

SI: Last week I started a sermon series on the Gospel and we looked at Mark 1 and asked, What is the Gospel?

We saw that in the big picture, the Gospel is everything in the Bible, it's the whole grand story of God redeeming this fallen world.

But more specifically, the Gospel is the proclamation of salvation through Christ.

As Peter put it in his message to Cornelius:

Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

So this morning I want to follow up with another question:

Why do we need the Gospel? Why do we need forgiveness of our sins?

INTRO: I read a WWII book recently that was a collection of memoirs by people who spent the war in the Santo Tomas prison camp.

When the Japanese captured Manila, they rounded up everybody living in the Philippines who were citizens of any of the Allied countries—Americans, British, French, Dutch—but it was mostly Americans.

These were American businessmen, missionaries, diplomats, their families, wives, children—there were about 3,000 of them.

The Japanese turned Santo Tomas University in Manila into a prison camp.

That's where these civilian families spent three years.

Towards the end it got especially brutal.

There were beatings and executions and starvation.

And then a rumor started that the Japanese were going to massacre everyone in the camp if they had to retreat. So there was this growing sense of dread.

Fortunately the American brass had heard this rumor, so they sent a special battalion ahead to capture the Santo Tomas prison and avert a massacre.

As I said, this was a book of memoirs, so there were lots of different personal stories and observations, but there was one event everybody mentioned.

Things were getting more and more grim and then suddenly, almost out of the blue they heard heavy gunfire, they wondered if the massacre had started.

But then US Army tanks smashed the gates, and the special battalion rushed in and overwhelmed the Japanese.

The inmates of the prison were stunned, they couldn't believe it at first.

But then they started hugging each other and cheering and weeping and shouting, We're saved. We're saved.

The Bible describes sin as bondage.

Sin enslaves the human race. Sin imprisons the human spirit.
So salvation is often depicted as deliverance from the bondage of sin.
It's being released from a heartless slavemaster who would destroy you.
That's what the book of Exodus is about.

The Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt for generations.

It was such cruel bondage that years later they described it as the iron furnace.
Then the Lord, the God of Abraham, sent Moses and he delivered his people from
bondage to Pharaoh and saved them from the Egyptian army through Red Sea.
And that event becomes the Old Testament depiction of the Gospel and salvation.

The Gospel is an announcement of deliverance from the bondage of sin.

But that's only good news to a man or a woman or a boy or a girl who knows that
he or she is in bondage, who feels that bondage, and who wants to be free.

You get that, don't you?

If a person doesn't understand sin is bondage and or if the person doesn't feel
hopeless, grim, despair over his or her sins, then who needs the Gospel?

So one of the big points of the Bible is to give us a realistic understanding of the
bondage of sin, so we do feel how awful it is and want to be free.
That way the Gospel is truly good news to us.

Let's look at this under three points.

1. A biblical description of sin's bondage
2. A contemporary picture of sin's bondage
3. The good news of deliverance

MP#1 A biblical description of sin's bondage

There are any number of passages I could have chosen but I picked Rom 3:9-18. Paul takes seven Old Testament quotations and he strings them together like pearls.

Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Isaiah. He's giving a survey of OT's teaching on sin. Look again in verse 9 at how he introduces this string of quotations.

What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.

Paul anticipates that a Jewish reader of his letter might say:

I'm not perfect, I'm sin from time to time, but not as bad as you say I am.

So Paul anticipates that. He says that what he's about to say applies to everybody.

But he's making an even deeper point.

Paul is pointing out that self-righteousness or self-justification is one of the key elements of sin's bondage. I may have done some bad things, but I'm not as bad as the Bible says. Other people might be that bad, but I'm not.

A false self image is part of sins' bondage.

Now let's get into this string of Old Testament quotations.

I'm going to use John Stott's outline of these verse in his commentary on Romans.

Stott says these verses declare three things about our sin—

First, sin is godless

In verse 11 and verse 18 there are two similar phrases that bracket the passage.

There is no one who seeks God . . . there is no fear of God before their eyes.

Is that really true?

Is it true that no one seeks God or thinks about what God wants.

Obviously, when the Holy Spirit starts to work in a person's heart, that person starts to seek God.

Many a Christian testimony goes this way. I never thought about God, but my spiritual eyes were opened, I saw my need, my guilt, I cried out to God.

But Paul's not talking about that. He's talking about people as we are in sin.

As we are by nature, apart from God's grace.

In sin people don't seek God, they avoid him.

Even many people who say they are seeking God really aren't.

They are actually using religion and spirituality to avoid the real God.

CS Lewis said to a sinful man seeking the true and living God is as unlikely as a mouse searching for the cat.

People in sin don't want the true and living God with all his awesome holiness.

They want a god who will honor their independence, give them what they want, and allow them to do what they want without any judgment.

Sin is godless, second Stott says it's pervasive.

Did you notice all the body parts in the verses Paul quotes from the OT?

Throats, tongues, lips, mouths, feet, eyes.

He's making a point that sin affects every part of the human constitution—our bodies, minds, emotions, desires, communication, conscience, This is what Reformed theology calls the doctrine of total depravity.

Total depravity doesn't mean every person is as bad as he could be. It means every aspect of personhood is corrupted by sin, so we're capable of terrible things. Instead of using the faculties God has given us to love him and other people, we can and often do use them for destruction.

The point is made with the violent imagery: throats open graves, tongues practicing deceit, poison, cursing and bitterness, bloodshed, ruin and misery.

Sin is godless, it's pervasive, and it's universal.

The pervasiveness of sin has to do with the extent of it in each one of us.

The universality of sin shows that it touches everyone in the human race.

There is no one righteous, not even one. No one who understands.

No one who seeks God. No one who does good, not even one.

Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. All have turned aside.

Paul stresses it negatively and positively.

Even the best person, the noblest, the most learned, the most philanthropic, the greatest idealist, the highest thinker is corrupted by sin and self-righteousness.

This means mankind can't corporately save itself.

God's common grace allows society to function and sometimes to flourish, but all of mankind's best corporate eventually implode because of sin.

So Paul presents sin as an underlying self-righteousness or self-justification, an avoidance of God, especially his laws and demands, a corrupting, self-centered focus that affects every part of us and every one of us—our thinking, our communication, our desires—so the things we do both individually and corporately result in frustration and unhappiness and destruction.

The Bible says a lot more about sin, but Romans 3 is a vivid biblical description of sin's bondage. Now I want fill this in by giving you . . .

MP#2 A contemporary picture of sin's bondage

I want to read something to you. It's long but I think you will appreciate it.

This is written by Theodore Dalrymple, a British doctor and psychiatrist.

He practiced medicine in some horrible countries in Africa for many years, and then in some blighted communities in Great Britain.

He's giving his diagnosis of the human condition based on his observations.

What makes his diagnosis interesting is that he's an atheist.

So he's not looking at humanity through the lens of Scripture.

He explains that during his time in Africa he witnessed atrocities on a massive scale—murder, torture, ethnic cleansing.

But he didn't believe individual people were evil. He thought powerful, impersonal political and social forces carried people along and mostly compelled them to do evil against their will and their better selves.

Then he left Africa and started working in Great Britain and he came to realize that he had been completely wrong.

People aren't compelled by outside forces to do evil, they do it freely and by choice.

He says: "Men commit evil within the scope available to them."

Or to put it simply, "They do what they can get away with."

"A single case can be illuminating . . . Yesterday, for example, a twenty-one-year-old woman consulted me . . . My patient already had had three children by three different men, by no means unusual among my patients, or indeed in the country as a whole. The father of her first child had been violent and she had left him; the second died in an accident while driving a stolen car; the third, with whom she had been living, had demanded that she leave his apartment because, a week after their child was born, he decided he no longer wished to live with her.

"She could not return to her mother because of conflict with her 'stepfather,' or her mother's latest boyfriend, who, in fact, was only nine years older than she and seven years younger than her mother. . . . (It goes without saying that her own father had disappeared at her birth, and she had never seen him since.) The latest boyfriend in this kind of ménage either wants the daughter around to abuse her sexually or else wants her out of the house as being a nuisance and an unnecessary expense.

"The father of her first child had, of course, recognized her vulnerability. A girl of sixteen living on her own is easy prey. He beat her from the first, being drunken, possessive, and jealous, as well as flagrantly unfaithful. She thought a child would make him more responsible – sober him up and calm him down. It had the reverse effect. She left him.

"The father of her second child was a career criminal, already imprisoned several times. A drug addict who took whatever drugs he could get, he died under the influence. She had known all about his past before she had his child.

"The father of her third child was much older than she. It was he who suggested that they have a child – in fact he demanded it as a condition of staying with her. He had five children already by three different women, none of whom he supported in any way whatever.

"The conditions for the perpetuation of evil were now complete. She was a young woman who would not want to remain alone, without a man, for very long; but with three children already, she would attract precisely the kind of man, like the father of her first child – of whom there are now many – looking for vulnerable, exploitable women. More than likely, at least one of them (for there would undoubtedly be a succession of them) would abuse her children sexually, physically, or both.

“She was, of course, a victim of her mother’s behavior at a time when she had little control over her destiny. Her mother had thought that her own sexual liaison was more important than the welfare of her child, a common way of thinking in today’s welfare Britain. The same day, for example, I was consulted by a young woman whose mother’s consort had raped her many times between the ages of eight and fifteen with her mother’s full knowledge. Her mother had allowed this solely so that her own relationship with her consort might continue. It could happen that my patient will one day do the same thing.

“My patient was not just a victim of her mother, however; she had knowingly borne children of men of whom no good could be expected. She knew perfectly well the consequences and the meaning of what she was doing, as her reaction to something that I said to her – and say to hundreds of women patients in a similar situation – proved: next time you are thinking of going out with a man, bring him to me for my inspection, and I’ll tell you if you can go out with him.

“This never fails to make the most wretched, the most ‘depressed’ of women smile broadly or laugh heartily. They know exactly what I mean, and I need not spell it out further. They know that I mean that most of the men they have chosen have their evil written all over them... And they understand that if I can spot the evil instantly, because they know what I would look for, so can they – and therefore they are in large part responsible for their own downfall at the hands of evil men.

“Moreover, they are aware that I believe that it is both foolish and wicked to have children by men without having considered even for a second or a fraction of a second whether the men have any qualities that might make them good fathers. My patient did not start out with the intention of abetting, much less of committing evil. And yet her refusal to take seriously and act upon the signs that she saw and the knowledge that she had was not the consequence of blindness or ignorance. It was utterly willful. She knew from her own experience, and that of many people around her, that her choices, based on the pleasure or the desire of the moment, would lead to the misery and suffering not only of herself, but – especially – of her own children.

“The men in these situations also know perfectly well the meaning and consequences of what they are doing. The same day I saw the patient I have just described, a man aged twenty-five came into our ward, in need of an operation to remove foil-wrapped packets of cocaine that he had swallowed in order to evade being caught by the police in possession of them. As it happened, he had just left his latest girlfriend – one week after she had given birth to their child. They weren’t getting along, he said; he needed his space. Of the child, he thought not for an instant. I asked him whether he had any other children. ‘Four,’ he replied. ‘How many mothers?’ ‘Three.’ ‘Do you see any of your children?’ He shook his head. It is supposedly the duty of the doctor not to pass judgment on how his patients have elected to live, but I think I may have raised my eyebrows slightly. At any rate, the patient caught a whiff of my disapproval. ‘I know,’ he said. ‘I know. Don’t tell me.’

“These words were a complete confession of guilt. I have had hundreds of conversations with men who have abandoned their children in this fashion, and they all know perfectly well what the consequences are for the mother and, more important, for the children. They all know they are condemning their children to lives of brutality, poverty, abuse, and hopelessness. They tell me so themselves. And yet they do it over and over again, to such an extent that I should guess that nearly a quarter of British children are now brought up this way. The result is a rising tide of neglect, cruelty, sadism, and joyous malignity that staggers and appalls me. I am more horrified after fourteen years than the day I started.

“Perhaps the most alarming feature of this low-level but endemic evil, the one that brings it close to the conception of original sin, is that it is unforced and spontaneous. No one requires people to commit it. In the worst dictatorships, some of the evil that ordinary men and women do, they do out of fear of not committing it. But in modern Britain, no such conditions exist: the government does not require citizens to behave as I have described and punish them if they do not. The evil is freely chosen.

Dalrymple goes on to say the only way for this evil to be restrained is for British culture to regain a sense of morality that it once had and be willing to condemn

and shame and punish this behavior.

External restraint is possible, internal change is not.

It's a vivid illustration of Romans 3 and a very grim picture.

So that brings us to

MP#3 The good news of deliverance

Do you see the glaring flaw in my opening illustration about the Santo Tomas prison camp? Do you see why it fails as an illustration of the bondage of sin?

Because nobody wanted to be there.

The truly horrifying thing about the bondage of sin is that our sinful nature wants to be in bondage. It is a chosen slavery.

Sin is not just present in African dictatorships and inner city slums.

You see the bondage of sin in marriages, in families, in workplaces, in neighborhoods, even in churches.

Each little environment reveals the same selfish, destructive, egotistical, and willfully foolish behavior.

And Paul shows us that underneath the behavior is an immense pool of human pride and self-justification and self-deception and indifference toward God and fellow man.

This is the human problem. This is the human catastrophe.

This is what keeps human beings from solving our problems.

This is what makes this world the sad place that it is—our willing bondage to sin. Good grief, even as Christians, even having been forgiven and on the path of sanctification, we still all know the power and draw of the old sinful nature.

So, ask me why the Gospel is good news?

Because the Gospel is the story of God smashing through the prison gates to deliver prisoners who are willingly imprisoned and who have chosen captivity.

In spite of our self-justifying, petty selfishness.

In spite of our hatred of God for requiring us to be good, God sent his Son on a special mission to rescue us.

It took a humility and love greater than anything we could ever measure.

Jesus Christ giving himself as a sacrifice for people like us, for our forgiveness.

And when God in his mercy has awaked you spiritually, and enabled you to see the bondage of your sin and the misery of your captivity—then you know that the Gospel is truly good news!

