



CHRISTIANITY|EXplored

WHAT'S THE BEST NEWS
YOU'VE EVER HEARD?

Episode 3: Sin

When I started college in 1991, I joined the rugby club. It was quite competitive, so I was sent a strict summer training schedule – which I immediately put in the bin.

Anyway, September rolled around and I arrived for club testing and training feeling fairly confident.

When I arrived, all the guys were very quiet – which was unusual.

Then suddenly the coach came in and said, “Right, we’ll start with the bleep test”.

The bleep test is a test where you run back and forth over twenty yards in time with a bleep that gets faster and faster. You run until you drop. In my case that was not long in coming.

I was the second to drop out, having col-lapsed and been physically sick.

Next we had to strip down to our shorts for the so-called “fat test”.

(Why not leave this part of the story to the imagination?)

Basically, the fat test is when your fat content is measured by this contraption that pinches the flesh all over your body. As it turned out, there was actually one other person who had an even higher percent-age of body fat than me. We became firm friends. Well, flabby friends really.

The results of all these tests were recorded and publicly announced. And it was extremely humiliating. Eventually, when all the tests had been completed, the coach got us all together and said, “Well, it’s not comfortable, but at least we found out the truth on the training ground before the real questions get asked during a proper game”.

Sometimes we experience things in life that give us a shocking dose of reality.

Things that expose us in an extremely uncomfortable way. But as our coach said, "It's better to find out the truth about ourselves while we still have time to do something about it".

We've already explored who Jesus is. The question now is, why did Jesus come?

Did he want to bring peace on earth? Was it to heal disease and end the sufferings of the world? Did he want to transform society, and give us an example of how we ought to live?

According to Mark, although there's an element of truth in all those options, they're not the main reason Jesus came.

When we look at the world, there's so much to marvel at. But who can honestly say the world is all good?

Estimates vary, but histories of the twentieth century suggest that at least 100 million people died violently in those hundred years – that is 2400 violent deaths every day.

The question is, why is the world like this? Jesus tells us the uncomfortable truth in Mark's Gospel. He insists that the reason there is something wrong with the world... is because there's something wrong with us.

Imagine for a moment a huge public gallery. On display for the whole world to see is the story of your life. It's a complete and truthful account, not only of everything you've ever said and done, but also of every thought that has ever crossed your mind.

Nothing is edited out. Everything is here, for everyone to look at.

Now I'm sure there'd be lots that you'd be relatively proud of: loving relationships,

real achievements, acts of kindness, moments of generosity, perhaps a flourishing career...

But there would also be thousands of things you'd want to keep out of the public eye.

Which bit of the wall would you most want to cover up? Maybe it's something nobody knows, not even your closest friend.

And it's not just the things we've said, done and thought that are a problem. There are the things we should have done and the words we should have said.

If my life were on those walls it would be a nightmare. I'd hate my life to be on display for everyone to see – I'd be so ashamed. I wouldn't be able to look people in the eye.

Could you, if you're being honest?

So what is the problem? Why is there so much to be ashamed of? Jesus gives us the answer in Mark chapter 7:

"What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean'. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'."
(Mark 7:20-23)

So when we look at the world and see all the things that are wrong with it, we instinctively want to point the finger at others. But Jesus says the problem is much closer to home. The reason the world is not the way it's supposed to be is because we're not the way we're supposed to be.

And if we were to trace all the evil in the world back to its source, says Jesus, the place we'd end up is the human heart.

For the people of Jesus' day, the heart was not simply the pump that sends blood around the body, it was thought of as the seat of human personality. It was "the real you".

Why is it so hard to keep good relationships going? Why do we hurt those we love most? Why can't we automatically do what we know is the right thing? And why are we so often tempted to do what we know is wrong? Because each of us has a heart problem.

Unfortunately, according to Jesus, our problems don't end there. It's not just that we often treat each other and our world in a shameful way – we treat God in that way too.

In Mark chapter 12, Jesus tells us how we should relate to God:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." (Mark 12:30)

Jesus calls this "the most important commandment", and with good reason. Because God made us, and sustains us, and gives us every good thing we enjoy, what should be our response to him? Jesus tells us. We should love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And the really scary word here is "all". It means that no part of our lives is to be withheld from God. He is to have all of everything.

But that's not our heartbeat.

We decide exactly what we'll do with our heart, soul, mind and strength. We give our hearts to lots of things, but not to our Creator. We barely know his commands, let alone seek to obey them. We develop relationships with others, but neglect the very relationship for which we were primar-

ily designed. And instead of loving God, we live as if we were God – and that's what the Bible calls sin.

So why did Jesus come?

According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus came to cure our heart problem: the problem of our sin. Here's what happens in Mark chapter 2 verses 15 to 17.

"While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the 'sinners' and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

"On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'" (Mark 2:15-17)

Notice how uptight these people are with Jesus. They're called the Pharisees and teachers of the law, and they were the religious establishment. They were always at the synagogue, always praying, always trying to do the right thing, and they are furious here because Jesus is spending time with all the people they love to look down on – especially tax collectors, who were hated because they worked for the occupying Roman forces.

But the shock for us, as it was for many religious people at the time, is Jesus' statement in verse 17. *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

You see, Jesus knows that when we look at our world and the state of our hearts, no one can seriously claim to be righteous.

No one has managed to love God with all their heart, all their soul, all their mind and all their strength. If we were able to live like that, there'd be no reason for him to have come at all.

"No," says Jesus, "I haven't come to call people who think they're good, who think they've nothing to be ashamed of. I've come for people who can see what is going on in their own hearts. People who realize that they are desperately in need of a cure."

If that's you, then I hope you can begin to see why Mark describes Jesus as "good news".

The qualification for coming to Jesus is not "are you good enough?" It's "are you bad enough?" He's come for people who realize they're bad – not for people who think they're good. That's the real reason Jesus came.

And isn't it ironic that these religious people who think that their hearts are perfectly acceptable to God are the very ones who end up plotting to kill Jesus?

So Jesus says, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners". But why did Jesus feel the need to call sinners at all? For the answer to that question, we need to look at the most disturbing verses in Mark's Gospel, chapter 9 verses 43 to 48.

It's here that Jesus tells us just how serious our heart problem really is.

"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better

for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'" (Mark 9:43-48)

I was in Australia, visiting a friend, and he took me to a beach on Botany Bay. So I decided I had to go for a swim. I was taking my shirt off when he said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm going for a swim". He said, "But what about those signs?"

I said, "Oh don't be ridiculous, I'll be fine". He said, "Listen mate, 200 Australians have been killed by sharks. You've got to decide whether those signs are there to save you or to ruin your fun. You're of age, you decide." And with that he walked off down the beach.

When we hear Jesus' words about hell, we have to ask ourselves, "Why would he talk like this?" Is he trying to manipulate us? Trying to scare us just so he can gain control of us?

Or is he giving us a loving warning?

For me, as I look at Jesus' life and the way he treated people, I see the most loving man who ever lived. Even people who were rejected by the rest of the world were deeply loved by him.

The reason Jesus warns us about hell is surely because he loves us and does not want us to go there. He knows that if we reject God throughout our lives, then ultimately God will be right to reject us. He knows that our sin, if left undealt with, will take us to a place of unimaginable and unending suffering. He warns us because he loves us.

But here's the problem. Jesus is not giving us the cure for our sin when he talks about

cutting off a hand or a foot, or gouging out an eye. Even if we were to do that, the knife would never go deep enough.

It would never get to the heart of the human problem – which is the problem of the human heart.

The urgent reality is that our hearts are desperately in need of a cure, and no matter what we do, as history has shown, we cannot cure it ourselves. But that is why Jesus came.

As much as I hated the fat test and the bleep test, it was far better for me to be exposed as unfit on the training ground, than in front of spectators in a crucial game.

In the same way, Jesus exposes what we're really like, so that we can respond to him while there's still time.

We'll never understand why Jesus came until we see the reality of our own hearts. And if we don't see that, we'll go through life without noticing that actually... we are in terrible danger.