

“God’s Good News – Jesus Christ”
Romans 1:1-4

Last Sunday my key point as we began this series is that God is in the business of changing people. If you want genuine, living proof of that fact just look at the example of the apostle Paul. Paul, before he met Jesus Christ and had his life changed forever, was a persecutor of Christ, a legalist, a frustrated angry man, one who was trying to stamp out the church of Jesus Christ. Now, because he has encountered the risen Lord, he is a servant of Jesus Christ, His apostle, called to declare the good news of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. God’s business in changing lives is called the gospel, which simply means “good news.” Notice that the good news is not something we created or made up. It’s not our gospel, it’s God’s, “the gospel of God.” It’s something God announced and accomplished. It’s something God does, through it He changes people’s lives, He saves men and women, boys and girls. His Gospel is not a novelty, it’s not a new development. Verse two tells us it was “promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures.” What God promised through His prophets in the Old Testament He fulfilled in the New Testament in the coming of Christ. Our God is a God who makes promises, and He keeps them. He can be trusted. It may look sometimes as if He’s forgotten His promises, but He doesn’t forget. The fulfillment of His greatest promise is His good news. There are three points I want to make about His good news today.

First, do we really appreciate how good this news really is? Consider the fact that the religions of the world are not good news at all. I know it’s controversial to say this in this age where everything is relative, especially in the area of spiritual matters. It’s argued in our day, “There are many valid ways to get to God.” I will say it again: The religions of the world are not good news at all. They’re bad news, a crushing burden. We see this merely by looking into the hard, grim, often angry faces of the leaders of the world’s other religions – the priests, imams, mullahs, and holy men found in every land. These are not happy people, and the religions they teach are not good news. It’s not hard to understand why. The religions of the world hold this in common: they are exercises in self-help or “works.” They tell you how, by your own efforts, to placate God, to satisfy God. For example, there’s the “Five Pillars” of Islam, five things you must do to receive God’s blessing. One, you declare that no one is worthy of worship except Allah, and that Muhammed is his messenger. Two, you engage in the five daily prayers. Three, you give alms for the poor and needy. Four, you refrain from eating, drinking, and sex from dawn to dusk in the month of Ramadan. Five, you journey to Mecca at least once in your lifetime. I think you’ll agree with me that if by doing these things you could please God and be blessed by Him, a religion such as Islam would certainly be good news. But pleasing God by what we do is not possible. God is holy, and in our sin, we’re too far removed from Him to do anything that can please Him. A religion that is based on what you or I can do is futile, hopeless. Deep inside, realizing that what we do is never enough, these works, these requirements become a burden, a burden that can never be lifted. The response to this burden is to add more things to do. The argument that jihad should become the “sixth pillar” of the faith and the reaction to cartoons of Muhammad are attempts to add even more to this burden.

In our day many have recognized how unsatisfactory religion is, and so they’ve opted for “no religion” or “developing their own spirituality.” At first, the idea of “no religion” or “developing your own spirituality” seems promising, seems like good news. But it all evaporates as soon as we think it through. If we’re free to do as we please without any thought of God, any accountability to Him, we seem liberated to joyous independence. But, if there is no one to be accountable to but ourselves, what we do with this “freedom” becomes meaningless. I mean, who cares what we do or don’t do? And if what we do is meaningless, we must be meaningless, too. “No religion” or “doing your own thing spiritually” leads nowhere. It may seem to offer the great good news of human progress, but it actually leaves us in the same place as religion, in despair over the futility of human life.

This is where God comes in and declares news that is good, which is our second point. The gospel is good for at least two reasons. One, it tells us that God is actually there – that He is not merely the figment of human imagination. He really exists. He’s made us for relationship with Himself and does hold us accountable for what we do. This gives meaning and direction to life because we know that at the end of our lives we’ll have to answer to God for who we were and what we did. Two, the good news tells us that God loves us and has reached out to save us, not based on what we do, but through a person, Jesus Christ. The contrast between Christianity and the world’s religions is highlighted in the story of the man who fell into a dark, slimy pit. He tried to climb out of the pit, but it was too deep and too slippery; he couldn’t. The leaders of the world’s religions came along—Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed, and they all said the same thing: “Poor fellow, if he’ll just come up out of that pit, I’ll help him.” When he couldn’t climb up, they moved on. Then Jesus came along. He saw the man and said, “Poor fellow!” and jumped into the pit and lifted him out. God’s good news is that He sent Jesus to jump into the pit that is our lives and lift us out to life and meaning and hope! That’s what makes God’s good news unique: it’s about what God’s done (not what we have to do).

It's also unique because of the person He does His saving work through, which is our third point. In the words, "as to His human nature (He) was the son of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead; Jesus Christ our Lord," we have three affirmations about the one-of-a-kind nature of Jesus. First, he's a man, but notice that He's specifically described as a descendant of David. This goes back to the earlier statement that God promised His gospel "beforehand through His prophets." All the promises of the gospel in the Old Testament depended on the coming of the Messiah, who would come from the royal line of King David. Jeremiah 23:5 says, "The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up to David a righteous branch, a king who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land" (also Isaiah 11:10). Jesus is the promised king, the Messiah. Second, Jesus is the Son of God. Here I differ with the translators of our NIV. Jesus was not "declared with power to be the Son of God." The better translation of the original Greek is that Jesus was "declared to be the Son of God with power by His resurrection from the dead." His resurrection from the dead was the declaration that He is the Son of God with power. Is this saying that Jesus was not the Son of God before His resurrection? No. He was the Son of God during His earthly life, but He was the Son of God in suffering, in weakness. When He was resurrected from the dead, Jesus moved from being the Son of God in poverty to the Son of God in power, power that is victorious over even death! Third, Jesus is Lord, which specifically means that He is God. The Greek word translated "Lord" in verse 4 is "*kyrios*," which is the translation of the Hebrew name for God, "*Adonai*," which means "supreme Lord." To say that Jesus is Lord is to say that He is "*Adonai*," God Himself. This statement is consistent with what Jesus said about Himself. In John 10:30 He said, "I and my Father are One." And in John 8:58 He told the Jewish leaders in a very public setting, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!" "I am" is the name God used to identify Himself to Moses. The Jews knew exactly what Jesus was saying. They picked up stones to stone Him for blasphemy, but Jesus slipped away. To say Jesus is Lord is to say that He's God, it's also to say that He's the Savior, for "Lord" is also a statement of Christ's victory over the forces of evil. He has conquered them on the cross. The good news is our salvation from and victory over sin, Satan, fear, and death.

I have said it many times; Christianity is not a religion. A religion is our attempt to reach God, satisfy God, it's our attempt to receive God's blessing. The problem with religion is that no matter what we do there's the gnawing fear that it's never enough. Maybe you're caught in that trap of fear today. You've been living your life believing it's all up to you, the ball is in your court, you have to do what you have to do to please God, satisfy Him. If you feel trapped today, Jesus has a promise for you. You may be in that trap even if you're a Christian. You believe Jesus is your personal Savior and Lord, but you live your life each day acting as if it's your work, your effort, your adhering to do's and don'ts that bring His blessing to your life. That may leave you frustrated, even angry, "Is this all the Christian life has to offer?" A good question! Jesus answers it with these words: "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). The good news is that you don't have to wear yourself out proving yourself to God. Come to Jesus, find rest in Him! If you've been "doing your own thing" spiritually (and I know many people in the Pacific Northwest do this). Let me ask you: is your personal spiritual journey taking you to meaning and purpose in life that energize you, give you hope, peace, and joy for the present, confidence and anticipation for the future? My experience with people who are doing their own thing spiritually is that while they talk a good fight, it doesn't take long to realize they're unhappy, frustrated people who are drifting through life. Jesus said, "I have come so that you may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Life is found not in doing your own thing. It's found in the Son of God! The good news is that Christianity is not a religion, it's a relationship: a relationship with the descendant of David, the Son of God, the Lord! For all the deep theology of Romans (soteriology, redemption, justification, sanctification, etc.), what this book is really about is Jesus Christ: what it means to be saved by Him, what it means to live for Him, what it means to serve Him, what it means to follow and obey Him as Lord and God. Christianity is not filling up your head with a lot of knowledge, it's living your life in response to a relationship that has changed your life for good, forever! He and He alone brings God's change, God's good news into your life! Our closing hymn states it beautifully: "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand!"