

What news is good news?



**CONSIDERING THE
FAR-REACHING YET
CLOSE-TO-HOME
NATURE OF THE
GOSPEL OF
JESUS CHRIST**



Article for Links Players
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I'M GOING TO AMBUSH YOUR FOURSOME in the middle of your round. I'll burst from the hedge along the eighth tee, just about the time everyone is resigned to the type of day it's going to be out there.

You know the rota: One player has shot his whole handicap wad already. He's turned quite jovial, actually. Another fella is one giant firing nerve because he's never had such a good round going in his life. And the two players who are just cruising along—they're sizing up each other for a silent back-nine competition that might be good if the one player can quit three-putting and the other learns how to keep his punch shots down when he's in the trees.

And ladies, don't think I haven't noticed you. One of you is wondering if you'll have time to make a run into the locker room at the turn to change into your more comfortable pair of golf shoes. Another of you wishes the others would talk a little less and play a little faster. Third among you might as well start picking up every time you hit it into the bunker—your sand play is that bad. And rounding out your foursome is that friend whose golf course concerns are overshadowed today by the dinner party her husband committed her to for tonight.

So here's the deal. I show up with my microphone in hand, a camera operator over my shoulder, and we're going to ask you all just one question. The same question for each of you. Here it is: *What would be good news for your golf game today?*

You already know I'd get eight different answers, and that's only because I've limited myself to two foursomes.

Some golfers would find good news in a modern driver, others in a youthful putting feel. Some would find good news in more enjoyable partners, others in winning their match. In today's economy, some would find good news in being able to play more often, others in their local course even surviving the recession. Good news for you might be finding an abandoned Pro V1 in the tall grass, but for her it might be adding that umbrella attachment to her push cart without pinching her finger this time!

When it comes to golf, all of us are looking for a different version of good news. And while a seasoned professional can teach you many different shots, or a golf store might sell you a broad variety of products, you can't find all the offers of good news in one place.

NOW LET'S GET SERIOUS and transfer this thinking to what those who talk about Jesus call the "good news." If this news is so good, why do some people have no interest in it at all? Shouldn't good news be good news for everyone?

Part of the difficulty rests in something we have already seen: what two people deem to be good news is not likely the same thing. Jesus healed one man of

blindness and another of leprosy—this was good news for them both. But obviously, their excitement would have been nil if the Jesus had done it backwards.

Good news, then, has to do with what we perceive to be our needs. That's not an absolute or even an accurate truth, but we'll come back to that later. For now, let's step aside and consider where the idea of good news comes from in the Bible and some ways it might really be good news to someone who needs it.

IN THE FIRST CHAPTER OF MARK, we read, "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God" (Mark 1:14). Immediately, this passage strikes a chord of curiosity because most of us have been taught that the good news—that is, the gospel—is encapsulated in the fact that "Jesus died for our sins." Yet here was Jesus speaking good news before anyone had the least notion that he would die for the atonement of sinners, ourselves included. In fact, Bible dictionaries willingly note that there was an addition made to the biblical idea of good news (a somewhat recognizable *euaggelion* in the transliterated Greek) after the full life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Perhaps, then—and this is a startling idea—we're not so clear on what the word *gospel* means in Scripture. Let's see what we can do to straighten that out.

Euaggelion itself suggests "glad tidings." When I have something to tell you that I know will be good news to you, I deliver it gladly. I am, in the broad sense of the word, *evangelistic* about it. I'm eager to share, even to spread, the news. More narrowly, in keeping with the confines of the Bible and particularly the New Testament, the good news I am eager to share is the story of the Savior. It is a gospel of grace and peace and glory.¹

This close look makes the idea of the gospel of Jesus so appealing, it may cause us to wonder how anyone could consider this "bad news." Yet when a messenger of old, for instance, stormed into the courts and reported that the king's greatest enemy was dead, this was cause for celebration in one palace or perhaps one kingdom only. If that enemy was a rival king, that rival's own household and kingdom may not have considered his death a good thing at all.

And even in a good king's own kingdom, detractors—though often secretive in their opinions and plots—may have sought power of their own; as long as the good king was in power, they yearned for something different.

All of this helps us make greater sense of Jesus' words that the "rejected cornerstone," while critical to the foundation of the building of God's kingdom, would be a stone that would crush those on whom it fell. To a certain number, then, Jesus was not good news, but very bad news. Certainly the Jewish and Roman leaders who did not adhere to the Messianic position of Jesus would not have considered the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John "good news." And neither do many of our own friends in our own time! To antagonists and true atheists alike, the gospels are "fiction," "moralism," and even "poison."²

SO WE'VE COME TO TWO OF THREE KEY QUESTIONS we will address as we move through the rest of this article. The first is quickly answered: *Might the good news of the Bible mean different things for different people?* For now, we will answer this inquiry with a simple *yes*. (I am fully aware that bells and whistles are going off in some minds right now. Just note one important qualifying factor at this stage—I did not say that there is more than one gospel. But this is a matter for our third question.)

The second question then follows: *How might the gospel be powerful in different ways for different people?* Let's take some time with five distinct examples of how the gospel might strike different people differently and yet be received positively by all.

1

The good news is that we don't have to do it on our own

In our work at Links Players, we enjoy the company of many ambitious and successful friends—recognizing that success in this case is limited to meaning the accomplishment of financial goals. These are people who understand devotion; they have dedicated themselves

to achievement. And they have made it.

But these are not people without struggles. Chief among them is frustration, primarily because they internalize responsibility. When the numbers aren't adding up and the company is threatened on every side, they may drop their head on the desk and say to themselves, "I can't do this alone." Successful people are often successful because they are so committed to success, but because they have built their own empires, they are uncertain where to go when great difficulty arises.

The same is true for many in the way they view their soul. They have been taught or otherwise become convinced that if they are to go to heaven, they must do so on their own. Their merit will get them there. And when they keep failing (sinning), they may rightly reach the conclusion, *I will never get to heaven if I have to do it on my own*. They land in a place of fatalistic discouragement or flippant dismissal about their chances of spending eternity with God.

The good news of Jesus, when it is taught according to the truth of salvation coming to us through the grace of Christ and according to his righteousness being credited to us, strikes right at the heart of all pressure-packed self-accomplishment scenarios. Yes, I may reject Jesus on the basis of a false theology that still tells me I can only get to God through my own moral living. But if I see the good news for what it is—a relief of all the weight of responsibility that I carry on my shoulders—then I can receive it gladly, just as it is gladly told to me.

2

The good news is that we are loved in spite of us

At a deeper emotional level perhaps is the misunderstanding that one's sin disqualifies them from God's love. No doubt there is much bad news in the truth that one's unredeemed sin does separate them from God both now and into eternity. But the price of atonement has already been paid, and Jesus' blood cleanses the sin of every believer who calls on his

name for forgiveness. When this doctrine is preached (or shared in serious conversation), it certainly stands up as “good news.” In fact, the result is that not only is God’s love made accessible, it is glorified—he cared so much for those he would call his own that he came in the flesh and shed his untainted blood for our sakes. Our sin does not disqualify us from God’s love. Far from it! The good news is that our sin provoked him in his love to make a way for us to lay hold of it once and forever.

3

The good news is that we are rescued from death

Many people fear dying, especially as they grow older and are uncertain of their salvation. Death is “the greatest unknown” for these people, and they fear the possible outcomes of their life once they have gone to the grave. In one way, these people recognize a staple of biblical theology: the soul endures. That is, they are not of the camp that says we are only material beings, destined to a hole in the ground, where our bones will rot and that is that. (You see, for such materialists the fact that we are rescued from death is not good news; it is really no news at all.)

But the apostles, writing in the aftermath of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, understood the fullness of his work. And they saw particularly that Jesus’ resurrection made it possible for us all to be resurrected, to live a second life in eternity with our Lord. The King had conquered death. When a man or woman fearful of death becomes convinced of the effectiveness of Jesus’ work in this way, they find this to be good news. Death is not an end, but instead a passage into the promise of life with God in eternity.

4

The good news is that we receive true purpose

Although you don’t find too many aimless golfers in the world—they all pursue at least 18 goals a

round!—we all know those who see little purpose in life other than satisfying themselves for another day. A number of years ago now, author Bob Buford authored a book picked up by many successful people, called *Halftime*. Writing to a middle-aged audience, Buford challenged his readers to recognize that it may be time in their lives to move “from success to significance.” Again, Buford was employing the definition of success that locks one’s eyes on acquiring material possessions or personal comforts and pleasures. Buford echoed the cry of many: “There has to be more to life than this.”

But unless we recognize the transcendent glory of God and hear of his greater plan for our lives and our world, it is unlikely that we will ever be moved off a course that rewards us—even when our soul aches over the bankruptcy of it all. And in that unsatisfied soul lies the desire for good news. When Jesus called the disciples to follow him, they knew that this kind of life—though confusing and demanding in entirely new ways—came with a sense of direction. Rather than picking and choosing, and missing and hurting, those whose hearts are given over to Jesus find an abundant life over and above “the good life.” To gain Christ is to gain a life fueled by living in his care and for his purposes. This is such good news to the one without direction.

5

The good news is that while we are not worthy, we are worth it

Incomplete theology can damage one’s interest in God. Certainly, you have friends and acquaintances who have dismissed God or the church for something they thought to be true. But they were basing their thinking on teaching that didn’t present them with a full, accurate picture of who God is and what he offers.

One such problem comes through a merciless application of the law that staunchly teaches the unworthiness of all people to receive God’s love. It is true that our sin, when set against the backdrop of God’s wonderful perfection, makes us unworthy of standing in his eternal presence. In the same way that I would

declare myself unworthy of playing on the PGA Tour because of the many faults in my golf game, I am unworthy of standing alive before the throne of God because of the many sins in my mind and my heart. That doctrine of depravity is sound; my words and actions prove it. But it is a treacherously incomplete teaching when allowed to stand on its own. And many people, recognizing this bad news (but not the bad theology behind it) say to themselves, “God doesn’t want me. I’ve done nothing to deserve his love. In fact, I’ve done everything to make myself unworthy of him.”

But here is the good news we *must* also tell them: Somehow, in the eyes of God and in his heart of love for us, he has deemed us “worth it.” Indeed, we are so worth it that came in the flesh to die for us. This makes perfect sense in the human realm. An infant is not worthy to have his diaper changed—all he has done is soil himself. And yet, the loving mom and dad consider this child so worth it in their love that they change his diaper and even spoon more food into his mouth so that the whole process might repeat itself! Over and over, as our children grow, they do things that make them “unworthy” of our love, yet we do not stop loving them. To us, they are always worth it.

To God we are worth it. Worth his mercy, worth his long-suffering, worth his painful, undeserved death. To those who think that God will have nothing to do with them, that is the best news they could ever hope to hear.

FIVE EXAMPLES. Five ways good news may come to people whose lives and psyches are quite different. Are there more possibilities of good news? Certainly. When John the Baptist faced his own disillusionment after wallowing in prison for no reason other than being a faithful prophet of God, he sent his own disciples to inquire of Jesus, “Are you the one?” Jesus’ reply was not theological but practical. He said: “Go back to John and report what you have seen and heard. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Luke 7:22). That is, Jesus proclaimed that needs of every kind were being met in him.

Which leads us to our final question: *Is it possible that one gospel, one message, can bring good news to everyone?*

It’s an important question because we could not, as we noted at the beginning of this article, find a singular answer for every golfer’s problem. The solution for a wayward driver will not work to solve your wedge play. And we would find the same no-one-remedy-cures-all principle at work in most any arena of life. So can it really be said of Jesus? Can it be preached with conviction that the good news enveloped in him is good for every need?

In a way this brings us back to wrestling with the falsehood that the good news we each need is determined by the needs we each feel. If I am feeling that my biggest need these days is a reliable car that will capacitate my current business venture or stroke my bruised ego, Jesus may not have good news for me. The sovereignty of God may not include a new car in the near future, no matter how important I think its acquisition would be.

But this does not mean that Jesus is not good news for everyone. If we found the cure for cancer, we would declare this universally good news, not just for those who have cancer. It would also be good news for those who love someone with cancer, and it would be good news for all who may one day get cancer—which could be any of us!

The condition that resides in each of us because of our sin is universal; we are all afflicted. And in meeting this need as only he can, Jesus accomplishes not only our salvation from sin but meets of our deepest needs, from disappointment over our lack of ability to fear of death to a sense of worthlessness. In this way, he is good news for all of us and good news for each of us. ¹

NOTES

¹Grace (Acts 20:24); peace (Ephesians 6:15); glory (2 Corinthians 4:4)

²It was the late Christopher Hitchens who named his most vitriolic book, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.