

2 - The Gospel of Forgiveness

Our last study concluded with these words from Luke's gospel (24:45-47):

"Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations."

The need for repentance has been preached, and the wonderful news that we can receive forgiveness through faith in Jesus has been preached, and countless millions have had their lives turned around by Jesus. This is clearly good news.

The 4-Spiritual Laws

Many people have learnt to share this gospel in four steps, known as "The 4-Spiritual Laws":

1. God created you for relationship with Him.
2. You are alienated from God because of your sin and destined for eternal hell.
3. Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin.
4. Only by faith and obedience to Jesus can we be restored to friendship with God.

This simple way of sharing the Gospel is extremely widely taught and used.

But comparing this with the Gospel Jesus announced in Mark 1 which we looked at in the last study, we can see they are very different. This is Jesus' three-line Gospel (Mark 1:15):

"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

So where did the 4-Spiritual Laws come from? Is it what Paul preached?

The answer to this question would surprise many Christians. In later studies in this series we will look at what Paul preached and see that it was very similar to Jesus' Gospel, and not at all like the 4-Spiritual Laws.

The 4-Spiritual Laws were devised by an evangelistic organisation called "Campus Crusade for Christ" and published in 1956. The four laws, or statements, are all biblical and are often supported by bible verses. But that does not mean that these four statements are a biblical representation of the Gospel.

A Gospel Summary?

Compare the 4-Spiritual Laws to Jesus summary of the Gospel which we started with:

"Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached..."

There is a stark difference: Jesus' summary contains no explanation. It is an abbreviation of the Gospel Mark recorded rather than an explanation. We will explore the implications of this in later studies. For now we simply need to observe that the 4-Spiritual Laws are not the same as the Gospel that Jesus preached. In particular, they have no reference to the Kingdom, which was central to Jesus' Gospel.

Because the 4-Spiritual Laws do not convey the Gospel that Jesus and the Apostles preached I do not think we can claim it is the Gospel at all!

Does it Matter?

Does it matter, we may ask. Countless people have come to faith through the 4-Spiritual Laws. Isn't that all that matters?

I think it matters for two reasons:

1. It is biblically wrong to say that the 4-Spiritual Laws explain the Gospel.
2. If we think the 4-Spiritual Laws explain the Gospel, we won't share the true Gospel.

Let's suppose we agree that the 4-Spiritual Laws are not the same as the New Testament Gospel. Does it matter? Here are two more reasons:

1. Shouldn't we trust that God knows best how the Gospel should be shared? It is a dangerous arrogance to replace it with our own invention.
2. The focus of the 4-Spiritual Laws is different from the true Gospel. And that has big implications.

The New Testament Gospel has the Kingdom of God at its centre; it is called "the Gospel of the Kingdom". The 4-Spiritual Laws have sin and forgiveness at their centre. We will call this "the gospel of the forgiveness of sins".

It doesn't scratch where it itches

"The gospel of the forgiveness of sins" focuses on an individual's sinful acts and the Cross of Christ. A problem with this way of presenting the Gospel is that most people don't readily relate to it as good news; it doesn't scratch where they itch. You therefore have to first work hard at getting a person to "see" that they have a problem in their relationship with God that really matters. Only then does this gospel sound like good news. You might be able to get them to pray a prayer asking for forgiveness but probably by the next day they will have forgotten all about it. The simple fact is that more than 90% of people who "respond" to this version of the gospel do not go on to become disciples of Jesus.

Convincing people of their Sin

The 4-Spiritual Laws require that we explain what sin is and try to get a person to feel the weight and consequence of their sin. Yet we never see Jesus or the apostles doing that. Indeed, Jesus told us that convincing people of their sin was the Holy Spirit's job, not ours! (John 16:8).

What about the Cross?

The Gospel of the Kingdom that Jesus preached makes no mention of the cross. We will look at this in more detail later. It is hard for a Christian to imagine how the Gospel can be shared without making the Cross of Christ central.

And yet in three short years, without explaining anything about the Cross, Jesus raised up more than 500 disciples to whom he appeared after His resurrection (1Cor 15:6). It seems likely that on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection Jesus gave a full explanation of His death as atonement:

"Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Lk 24:26-27)

Here, I think we have a significant point. An explanation of the Gospel in terms of our sin separating us from God is probably not generally the best approach. That can come later when a person has already met Jesus and they are curious to understand the scriptures. Let us learn from Jesus.