We've been looking at how we're called to take the gospel out into the world. And we're going to wrap up, this week and next, by considering two broad types of people you might meet as you do that; or, if you're not yet a Christian, who you might be among.

And today, I want us think about someone for whom living a good, upright, moral kind of life matters - maybe even religion, or spirituality, matters… and what does the gospel have to say to them - or to you?

And to do that, I want us to look at two occasions when the apostles addressed people just like that.

And the first is the one we had read to us - because the people Peter was addressing were highly moral, religiously observant Jews. But the second is in Acts 14, where Paul addresses a crowd, not of Jewish but pagan worshippers.

But the fact that these two addresses happened at all tells you something, doesn't it? That whether you're a strict, highly moral monotheist, like the Jews Peter's talking to, or a very spiritual, open-to-many-different-gods polytheist, like the gentiles Paul's addressing, spirituality and morality are not enough, are they? And being serious and sincere about your faith are not enough… even morally good and religious people need something more.

The question is, what? So, that's what we're going to look at: What are you trusting in? Who are you accountable to? And what do your stories tell you?

What Are You Trusting In?
Let me ask you a different question: Who or what gets you really riled, and worked up, because they are beyond the pale? Who do you find yourself criticising, or mocking? And I don't just mean laughing at in a friendly way, I mean in a despising way.

You see, Peter and the other disciples have just been filled with the Spirit for the first time, and they spill out onto the streets of Jerusalem, and the people watching hear them proclaiming 'the mighty works of God' (Acts 2:11).

But who are the people watching them? Acts 2:5: 'Devout men from every nation under heaven.' Jewish pilgrims who have flocked to Jerusalem for Pentecost. And many of them have come *miles*. And given how unsafe travel was back then, they've risked their lives, they've spent their money to be there. So when Luke says they're devout, he's not exaggerating, is he? Their religion matters to them.

But did you notice their response to what they see and hear? Verse 13, some 'mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."'

So, it's not just 'bad' people who mock and criticise others is it? Good people, people who genuinely care about morality can too. And they might be people in the street, or a colleague in the office, or a friend on campus, and they see or hear something they don't like - maybe in the conduct or words of Christians - and they criticise it. But if you're a Christian, notice here how that criticism can become an unlooked for opportunity to share the gospel.

And yet, for all of us, what does *who* we mock, or criticise, say about what *we* think makes a good person?

You see, Peter tells the crowd 'we're not drunk', because v15, 'it is only the third hour of the day' - it's only 9 in the morning. Which means, it's only a few hours since the men in that crowd got up, and prayed what every Jewish man would have prayed to start his day: 'Thank you God that I am not a Gentile.' Thank you God that I am not like these other people.

Now, imagine that was you. If you prayed that every day, what would it do to you? Doesn't it begin to ingrain in you a way of seeing the world, and of comparing yourself to others? Us and them. The good and the bad. And here, the people they're mocking may be fellow Jews, but 'ah! they're drunk Jews.'

Now, that prayer almost certainly began as a prayer of thankfulness, for God's grace in choosing Israel. But can you see how over time it could become a means of comparing themselves, favourably, to others' race, ethnicity, or lifestyle, and to feel better about themselves as they did.

So ask yourself, do you ever find yourself comparing yourself like that? 'Thank God I am not like those people over there.'

But what is that? Isn't that a form of self-righteousness - of grounding our worth, and trusting in, our own moral goodness? That we can hold our heads up, because we're not as bad as *them*?

But if you start to notice that attitude in others, there's a danger isn't there? The danger of going, 'Yeh, and thank you God I am not like those self-righteous people.'

You see, Paul opens his letter to the Romans by critiquing the person who turns his back on God. Today, we might call such a person secular. But then, in chapter 2, he turns to the religious person and asks, 'but are you any better? You who judge others - aren't you just as guilty. Because you don't even live up to your own standards, let alone God's.'

Francis Schaeffer famously said, there would be enough to condemn us on the Day of Judgement, if God simply replayed all the times we've criticised others and then done the exact same thing. Because think of all the time you've criticised others for lying… well, have you ever lied? Or for greed… and have you ever coveted? Or criticised other people's driving… well have you ever broken the speed limit? And in judging others we end up judging ourselves.

And that judging, that comparing might make the moral person feel better about themselves, but can't it also make us feel worse? Because we see how good others are, but then we look at ourselves, and the sins we're still struggling with, and we despair. But why do we despair? Isn't it also because in that moment we're grounding our worth, and our standing, in our own goodness… or lack of it? So isn't that too a form of trusting in self? Just this time we realise there's not a lot to trust in, so we need to try harder.

Ok, but in Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas are confronted with a very different crowd - ethnically, maybe even morally. And yet, they're equally religious and equally devout. Because they're in Lystra, in modern day Turkey, and they heal a lame man, and the crowd goes crazy! Acts 14:11, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!"

And the priest of Zeus comes with these oxen to offer sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas, because they are clearly gods. But Paul and Barnabas, v14-15, 'tore their garments and rushed into the crowd, crying out, "Men, why are you doing these things?"'

Good question, isn't it? Before you answer it, why do Paul and Barnabas do what *they* do? Why tear their clothing?

Well, in their culture, it's a sign of grief. Now, does the self-righteous person, the person trusting in their own righteousness, feel that grief for others? They might feel it for *themselves*, as they feel lousy about themselves in comparison to others; *or* they might feel *better* about themselves, as we've seen. But what they don't feel is genuine grief for those they're critiquing.

So if you find yourself critiquing others, ask yourself, are you also genuinely grieving for them?

Ok, but why does this crowd want to sacrifice these oxen? Well, if ingrained into the crowd of worshippers at Pentecost was the idea that they were morally better than others, ingrained into *this* crowd of worshippers is the idea that the gods must be appeased, and kept on side, by sacrifice and ritual. And that if you do that, the gods will give you what you want.

Now, you and I may not worship Zeus, but have there been times when something bad happens in your life and you think, 'I don't deserve this! - I've been a good person, or look at all the sacrifices I've made.' Or when something good happens and you think, 'yeh, I deserve this - look at all the sacrifices I've made, or the good things I've done.' But when we think like that, aren't we betraying the same transactional approach to God as the priest of Zeus with his oxen?

So notice how Peter begins his sermon at Pentecost. He starts by saying, 'it's only 9 in the morning!' It's too early to drink wine even by Swiss standards.' Instead, he says, this is the fulfilment of all the prophet Joel said would happen.

But then he starts the sermon proper. Verse 22, "Men of Israel, hear these words: *Jesus of Nazareth…*" He's faced with an audience of good, moral, religious people, and where does he take them? Does he rail against the wine producers of the day who get people drunk by 9 in the morning? Does he take aim at the immorality of Roman imperial policy, or the corruption and vanity of Herod, or the questionable lifestyles of the elite, or the work-shyness of the poor? No. What do these people who take life and faith seriously need to hear? Jesus.

Or think of Paul before his pagan crowd: v15, "We bring you good news" - literally - we proclaim to you the gospel - "that you should turn from these vain things to a living God." (Acts 14:15). In other words, these rituals you're engaging in will never do for you what you want them to do. But in their place, we can offer you something much better - the gospel.

Ok, but which gospel? Which Jesus? Because then and now there are plenty to choose from, aren't there? Jesus the revolutionary; Jesus the social critic; Jesus the great teacher; Jesus the flayer of the right or the hammer of the left; or maybe, for religious people, Jesus the great moral example.

Verse 22: “Jesus of Nazareth, *a man*…” And Peter starts with Jesus’ humanity - a man just like us. But, v22, “A man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst.”

Now, at some point, you’ve almost certainly had to prove that you are who you say you are, haven’t you? Or had to get someone else to vouch for your identity - like in a passport application.

But who could vouch for your moral goodness? You see, Jesus was a man with enemies… who criticised him. And Peter’s saying, ‘yes, but look who *attested* for him. Look who *vouched* for him.’

Who does that for the person trusting in themselves? It’s themselves, isn’t it? And the person who feels good about themselves by comparing sets the passmark just a little below themselves, and amazingly, they pass! While the person who feels bad about themselves sets it a little above themselves and feels bad when they fail. Either way, it’s a form of self-attestation.

But Jesus was attested by God. And how does your life compare to his? And what if *he’s* the passmark? What if he’s the standard? Where does our *self*-attestation, our self-trust leave us then? Don’t we all fall short?

But then Peter moves to his death v23: “This Jesus, delivered up…” By whom? I mean, this would be *the* ideal moment for Peter to say ‘Judas’, wouldn’t it? And point the finger at someone worse than him, to make himself feel better about his own denial.

And Peter does point the finger, as we’ll see in a moment, just not where we might have expected. But before he does, he starts with God: “This Jesus, delivered up *according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God*…” (v23).

Shouldn’t that give us all pause? Because why would God hand over *the* most righteous of men, the man he attested for, to death? And what does that say about *our* level of righteousness? Well, for now, Peter leaves that question hanging.

Instead, he moves to Jesus’ resurrection. Verse 24, “God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for death to hold him.”

Now, if you drew up a list of things you prefer not to think about, what would make the list? Going to the dentist? American politics? Doing your tax return? But would your own death make the list, or is that so suppressed that you don’t even want to think about not thinking about it? Because if it was impossible for death to hold Jesus, one day it will hold you, won’t it? Our bodies will die and they’ll stay dead. At least for the moment. But this man, Peter is saying, Jesus of Nazareth, is in a league of his own.

But then, v32-33, “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God…” and then v36, “God has made him both Lord and Christ.”

And so if one of the problems for the highly moral, or religious person, is that they look down on others, because that’s how they feel good about themselves, or they look up and feel bad about themselves, the real problem is that none of us look up high enough. Because in our comparing we can think that we’re the Lord, and judge, of others, and ourselves or even of God, if he doesn’t do

for us what we want when we have sacrificed for him. But Peter is saying, 'No, Jesus is Lord, and he's the judge. He's the ultimate king of heaven and earth.'

So wouldn't it be better to put your trust in him, and his perfect life, than in yourself?

Who Are You Accountable To?
Not long after we arrived in Switzerland I got a letter from the police, in Vevey, telling me I'd parked illegally over night and here's the fine for doing it. The only problem was, we'd not even visited Vevey yet! So I checked with Su, 'Darling, are you sure you didn't sneak out in the middle of the night to go see Vevey?'

So I wrote back and said 'I'm sure Vevey is a lovely town, and I very much look forward to visiting one day soon, but when we do we'll come in the daytime, and I promise to park legally, but it wasn't me, and Mrs Slack promises it wasn't her. And I doubt someone stole the car, parked it, and then drove it back the next morning, so, with respect, I won't be paying the fine.'

And I got a nice reply back saying, 'oh, we've made a mistake. Sorry.'

Well, what about Peter? Because v23, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, *you* crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." And v36, "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom *you* crucified."

But these are people who've come from hundreds of miles away. And Jesus was crucified weeks ago. So, sure, some of the crowd, those who actually lived in Jerusalem, may have been present when that crowd called out, 'Crucify him!', but the rest? Most of them were probably sunning themselves somewhere in the Mediterranean.

And yet Peter's saying, 'no, you, all of you, good, upright, moral, serious-about-your-religion people, *you* crucified Christ.' *You* are morally responsible, and accountable, for his death.

Why?

Well, read to the end of the chapter and you discover several thousand of them realise he's right. Verse 37, 'Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

Before he became a Christian, John Newton, the author of the hymn *Amazing Grace,* was a slave ship captain. But then he was converted, and became a minister, and wrote another, less well-known hymn. It's called 'The Look':

'I saw one hanging on a tree,
In agony and blood;
Who fixed His loving eyes on me,
As near His cross I stood;
And never till my dying breath
Will I forget that look;
It seemed to charge me with His death,
Though not a word He spoke.

My conscience felt and owned the guilt,
And plunged me in despair;
I saw my sins His blood had spilt,
And helped to nail Him there;
But with a second look
He said "I freely all forgive,
This blood is for your ransom paid,
I died that you might live."

And it finishes,
'*With pleasing grief and mournful joy,*
My spirit now is filled,
That I should such a life destroy,
Yet live by Him I killed.'

So Newton, like this crowd, saw Christ crucified, and was cut to the heart. Let me ask you, do you know what that feels like?

Because why did God deliver Jesus up? And why is this crowd of good people, and Newton, and all of us, charged with his death? Well, in response they ask 'brothers, what should we do?' And Peter answers, v38, "Repent and be baptised everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of your sins*."

Because it was for their sin and our sin that Christ was delivered up - for the forgiveness of those sins.

So the very thing we're working for in all our religious efforts, the very thing we're hoping for - or despairing of - in all our comparing, Christ has done for us, and made us good and right in the sight of God. As Peter says in v21, "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

But there's one last question for the religious:

What Do Your Stories Tell You?
You see, one of *the* striking things about the sermons in Acts is how contextualised they are. The apostles preach to fellow Jews, and they pack their sermons with Old Testament quotes. They preach to gentiles, and what do they talk about? The weather… or poetry.

Look at Peter. He starts by quoting the prophet Joel. Then Psalm 16. Then Psalm 110. And each time his point is the same: all along these were pointing us to Christ.

But then look at Paul. The crowd are about to sacrifice oxen to them, and he says 'No!' Verse 15, 'We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them…for he did good *by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness*.' In other words, 'it's God who gives to *you*. The God who needs nothing from you.'

Now, what are they both doing? They're entering their worlds, and saying, 'can't you see how Scripture, or the seasons, point you to Christ and his grace?'

Now, if you're not yet a Christian, maybe you think, 'great, but the Old Testament doesn't speak to me, and as for the seasons… we know better now.'

But do we? I mean, have you ever got away from the lights of the city and looked up at the stars and felt just how infinitesimally small you are, and yet, at the same time, lifted up and filled to bursting with awe? Well, isn't that beauty, that awe, pointing you to something above and beyond yourself?

And maybe the Scriptures don't speak to you, but what about your own stories? I mean, why do we love stories of a hero willing to risk his life to save others, or the underdog who triumphs? Of a Jean Valjean redeemed by grace, or of good triumphing over evil, and the forces of light over the empire of dark? Why do we love seeing the broken made whole, or the ugly beautiful, or the unloved being loved? Why do we long for intimacy, justice, or home?

Aren't these stories, those longing, pointing you to something you want, and that this world can't give you? That in all your searching, it's Christ you're searching for. That it's in him you'll find victory, and life, and love, and wholeness.

So, Christian or not: who are you trusting in? Who are you accountable to? What do your stories tell you? And see that there is something infinitely more good than ritual, and someone infinitely more righteous, and filled with grace than us. And as Peter said, It's Jesus of Nazareth. Let's trust him, not ourselves.