

Explaining the Gospel to a friend

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[0 : 0 0] Tonight I'd like us to turn together to the well-known words of John 3.16.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. These are wonderful words, words that I'm sure many of us have known for a long, long time and in many ways they sum up what the message of the Gospel is all about. As a church one of our great goals is that as a congregation and as individual disciples that we would be able to share our faith with other people.

That's a key part of being a Christian. We want to spread the good news of Jesus and if you look back at the history of the church that's exactly how the church has grown. It started off with a tiny crowd of some men and some women in Jerusalem spreading to the surrounding regions spreading, spreading, spreading across all the nations of the world.

And we want to see that continue because as we look at our village around us tonight we can see that there are many people that as far as we know, as far as we can tell they do not seem to believe in God or if they do they don't seem to be too concerned about their relationship with Him. Same's true in our workplaces you probably go to work tomorrow and you may well be in a situation where you are in the minority as a Christian. Same among our friends, even within our families there may be people in your own family who have yet to come to faith in Jesus. We don't live in a day when most people around us are professing Christians. We live in a day and an age when most people aren't. And for that reason we long to see people come to faith, we long for God the Holy Spirit to be at work among us, we long to see people changing so that they go from being unbelievers and they are transformed into committed followers of Jesus Christ. That's our goal and for that reason we need to keep praying that God would be at work among us. That's the foundation of everything that we do as a church. We look to the God who is able to do what we can't do on our own. And we go to God in prayer that He'd be at work among us because we know that it is only through Him that we can accomplish anything. We never want to forget the words that Jesus said, I am the vine, you are the branches, whoever abides in me and I in Him

He adheres to the bearers much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. And that's true of every single thing that we try to achieve as a church and as disciples. Whatever we do, whether it's in our worship, our discipleship or our evangelism, we are doing everything in complete dependence on Jesus. However, at the same time we must never forget that if God is going to be at work among us, then He is going to use His servants to do that work. In other words, He is going to use you. That's the biblical pattern, whether it's Moses or Joshua or David or Peter or Paul or Timothy or even the woman at the well, Jesus uses people as the means through which the gospel is spread. And it's not just the

[4 : 11] Bible that evidences that, history evidences it as well. God has used millions of people to spread the good news of Jesus. Some of these people are very famous, some of these you will have never heard of. In fact, by far the majority of them you will have never heard of. But they have been the means through which God has worked in order to draw people into His kingdom. And Paul summarizes it so clearly. He says, How then will they call on Him who they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And I think there's a really important word in that verse and that's the word someone. God uses people to spread the good news of Jesus. And that's true even at times of revival. We can think in our own context of God being at work in a very, very powerful way at very particular times. But if you look at the history of, I think, any revival, you will see two things. You will see first of all that God, the Holy Spirit is powerfully at work. But at the same time, you will see people as a key means through which that work is done. Because when you think back to revivals, we tend to think of people who were used by God. So we have this pattern that we want to just think through logically in terms of the work of the Gospel.

We want to see people come to faith. We long to see people come to faith. So we need to pray that God would be at work among us because He's the one who's able to bring people in.

But we also need to be prepared for God to work through us in order to achieve His purposes.

And it's that third part that I want us to think about tonight. And in particular, I want us to think about the whole issue of sharing the Gospel with our friends. Sharing the Gospel with our colleagues. Sharing the Gospel with our families. That's something that we long to see happen. Wouldn't it be brilliant if this week we all had a conversation about the Gospel with a colleague or a friend or someone in our family? Wouldn't that be amazing if we all came back next week and we said, I was talking to somebody about the Gospel last week. It would be wonderful if that happened. It's something that we want to see happening. It's something that we want to be doing ourselves. We want to be able to talk about our faith. It would be wonderful. But for many of us, talking about the Gospel is very, very difficult. It's something that for many of us, we find very daunting and very hard. Now, the first thing I want to say is that if you feel like that, you are not in the minority. You are in the majority because that's how most people feel. In fact,

I think it's probably how virtually every Christian feels. And it's very difficult because so often we can feel guilty. We can feel crippled by a sense of failure because we feel that we are so rubbish at talking about our faith. And please don't think that I'm different because even as a minister, it's not that often that I get the chance to talk to someone about the Gospel. It's not that often that somebody will come and ask me questions about Christianity. And yet the times that it has happened, I look back and I think I always come away thinking I made a right hash of that. I tend to think that I haven't made it clear. And one of the reasons that I often make a mess of it is because all too often I don't know where to start. And so you get a bit nervous, you get flustered, you try to say too much and you end up saying not really making much sense and it doesn't really fit together. And you come away thinking that you've just made a mess of the whole thing.

[8 : 39] Opportunities to share the Gospel with people don't come up very often. And yet when they do, all too often we muck it up. Certainly that's how I tend to feel about it. But I want us to think about this together tonight. Because if you find it hard to talk about the Gospel, to talk about your faith, you're not on your own. It's how many of us feel.

But the fact that we find it hard is not a reason for us to just give up and to think we can't do it. And it's easy to think like that. It's easy to think, well other people should do it because other people are better at it. We mustn't think like that because God can use us all. And our goal and our priority is not to think, well because I've made a mistake, because I've mucked it up, I'm not going to do it. That's not a good way to approach you. What we want to do is think, well how can I get better at it? How can I be better at doing this? Well, one of the key steps to being better at sharing the Gospel is to be better prepared. And that's a biblical command. Peter says, in your heart's honour, Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks for you a reason for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect. Peter is telling us, be ready. And so tonight, that's what I want us to try and do. I want us to see if we can better prepare ourselves for the occasions when we might be asked about our faith. And in particular, I want you to just imagine a friend coming up to you and asking the question, what is Christianity all about? Now as I said, that's not a question that we get asked very often. And we have to remember that we can't necessarily force a Gospel conversation. We sometimes want to try and do that. We want to try and go and force a conversation to be about the Gospel. Very often that doesn't work. But sometimes people will come to us, or sometimes the opportunity will present itself. Sometimes the conversation might arise and very often it's when we least expect it. And so if your friend asked you that question, what would you say? If your friend asked, what is the Gospel? Could you explain it in two or three minutes? If your friend said, why do you believe what you believe?

Where would you start? If your friend said, can you explain Christianity to me? What stuff should you include? What stuff should you leave out? How do you answer the question, what is Christianity all about? Well obviously there are many ways in which that question can be answered. And I'm not suggesting tonight that what I say is the only way or the right way or the best way and in many ways I'm not an expert in any of this. The crucial point though is that whatever our answer to this question is, it must be biblical. And therefore we want to base our answer on what the Bible says. And for us tonight, we're going to use the wonderful words of John 3.16. And as we look at this verse, we are seeing an answer to the question, what is Christianity all about? And there are six things that I want us to remember in terms of our reply. So we're not really doing anything complicated tonight, it's pretty basic. But it's just if someone said to you tomorrow, why are you a Christian?

Then there's six things I want you to try and remember. Number one, you can see there, the God of the Bible is real. Now that might seem very obvious, but it's very important to remember and recognize that the reality of God is at the very centre of the Christian faith. That's why when you read John 3.16, the starting point is God. And exactly the same pattern is seen in the Bible as a whole because you turn to page one of the Bible in Genesis one verse one, the first statement to clear in the beginning, God. It's all reminding us that God is the ground and source of all other reality and our faith and our understanding and our teaching and what we believe is grounded on the fact that the God revealed to us in the Bible is real. And that's the first thing that we need to say. We are Christians because God is real. And that itself might lead your conversation with your friend into other areas. In fact, this might be the key stumbling block that your friend can't get past. They might say that, well, I don't believe in God. And they might say to you, well, where's the evidence for God? That's what you see very often people say, where's the evidence that proves the existence of God? They say your faith is just blind. It's irrational. It's just believing in fairy tales. It's all that kind of stuff. People make all kinds of kinds of accusations like that. And to them, it's a big stumbling block. But of course, there's a lot that we can say in response to the person who questions us like that.

In fact, I would suggest that that we should respond to that by saying that it is only through recognizing the reality of God that we can make any sense of the world around us.

[14 : 53] So ask some big questions. Is the universe real? The answer is yes. Does life exist?

Yes. Are we conscious, rational beings? Yes, we are. Is there order and logic in the world around us? Yes, there is. Do we have a consciousness of morality, of right and wrong? Yes, we do.

Do we have an appreciation of beauty? Yes, we do. I'm sure your friend would agree with all of these things. They're basic truths of human experience, but you have to then ask the key question, why? Why are these things true? And I would argue that without the God of the Bible, you will struggle to find a satisfactory explanation for all of these things. You might find an explanation for some of these things, but not for all. So you might have a friend who's got a very kind of scientific, a purely scientific, non-supernatural worldview. So they would be able to say, well, well, well, here we have a series of scientific processes that provide an explanation for life and for the material universe around us. That may be true, but that worldview struggles to provide a grounding for morality or for beauty. Or your friend might have a worldview that's based very much on the fact that love is the most important attribute, but yet that worldview struggles to explain why, or where, the other truths of reality like life and matter and rationality and all of these things have come from. In terms of all the key truths of human experience, the only coherent explanation for the reality of life and morality and matter and beauty and rationality, the only coherent explanation is the God of the Bible, because what the Bible tells us and what we see around us all makes sense. So the Bible tells us that God is created and we only have to open our eyes to see a creation all around us. The Bible tells us that God is the giver of life and again, all around us, we see life in abundance. The God of the Bible is orderly and we look at the world and we see order evidenced all around us. The God of the Bible is a conscious, rational, personal being and we are as well because we bear his image as the

Bible tells us. The God of the Bible has a sense of right and wrong and so do we. The God of the Bible values love and beauty and we regard these things as precious as well.

In other words, what the Bible says about God and what we value as the basic truths of human existence, they fit together perfectly, which is why the evidence for the reality of God is everywhere. It's all around us. It's absolutely clear. And the truth is, the burden of proof actually lies on the other person in their conversation, on your friend who doesn't believe in God because you need to ask them, how do you know what is right and wrong? How do you know if something like love is real? How do you know where the world has come from? And if you push them, you'll expose the fact that they don't really have the answer to these questions. And the key point you want to highlight, I think, is that if we recognise that God is real, then it should change everything because if God is real, who's in charge? He is. If God is real, is he answerable to us or are we answerable to him? We are answerable to him. And if God is real, should he be listening to us or should we be listening to him? First and foremost, we should be listening to him. And so step one, we want to highlight the fact that the God of the Bible is real. Step two, we want to say that people are precious. That's a key truth and it's highlighted in John 3.16.

[19 : 28] We're told that God so loved the world. And that's highlighted in the key biblical truth that people are precious. It's an absolutely foundational biblical doctrine that every single human being who has ever lived is precious. Again, you go back to the very beginning of the Bible, you see that in Genesis 1.26 and 27 where God tells us that humanity is made in his own image. And throughout the whole of the Bible, again and again and again, we see God caring for people because they are precious. So no matter who you are, no matter where you live, no matter what your status is, your race, your nationality, no matter what problems you may have, as Christians, we believe that everyone is precious. And one of the most glorious truths being presented to us by the Bible is the fact that the God who reigns over the whole universe, the God who has created all that there is, the God who is bigger, stronger, wiser and holier than we could ever imagine, that God thinks that you are special. And that is one of the many reasons why the Christian message is such good news for the world today because we live in a world today where many people are not regarded as particularly precious. So we have countless lives being lost in places like the Middle East and Africa with hardly any interest from the Western media. We have certain classes of people who are marginalised and shunned even in our own society and we have vulnerable individuals who are left feeling that nobody cares about them. And into that world the message of Christianity tells people that they are precious and it reveals a God whose love is greater than anything we could have ever imagined. And again, the worldview that denies the existence of God has got a huge problem, a huge problem trying to explain why people are precious. And here you can ask your friend who doesn't believe in God whether they think people are precious and if they do think people are precious they have to be able to explain why because if our world is ultimately explained by meaningless chance then every human life is just a pointless accident. And thank God that the Bible tells us that that is not true. At the heart of Christianity is the fact that people are precious.

So we want to tell people that God in the Bible is real, we want to tell people that people are precious. And thirdly we want to tell people that the world is broken. John 3.16 begins with a phrase for God so loved the world. Now at first glance that seems like a very positive statement doesn't it? It's a wonderful message, God so loved the world and it is very positive. But as we read that it's important to recognise that when John uses the word world he is not using it in a positive sense. You go through the Gospel of John and when he uses the word world he tends not to be talking about something good, he is generally talking about something bad. Right from the start of the Gospel he explains that even though the world was made by God it has not known God and it is a world that is now burdened by the reality of sin. It's rejected, it's creator. And again the whole

Bible emphasises this message. Again go back to Genesis, God's created the universe, he's crowned that creation with a precious human race but then very quickly humanity rebels and creation is cursed. As a result the world is broken. And as I've said many times it's the easiest biblical doctrine to prove because the evidence is all around us. That's why we see people suffering in the world. That's why we see people treating others with appalling cruelty. That's why we see people who are deeply troubled and broken in their own minds as they struggle to find peace. The world around us is broken and Christianity does not deny that for one moment. Other world views deny that. So people will say that suffering and pain and cruelty is just part of life or it's just the way it is. Christianity does not say that. Christianity says that all of these things are horrible. And I think that's one of the great things about the Bible. Particularly in regard to death. People often talk about death as well you know it's just one of these things. The Bible says death is not just one of those things. Death is a horrible enemy and it's something that shouldn't be there.

As far as the Bible is concerned all sin and wickedness and pain and sorrow and death is wrong and awful and it arises from the fact that something is not right. We have turned away from God. And it's a very important thing to remember because your friend may come to you with the objection which says well how can I believe in God when there's all this suffering in the world and yet the truth is that the blame for that suffering lies at our own feet. Because the argument that says how can I believe in God when there's all this suffering in the world is effectively saying God I don't want to listen to you but everything that goes wrong is your fault. So we say that. I'm not going to listen to you but everything that goes wrong as a result is your fault. And it's absurd. At the heart of the Bible's message is the fact that we need to listen to God and the world is broken because we've ignored that principle. So if we're asking the question what is Christianity all about the Bible is the God of the Bible is real. People are precious. The world is broken. Fourthly Jesus has come to fix it. Often people will object to Christianity because they look at the state of the world and they say why doesn't God do anything about it.

Maybe you've heard that yourself. Has anyone said that to you? They say why isn't God doing anything about it. So your friend might say to you why doesn't God deal with all that's wrong. Why doesn't God take steps to put things right. Why doesn't God come and help us. And your friend might say if God won't do anything then he's not worth believing in. And do you know what? They would be right. A God who would not do anything to help a broken world is not worth serving. But the whole point of Christianity is that God has done something.

[26 : 58] In fact he's done the most incredible thing that the world has ever seen. John 3.16 tells us what he did. He gave his only son. And the glorious truth being said before us is that Jesus Christ has been sent by his father to fix a broken world and to rescue a people who are precious to God. That's why it all fits together. He's come because the world is broken. And he's come because people are precious but he has not given up on us. And in giving his son God has provided everything that we need. And he's dealing with everything that has gone wrong. So don't ever ever ever let somebody say to you why doesn't God do something about it. He has. That's what Christianity is all about. And here is perhaps the opportunity to explain to your friend that when Jesus died on the cross he died as our substitute.

And in doing so the consequences of our sin fell onto his shoulders so that we could be forgiven. You could talk about the great exchange that lies at the heart of Christianity. Our sin counted to him. His righteousness counted to us. God did not spare his own son but he gave him up for us. So God is real. People are precious. The world is broken. Jesus has come to fix it. Fifthly we need to respond in faith. So John 3 16 tells us says what it tells us the response that God requires from us. Whoever believes in him. So you've just told your friend what Jesus has done. Now you're telling him what they need to do.

And this is where we see that the gospel is simple. It is beautifully simple because all we have to do is trust in Jesus. And it's really important to highlight the simplicity of this fact. God asks that we trust him and he will do the rest. That's why Christianity is a message of grace. It's a free gift that we don't earn. It's not something that we deserve but it is freely given to us by a generous and kind God. And here in John 3 16 you see the astonishing difference between what God has done and what we are asked to do. I think I've said this before but you look at what God had to do. God had to give his only son, his precious beloved, perfect son. He had to hand him over to suffer, to be humiliated, to be mocked, to be betrayed, to be tried, to be beaten, to be crucified.

God had to do all of that. And all we have to do is believe. What God had to do is massive.

What we have to do is so simple. There's a marvelous contrast there. We simply have to believe which just means to trust in Jesus, to rely on what he has done. And maybe you could ask your friend who they rely on. That's really the key question at all. Who are we relying on for life and death? A Christian is simply someone who is relying on Jesus.

[30 : 58] Now there's three important implications that arise under this heading that I just want to highlight. First of all, there's an urgency in this response. You'll see that that's brought out in the words later in the verses, whoever believes in him should not perish. The brokenness of the world has placed humanity in a dangerous condition. This is why Christianity is not about self-improvement. It's not about personal development. It's not about lifestyle enhancement.

It is a matter of life and death. The Gospel is incredibly urgent. It's far more urgent than a cure for cancer. It is a matter of life and death. There's urgency in the response.

But secondly, we've also been reminded here that there's no middle ground. It says that whoever believes in him, these two words are highlighting the exclusive nature of Christianity.

Jesus has come to be our Savior, but he is also the only Savior. And that's where we see that when we recognize who Jesus really is, our relationship with him is black or white.

We are either for him or against him. And this truth has been brought out very well by C.S. Lewis in what's known as a trilemma. We talk about a dilemma where you're choosing between two things. C.S. Lewis sets out a trilemma regarding Jesus. And some of you may have heard this, but it's worth repeating. He's talking about the whole idea that people tend to approach Jesus and think, oh yeah, he's a good person, a good teacher and I quite like Jesus. Not necessarily the Son of God, but somebody to be respected. Here's what C.S. Lewis has to say about that. I'm trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him. I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic on the level with a man who says he's a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the

[33 : 30] Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool. You can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher.

He's not left that open to us. He did not intend to. And he's presenting us with this great choice. If you look at what Jesus says, you are either forced to conclude that he was a liar or a lunatic or he's the Lord. And there's no middle ground when it comes to Jesus. You can't say, well, I kind of like him. I kind of don't. You are either for him or against him. There's an exclusive element to the gospel of Jesus Christ. But alongside that exclusive element, there is also a wonderful, inclusive emphasis in the gospel because the invitation is to everyone. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him. And that whoever is one of the most precious words that we have. Doesn't matter who you are, how little or how much you know, how many mistakes or successes you have in your life, how young or old you are. The offer of the gospel is for whoever. It's for absolutely everyone. So we can recap. Someone asked you, what's Christianity all about? Go to John 3 16 in your mind and go through these points. The God of the Bible is real. People are precious. The world is broken. Jesus has come to fix it. We must respond in faith. And finally, you want to tell them that being a Christian is brilliant.

And that's a vital point that must never, ever be forgotten when you are sharing your faith because Christianity is good news. It is brilliant news because as John 3:16 tells us whoever believes in him will have eternal life. That's the great goal of Christianity that we would have eternal life. It is the greatest promise, the greatest gift, the most wonderful hope that the world has ever known. Jesus is promising us eternal life. And that word eternal is really, really important. At one level, it speaks of a life that's never going to end. And that's a glorious promise that we have in the gospel, the fact that when we die, we will be with God forever and ever and ever, and there will be no end to it. There's a wonderful quantity there in the sense that it will go on and on and on, never ending, no separation, no fading, no decay, nothing to stop it, nothing to take it away. But that word eternal speaks of more than that. It's not just talking about quantity, it is also talking about quality. The gospel gives us a quality of life that is amazing.

Now that's not in terms of riches or worldly status because these things only leave us empty anyway. It's talking about a wonderful new life that we have as part of God's family.

And the great point that John makes in chapter 3 is that that life begins now. That's why you read the verses after John 3:16, he talks about the present reality of our salvation.

[37 : 38] Right now we are not condemned. We have life now through faith in Jesus Christ. And the point you want to tell your friend is that that life is brilliant because it is brilliant to get up each day as a child of God, knowing that you are loved by Him. It is so good to be part of a church family where we are all brothers and sisters who love each other and who serve together and who care about one another. It is so amazing to be able to talk to God as we go through our daily life about anything and everything. We can come to God and speak to Him knowing that He is listening. It is so satisfying to know that whatever your job is or however your career may go or whatever may happen in terms of your life, you can go through your life as a servant of God and it does not matter if you are earning millions or earning pennies or at the top of your job or just plugging away in the routine of life, you are doing that for the glory of God as part of His purpose. You are serving

Him. And knowing Jesus as your Savior brings a peace into your life that nothing else can compare to you. So that even though life can be hard as Christians, we have so many precious and wonderful promises from God that we can face these hardships with hope and with joy because eternal life is amazing. Knowing Jesus is amazing. Being a Christian is amazing. And if you ever share the Gospel with a friend, please make sure that you leave them in no doubt whatsoever that following Jesus is just the best thing that can ever happen to you because the message of the Gospel is good. And you know I think that that is sometimes the key to overcoming our fears, about speaking about our faith. Never forget that you are sharing good news because you know good news is easy to tell. Good news is easy to tell.

So if someone asks you this week what Christianity is all about, maybe try and remember these six things. Maybe you've got another way of explaining it if so, that's brilliant. But if you don't know where to start, these six things I hope will help leave you better prepared.

And you know God's not daft. Often we think well you know these opportunities never come or hardly ever come. And I look at my own life and I think to myself you know these opportunities haven't really come very often to me. But then I think to myself well have I ever tried to prepare myself for those opportunities? And in many ways I haven't. And God's not daft. If we are better prepared I think it's probably much more likely that in God's providence He will send the questioners to us. So maybe our prayer this week can be Lord when this question comes help me to be ready. Because if God is going to bring the gospel message to Carlyle and Lewis he's going to be using people like you. Let's pray together. Our

Father we pray that by your grace we will be better prepared to share the gospel. And we confess that very often we're not ready and we're overcome with fear and nerves and uncertainty and those odd times when people do ask us we tend to panic. And we pray Lord that you would just help us to be better prepared. Help us to have clear thoughts and wise minds.

[42 : 14] And above all to just give a biblical response. Help us to remember these six points and to leave people in no doubt that you are real and that they are precious. To show them that the world is broken but that Jesus has come to fix it. Help us to push them to respond in faith and help us to leave them in no doubt that knowing you is just the best. Please help us Lord and by your grace use us to share the good news of Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.