

Beloved people of God.

We live in a world that is quiet religious. Yes, I know that some don't acknowledge God, but many do. For instance, many Muslims, Hindus, Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons believe in God or in 'gods' plural. And strangely enough, many of them believe in eternal life even if it is through a process of several reincarnations. As Christians we firmly believe that no one comes to the Father, except through Jesus Christ. There is only one way to eternal life in heaven [John 14:6].

So how do we convey this marvellous message of God's love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, or if you will, this single, exclusive, narrow way that leads to eternal life in a winsome way? On the one hand, we wish to win people for Christ and not give unnecessary offense to the gospel. The gospel, is already offensive to many people who reject Christ. We don't need to add to that offense by being offensive with our presentation of the gospel.

So do we only speak about God's love or do we only speak about sin and the need to repent? Or alternatively, should we do both? I put it to you that we must do both for that is also how Scripture brings the good news of Jesus Christ. When John the Baptist proclaimed the coming Messiah he did so calling on people to repent and believe. The Lord Jesus did likewise. The Apostles' did likewise. In fact, that is the message of John 3:16. "God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Now granted, we must not fall for the trap to focus all our energy on the 'perishing' bit, but equally, we must not focus all our energy on the 'saving' bit. One without the other is rather meaningless. If I say to you that Jesus is love and that he died for you then you would be left asking, "Why did he do that for?" It would be meaningless unless I also gave you the reason why Jesus died for you, namely to pay for your sin before a Holy and just God! Similarly, if I were to say to you, "You are going to perish" without giving you the hope of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ, I would be very unloving. So these things go together.

Now I realize that speaking about God's anger and his just punishment for our sin doesn't make people feel good. But if you read some of the books about the great revivals in the past, the Revival in Wales and the Great Awakening, both those revivals by the grace of God came about because:

- a) People prayed earnestly for that to happen, and
- b) People were convicted of their sin and need of a Saviour!

So that is our challenge. God's desire is for the good news of Jesus Christ to be proclaimed so that people chosen for eternal life will hear and embrace Jesus as their Saviour. And God's primary means of doing that, is not usually by a Damascus road experience, but through the preaching of the Word, applied by the Holy Spirit.

So we need to somehow explain that without Jesus as your Saviour, you have no hope for eternal life with God, for God is angry with us because of our sin. And that is true for all of us at one time. Paul makes it clear in Romans 1:21 that we are all guilty. "Even though man knew God, they neither glorified him as God, nor gave thanks to him. Instead they exchanged the immortal God for idols!"

Romans 2:1 says, "That man is without excuse, even those who pass judgment on others!" There is no such thing as respectable sins.

Romans 3:10ff reminds us that "There is no one righteous, not even one!" We are or have all been guilty of making God angry. What's more that anger has increased when people reject his Son.

So let's heed the warning contained in John 3:16, 18 and 36 and in the book of Hebrews in several places. Believe in Jesus and you will be saved!

Now we acknowledge that it is because of God's grace, that we have embraced Christ and no longer have this natural tendency to hate God and our neighbour. That has come about when the Holy Spirit has applied God's word to our once stone cold hearts and caused them to be receptive to the good news of Jesus Christ. But we also want our unbelieving families and friends to experience that grace. So allow me to make a few suggestions that can perhaps assist us in this process.

The first thing we need to do is to pray, acknowledging our own sin and the marvellous grace we have experienced. We are no better than our unbelieving friend except that we are now forgiven sinners. And then we should be praying for those with whom we hope to share the gospel, that the Holy Spirit may make them receptive!

And then we need to pray that we will be able to present the glorious gospel in a winsome way. We want our families and friends to do a "U" turn out of their dead end streets and embrace God's way in Christ. When the Apostle Peter preached his first sermon at Pentecost he told the crowd that they had murdered God's own Son on the cross. But God had raised him from the dead and made him both Lord and Christ! (Acts 2:36) And God used that 'sledge hammer' approach to save three thousand people.

Now God can still use that approach, but generally, people don't like the 'sledge hammer' approach in today's society. We need to be more gentle. I am always intrigued by Paul's approach in Athens at the Areopagus. He didn't go in with all guns blazing telling them what great sinners they were and that they were all going to hell. Rather, he started by commending them for their religiosity. They had idols for many different gods erected. And then Paul goes on and tells them about the unknown God who created the heavens and the earth. And gradually he gets to the point that in the past God over-looked ignorance, but now since Christ has come, people need to repent.

And that is what we need to know of ourselves and to convey to others. We are sinners and God is Holy and we cannot hope to live with God in eternity without God's justice for our sins being met. So we can either pay ourselves which means death and eternal punishment, or someone else pays with whom God is perfectly satisfied and we live! So here is the good news. Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. But sadly, so many people do not want Jesus.

They don't even think they need to be saved! And if they keep on thinking they do not need to be saved, they will have to pay the debt themselves! Some people, including Christians think they can work their way into God's favour by caring for the poor and homeless and feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. All important but it doesn't pay for your sin.

And then you have some Christians who in some strange way they think they can pay God back for what he has done for them. But that is not possible. Some people even suggest that the answer lies in our minds. It's all about positive thinking or possibility thinking. So long as we keep telling ourselves that we are good, that we can do it; that will give us peace with God and ourselves! Do you know what? It's a dead end street!

Still others teach that we can get some 'brownie' points or 'god' credit from someone else who has lived a better life than us. It's not true! It's a dead end street! Scripture teaches that each man must pay for his sin! Ezekiel 18:4, 18ff makes it very clear that the person who sins has to pay!

Psalm 49:7-9, "Who can give payment to God for the ransom of another? "No-one" says the Psalmist. "Even if he was to live forever, he still could not pay enough" Oh how we wish it were true that we could reap some brownie points from some 'better' person, for then we could carry our loved ones into heaven with us!

But we cannot for we are all sinners. You and I are responsible for our own sin. You cannot ask your father or mother or a good friend, not even a minister or elder to pay because it will not satisfy God's justice. In fact, even by thinking that we or someone else could satisfy God's justice adds to our debt. It adds because it takes away from the glory of God and nullifies the work of the Lord Jesus.

Well, then, shall I kill a lamb or bullock and ask God to accept it as a substitute for my life? No, that will not do either. They offered animals for their sin in the OT. In fact, Heb 10:4 tells us that the annual sacrifice was a reminder of sins, because it was impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take sins away. Here are still some more 'dead end' streets. Attending church once or twice? Good to do, but cannot pay for your sin. Your baptism? Your profession of faith? Your church affiliation? They are all dead end streets and lead nowhere.

Martin Luther tried and tried to be righteous in God's sight and realized that it was impossible. No one gets into heaven without trusting in God's Son alone for their forgiveness and salvation. End of story! Congregation, we need to convey that we can never pay the debt we owe our Father God. We are in arrears with the one true God and have been so for a very long time.

And we must make full satisfaction and yet we cannot! And just as well! Just imagine if some people could pay the debt and others couldn't? What a division we would have in the church! No the bottom line is this – the natural man cannot save himself, therefore he cannot glory in his own achievement. All personal boasting is excluded. If salvation is to come to man, then it must come from God above. For it is only someone who is truly man, truly righteous, who can be the mediator to fill the gap.

In other words, it has to be God himself - and he does it in the person of His Son. In Christ, God's just demands for our sin are fully met! Here, we are making a shift, we have spoken about sin now we speak about the great love of God for sinners! Our Father God provides His Son, the Saviour purely from his grace and mercy.

1 John 4:19 reminds us that "it is not that we loved him, but that he loved us!"
Rom 5:6; You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.
(v8) But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
(v10) For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.
That's love! That's mercy. That's grace. We can only say with Paul, "...Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

It's all God's work. All of grace! He not only brings salvation through his Son, he calls us into a saving knowledge of His Son through the Holy Spirit which he sends into our hearts. That's grace and love in action! Man without the Holy Spirit would have no inclination to do so! With the first sinful Adam we die, with the second Adam Jesus Christ we have forgiveness and life eternal. That's what Heb 2 speaks about. He must be flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood, living our human life, entering into our human existence.

Being tempted in every way just like us, but remaining sinless, fully righteous. Anything less would not satisfy the justice of our just and holy God. He must be able to deliver many, for all have sinned, therefore his sacrifice must have infinite value. He must be able to lay down his life and to take it up again. He must be able to deliver us from the power of death, and to impart to us eternal life.

Who is this man you ask? Immanuel, God with us, the Son of God in the flesh. John 1:1 says it so clearly, "In the beginning was the Word..." And then verse 14: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth".

God has provided a perfect answer in the perfect high priest, made like his brothers in every way, except without sin. Jesus is not only our brother but He fulfilled the law perfectly. Jesus is God's answer to our crises. Please don't be like people of the world who are going down their dead end streets. We cannot do anything to save ourselves.

Luther's burden was lifted when he understood for the first time, that we have righteousness from the perfect high priest that satisfies the justice of God! In John Bunyan's famous book, "Pilgrims Progress" Christian's burden fell off his back when he came to the cross. We can only marvel at the wonder, at the greatness of God's love in providing such a deliverer, such a mediator.

In closing let me ask you, who is paying your debt? If you want to go on your own, you will fail miserably. Why go down that dead end street? Acknowledge that the Lord Jesus is the only one who can do it for you. In Him we are again in favour with God, for his glory. In him our debt has been paid in full. God's justice has been satisfied and we have sins forgiven and eternal life! Hallelujah. Amen.