Grace Not Religion
Ephesians 2:8-10

We're starting a new series called Upside Down World. And the reason for that is that whether you're just beginning to explore the Christian faith, or you've been a Christian for years, you can have the wrong idea as to what Christianity really is.

You see, you can think that Christianity is really about morality, and living a good life, in the hope that God accepts you. Or that it's about family values and maintaining some sort of traditional social structure - which is great if you fit into that, but what if you don't? Or maybe you look at how some Christians behave or speak and you think, 'is that what Christianity is? Because if it is, I'm not sure I really want anything to do with it.' Or maybe you read stuff or hear stuff and think Christianity is about having your best life now. And God's job is to sprinkle some magic fairy dust on you, so your life sparkles.

So, in this series, I want us to see how Christianity is radically different from anything else on offer, maybe different even from what you think it is; and how, when you understand what it is and what it teaches, on stuff like sex or beauty or power or ambition or money or family or singleness or race or nationalism or suffering or success, it turns your world upside down.

You see, sometime around 50AD, the apostle Paul preached the gospel for the very first time in Thessalonica, in Greece. Now today, if you picture a nice Greek scene, you'll think beautiful blue sky, white-washed buildings, and in amongst those buildings there's the dome of a Greek Orthodox Church. But there was a time when there were no churches in Greece, when Christianity was revolutionary.

And when Paul first took the Christian message to Thessalonica, it ended in a riot. And a mob dragged some of Paul's supporters before the city authorities. And listen to what they said, Acts 17:6-7, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also… and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus."

So, at the heart of their complaint was that Paul and his friends were saying that there's another king, that's there's an authority, a power higher than Caesar's. And that in a day when Caesar was *the* power. And that their loyalty to this ultimate power, this ultimate king over every king - to Jesus - wasn't just shaking the foundations of society, it was turning society on its head.

Now, what's interesting is that these first Christians were accused by the Roman authorities of being atheists. That seems bizarre to us, because today no one would say that - the atheists are those on the other side. But they were accused of being atheists because they refused to worship the state gods. They refused to worship the gods of war and fertility and prosperity and good fortune. They even refused to worship Caesar as a god. And that was seen as a threat to the social order.

Well, what we're going to see is that the Christian message, and the implications of there being another king, still turns the world on its head, because Christianity still calls us away from the gods of the day, to give our allegiance to this greater king.

And we're going to start today by looking at the fact that the Gospel isn't about religion, or living a moral life, to try and earn angel points with God, it's about grace.

If you have a Bible turn to Ephesians 2:8-10.

Where Paul writes, ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.’

So from that I want us to see three things: firstly, we need saving; secondly, how you can’t save yourself, and thirdly, how God does what we can’t.

We Need Saving
Look at v8, ‘By grace you have been saved.’ Now, when you hear that, you’ve got to ask, saved from what? What does Paul think we need saving from?

And today, if you were to ask the average person in the street ‘what does humanity need to be saved from’ you’re likely to hear something like - climate change. Or Brexit. Or not just Brexit but the mess politicians are making generally. Or if they listen to populist politicians ‘we need saving from immigration’.

But when Paul says, ‘by grace you have been saved’, those aren’t the categories he’s thinking in. He’s talking about being saved from the judgement of God, and from the wrath of God against our sin. In short, he’s saying, that the Christian has been saved from hell.

And I would guess that that immediately raises a problem for some of you. If you’re not yet a Christian you may hear that and think - well, there goes Christianity, because I could never worship a God who throws people into hell. That’s just primitive. Or even if you are a Christian, this idea that God judges people and sends some to hell may be hard to swallow. And we’re ok with a God of love, but a God whose anger we need saving from, that’s a bit medieval.

And yet, what I want you to see if you’re not yet a Christian, is that even if you say you don’t believe that there’s an ultimate standard we’re all going to be judged by, you almost certainly live as if there is, and you wouldn’t want other people living any other way.

Katie, one of my daughters, has been writing her Gymnase project on the German Resistance in the Second World war, and what motivated them to stand up against Hitler and the Nazis. And when you read their stories, you instinctively feel, you know, that they chose the right path. That what they did mattered; that it mattered morally. That there is a real difference, morally, between the actions of Hitler, and his henchmen, and those who opposed him. In fact, that’s so obvious we take it for granted.

But what if there is no ultimate, universal standard of right and wrong that we’re judged by? Which is the secular position. Or, what if the universe ultimately has no meaning, and everything’s just going to wind down, and ultimately nothing really matters? Which is the atheistic position. Then those moral decisions don’t *really* matter. Provided you can get away with it, you can do what you want. And yet, whether you’re a Christian, or not yet a Christian, you don’t live like that, do you? You don’t live like nothing matters. You don’t live like there’s no difference between right and wrong. Because deep down you know there’s a difference between good and evil, that there is a higher, external standard against which all of decisions and behaviours are judged.

Imagine for a moment a criminal brought before the courts - maybe for repeated acts of burglary. And the prosecution brings the charges against him, and the defence has no legs to stand on. And then everyone looks up to the judge to declare guilty or not guilty, and pass sentence, but the judge's bench is empty. There is no judge. And it's the same in every court house across the land - no judges and no judgement, and all laws are suspended, and there's one to declare guilt or innocence. Nothing to divide right behaviour from behaviour that ruins lives.

Now, none of us would want to to live in such a land, would you? It would be like one of those dystopian films where anything goes. And yet, that is the secular view of the universe: There is no ultimate, universal Judge on the bench. And yet, deep down, even if you say that's what you believe, you live as though there is a judge on the bench, because deep down you know there is. You know truth is not the same as lies, good is not the same as evil, help is not the same as harm. But that only makes sense if there is a judge on the bench.

But what if there isn't? What would be the impact on your own inner life? Arthur Miller, the American playwright was married for a number of years to Marilyn Monroe. But they eventually divorced and a matter of months later Marilyn Monroe committed suicide. And in all the aftermath Miller wrote a play called *After the Fall.* And it's autobiographical - the main character, Quentin, is really Miller himself, reflecting on his life and marriage. Listen to what Quentin says, 'For years I looked at life like a case at law… When you are young, you prove how brave you are, or smart; then, what a good lover you are. Later you prove what a good father or husband you are. Finally, prove how wise, or powerful, or whatever. But underlying it all, I see now, there was a presumption. That one moved… on an upward path toward some elevation where… I would be justified or condemned - a verdict anyway. I think that my disaster really began when I looked up one day… and the bench was empty! No judge in sight. And all that remained was the endless argument with oneself… the pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench… which, of course, is another way of saying - despair.'

Now Miller was an atheist, but can you see what he's saying. It's not just that if there's no one on the bench right and wrong don't ultimately matter, it's that *you* don't ultimately matter. If there's no ultimate accounting, no elevated place where the quality of your life is judged, there's no sense in which your life has meaning. And your progress and your achievements have no meaning, because there's no one to say it is progress. And Miller says it ends in despair.

But listen, if that's the secular view: there is no God on the bench, that right and wrong and your life don't ultimately matter, the gospel turns that world upside down. Because it says that there is a Judge on the Bench, sitting in that elevated place, and that justice and right and wrong and good and evil, *and your life*, do matter. They're full of meaning. And if that makes more sense to what you really believe deep down, and how you live, wouldn't it make more sense to change your world-view, and jettison the secular and fully embrace the Christian?

But maybe you think, 'yes, but I still can't worship a God who condemns people to hell. I struggle with that. A God of love I can worship, a God who accepts people, who forgives people, but not one who condemns.'

Well, for love to be love, doesn't it need to cost something? I mean, imagine I see a piece of rubbish blowing along the pavement and I step on it, and pick it up. And it's a muddy, wet, ripped picture of a rose. Now imagine if I go home and give that to Su and say, 'darling, I love you, and I've brought

you this rose to tell you how much I love you.' What do you think Su would say? She'd be justified in saying 'no you don't, that's cost you nothing. If that's how much you love me it's clearly not a lot.' You see, a so-called god of love who says, 'anything goes, I accept it all, this doesn't cost me anything, sure you've hurt others, but it doesn't hurt me, you're all welcome' - is not a God of Love, is he? It doesn't cost that kind of god anything to love us. Because that's not love, it's sentimentality.

You see, whether it's justice, or goodness, or even *real* love, they all depend on God being a God who divides between good and evil, right and wrong, love and hate. A God who judges. You just can't escape it. But if you can't escape it - how can you escape it? How can you be saved?

Not by Works

Now, if the gospel turns the world on its head by telling us we need saving, it does the same by telling us how you get saved. You see, typically, religions say, you can do it, and you've got to do it. So, pursue the noble eight fold path of Buddhism, or the five pillars of Islam, and in your living and giving and praying and being you've got to make yourself acceptable to God and climb up the ladder to the divine.

But its not just religion that teaches you that, is it? Secularism does the same. I mean, have you noticed how moralistic and judgmental our Western, secular cultures can be? If you say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing, or even wear the wrong thing, or mix with the wrong people, you offend the gods of popular opinion, and you'll be de-platformed, or face death by a thousand angry tweets, or just be shunned. To be in, to be acceptable, you've got to conform.

So it doesn't matter if it's traditional or modern morality, does it? Religion and secularism say, it's down to you, you've got to make yourself acceptable to the gods we worship if you want to be saved, if you want to be in.

The problem is that leads to some pretty negative consequences. Look what Paul says in v9. We're saved he says, not as 'a result of works, *so that no one may boast*.' You see, if you can save yourself, by improving your moral record, or ticking all the right-on boxes that our culture demands of us, it makes you proud. Because now you can legitimately think you're doing ok, you're better than them, who aren't. And you're in and they're out. And that pride can rapidly breed intolerance of those who don't see it the way you do - who aren't 'in.'

But also, if you're saved by what you do, you seriously need to narrow down what's required of you, don't you? In his book, ironically called *Twelve Rules for Life,* Jordan Petersen, the Canadian Psychologist says, rule 6, 'Set your house in perfect order before you criticise the world.' Now, he's a controversial chap, but what he's saying is that it's much easier to point out all that's wrong with the world, and we need to sort this and that out. It's much harder to sort out the mess of your own life.

But when you think you've got to save yourself by good works, traditional or modern, you're naturally going to look for the easiest thing to do to earn those salvation points - to make yourself feel good about yourself, and look good in the eyes of others. And sometimes, arguing about global injustice or saving the planet is much easier than cleaning up the mess of your own life and loving those difficult people around you.

Remember when a lawyer came to Jesus and in Luke 10:25 asks him, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” In other words, what must I do to be saved, to escape the judgment to come? What does Jesus say to him? He asks him a question: you’re the lawyer, you’re the expert, what does the law say? And the guy replies, v27, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.”

And Jesus responds, v28, “You have answered correctly; do this and you will live.” In other words, yup, that’s all you’ve got to do. If you really think you can save yourself, you’ve just got to love God perfectly and love your neighbour like yourself.

And immediately, the lawyer shoots back, v29, yes, but, “Who is my neighbour?” Do you see what he’s trying to do? He’s trying to narrow down what’s required on him, isn’t he. Because surely God can’t require me to love *everyone.* I need to narrow this down. I need to get this down to manageable amounts.

I mean, be honest - it’s hard enough to love your own husband, or wife, or friends or kids, isn’t it? So God can’t mean *everyone*… let’s specify the target group, Jesus.

And in response Jesus tells him the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And a Jewish man is lying robbed, and injured and broken in the road. And all the good religious people walk past. But then a Samaritan, a despised, racially impure, religiously unacceptable enemy stops and helps him. It’s the social, racial, religious outcast who’s the good neighbour.

In other words, it’s not just those who are like you, who you can happily accept and welcome that you’ve got to love like yourself, Jesus says, it’s those who are unlike you. It’s the foreigner, the person you’re tempted to despise, the one you look down on. He’s your neighbour and you’ve got to love him, Jesus says. And if that doesn’t turn the world on its head, I don’t know what does.

But if thinking you can save yourself leads to pride, or trying to narrow down what’s required of you, it does something else as well. It makes you despair. Because if you really understand what’s required of you, if you read the Sermon on the Mount, and hear Jesus saying, your righteousness has got to exceed that of the pharisees, you’ve got to be perfect like your Father in heaven is perfect, unless you are totally deluded, you think, I can never do that or be that.

You see, if Jesus’ life and teaching is only a moral example to you, the standard you’ve got to live up to, it won’t save you, it’ll crush you.

So, if living consistent with a secular world-view, that the bench of the universe is empty, leads to dystopia or despair, but thinking you can save yourself makes you proud, or narrow, or also despairing, how *can* you be saved?

A Grace that Changes your Life

In the film, *The Funeral*, a young man who’s murdered another man from a gangster family is about to be executed in revenge by the dead man’s brother. But before the brother can pull the trigger the young man pleads with him: “Don’t do this. You have the chance to do something good, and that’s better than justice.” But the man doesn’t listen, and takes his vengeance.

And that's the way of the world, isn't it? You hurt me, or mine, and I'll hurt you. Or if we can't get our own back, we internalise it and become bitter.

But then the gospel comes and turns the world upside down. You see, in the Book of Common Prayer, there's a prayer that says, 'God, who declares your almighty power, most chiefly in showing mercy and pity, give unto us abundantly your grace.' In other words, unlike the gangster brother, God doesn't show his power chiefly through retribution but by pouring his grace on those who don't deserve it. Verse 8 again, 'For *by grace* you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; *it is the gift of God*.' A gift that's more costly than we could ever imagine.

You see, when Jesus told that parable of the Good Samaritan, who's the man lying in the road? Who's the man in need of a neighbour? Who's the guy who's injured, and broken, and robbed, and unable to help himself. That's the shocking, world-upending thing about the story isn't it? Because it's not the Samaritan. It's the Jewish man. It's the lawyer, or any of us who thinks we can save ourselves, who think we can limit who to love; who look down on those racially, theologically, socially different from us. And Jesus is saying, you won't be able to neighbour others, like God calls you to, until you know you've been neighboured, until you've seen yourself helpless and unable to save yourself.

And Christ came as our Good Neighbour. He came as One from a foreign land, as One unlike us. And other religions, and modern secularism says, you've got to pick *yourself* up out of the street and then they pass on by on the other side. But Jesus didn't. When Jesus saw the mess of our lives, when he saw how we have been robbed and left for dead in the road, he left the safety of his foreign land and he put himself at risk, he crossed the road towards us, to save us. What we couldn't do, he did.

And at the cross he stood before the bench of the Judge of the Universe, bearing our sin. And he was declared guilty, that we might be declared innocent. In the face of all our failure to love as we should, he loved us perfectly. Not with a sentimental love that cost him nothing, but with a love that cost him everything. A love that doesn't just forgive you, it frees you - from the endless trying to please him, from the pride of thinking you can, from the narrowness that hopes you can, from the despair when you discover you can't. But instead of sending you away guilty, he welcomes you, as a son or a daughter of God.

And because you know you've been neighboured by Christ, you'll begin to love him with ever growing love, and find yourself able to love your neighbour, including the one different from you. And you'll begin to walk in those good works Paul tells us God has prepared for us. Not to win his approval, but because you have his approval.