with which to trade for heaven.* Not a single action of his can ‘print heavenly money’ by which he may barter with God, or ‘purchase’ worthiness in God’s sight. This is why Jesus said a person must be born again, born of the Spirit if they are to enter the Kingdom of God (Jn 3:5). The work of the Spirit in calling and quickening the sinner is necessary for salvation (1 Pet 2:9). This unbreakable covenant of love, between Christ and His people, proclaimed in the gospel is not formed by a church, a clergyman, or a sacrament, or even by the penitent himself, it is the work of Christ’s Spirit (new birth) (Jn 1:12-13; Rom 8:28).

*The Spirit’s work is to convince of sin, and righteousness, and judgment (Jn 16:8-11).* When the Spirit does this convicting work, the sinner discovers that he cannot qualify himself for God. Christ alone changes hearts and makes men new. Christ alone qualifies a person for heaven by counting His righteousness as theirs (Phil 3:9). “Nevertheless, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified” (Gal 2:16).

Apart from this convicting, calling, quickening work of the Spirit, the sinner will remain reliant on himself, even if he attends an evangelical church. The Spirit’s effectual work in calling, reveals to the sinner that Christ alone dispenses the benefits of His redemptive work (Mt 11:28-30). Therefore, the

sinner must go to Christ for life eternal: “And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 5:9-10).

The form of the gospel commonly preached today, as Ray Comfort frequently reminds us, is so focused on quickly offering Christ and forgiveness that it spends a minimal amount of time exegeting man’s disastrous dilemma. But, as Mr. Comfort and faithful biblical preachers warn, if we do not systematically ‘excavate’ that bastion of self-righteousness and human ability inherent in every natural man’s bosom, he will surely conclude that he possesses the ability to connect with God.

Preaching the sinner’s helplessness and inability is not popular today, and it was not popular in Jesus’ day as well. Jesus’ listeners stumbled over His words: “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day’” (Jn 6:43-44). The freeness of the gospel is truly remarkable. But, the gospel is not only an offer, it is a command to be obeyed (Acts 6:7; Rom 1:5; 1 Pet 1:22).

What a paradox this is that the gospel requires a response from helpless men. This is a marvelous testament to the power of God in salvation, that the sinner, in his effort to be accepted by God, discovers his impotence. Therefore, his plea for mercy and a new heart is actually a cry for the ability to comply with what the gospel requires. And, that is only something God can supply. Thereby, God receives all of the honor in salvation.

***The gospel requires a response of faith and repentance, but It is the Spirit who enables the sinner by faith, to be united to Christ.*** The glorious benefits of Christ’s death belong only to those who repent and trust Him as personal Savior (Mk 16:16). *The person who savingly believes, trusts solely in Christ’s Person and finished work on Calvary. The person who believes unto salvation, transfers trust away from self to Christ alone; relying upon Him to be the necessary and sufficient payment for sin* (Rom 10:13).

***Christ is willing to save even the worst sinner. He came to seek and to save that which was lost (Lu 19:10).*** Saving sinners is the mission for which Christ came to earth (Lu 19:10). Your sin is not a barrier to salvation! Christ came to destroy the works of the devil (1 Jn 3:5-10). God commands all men everywhere to repent of sin (Acts 17:30; 1 Thess 1:9). *To repent is to agree with God that we have wronged Him and deserve judgment.* Repentance is turning from sin so as to forsake it, and turning toward God in humble obedience (Ez 18:30-32; Luke 13:5).

***The Word of Christ is crystal clear: the only safe place for sinners is in Christ, where the wrath of God has already struck in full force at Calvary’s cross.*** You will not escape if you neglect the salvation that is in Christ (Heb 2:3). Consider the wealth of God’s grace in Christ; it is truly amazing, excelling any modifiers found in language. Believers have a Great High Priest above, who answers for the sins of His people in His Own Person (Rom 8:33-34; Heb 2:9). Therefore, if you are yet outside of Christ, do not oppose yourself by remaining an enemy of God, bring your case to Christ, He is the Great Physician given by God to heal the plague of your soul, your sin against a holy God.

***The gospel is the story of God, the love story that draws sinners to Christ. A salvation that is full and free and effectual, must be all of God and none of the sinner. God is to have all of the glory and the sinner none (1 Cor 1:26-31).*** Only the miracle of regeneration by the Spirit can make a person joyous in the fact that they owe all to Christ and are utterly obligated to Him for time and eternity. Otherwise, the pride of man wants a hand in his own salvation, and consequently he resists the freeness of God’s grace. It is the work of God’s Spirit to overturn this pride in the heart of a man. “He saved us, not

on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to *the* hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5-7).

The gospel’s good news is an announcement that Christ really saves unworthy, defiled, helpless sinners. Therefore, the good news of the gospel is a proclamation of the power of God—that the Lord graciously exerts His power in the salvation of spiritually dead sinners (Rom 1:16-17). In so doing, He grants to helpless sinners even the ability to believe and repent (a grant by the power of God—Philippians 1:29, that God might be all in all—Ephesians 1:19-20). This is the gospel we preach, the gospel of our God who actually saves, the gospel that is not according to man.