

The Power of the Gospel

9

Saved from the World

Read Acts 2:40

We often think that Peter's message to those first converts on the day of Pentecost ended at **verse 39**. However, this is not the case. His message had in fact *two* parts:

- ➔ Salvation from God's judgment (**verses 14-39**)
- ➔ Salvation from the world's corruption (**verse 40**)

Notice how it says: "With *many other words* he warned them; and he *pleaded* with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'" Those "many other words" are not specifically recorded in the account of Acts, but make up the bulk of the New Testament letters that were to come.

All too often, we preach only half the Gospel. We implore people to escape *the judgment of God* through the provision of the Cross, but we fail to put equal emphasis on pleading with people, as Peter did, to escape *the corruption of the world* through the provision of the Cross.

This imbalance in our presentation of the Gospel has to have serious repercussions in the lives of those who respond to that Gospel. Any deficiency in the Gospel we preach will produce deficient Christian lives and deficient churches.

In this lesson, we will be taking a brief excursion into one of the most important elements of the Gospel message: Salvation from the world's corruption.

Escaping the Corruption of This World

Read 2 Peter 1:4

As we've seen in previous lessons, Peter here provides us with the express purpose of God for your life:

- ➔ To participate in the divine nature
- ➔ To escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires

Take a look at how the *New King James Bible* translates this verse:

“[God has] given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption *that is* in the world through lust.”

The sense of the original Greek is accurately expressed here in the *New King James Bible*. God has enabled us to become “partakers of the divine nature” *because* we have “escaped the corruption that is in the world.”

The Message also reflects this meaning:

“We were also given absolutely terrific promises to pass on to you – your tickets to participation in the life of God *after* you turned your back on a world corrupted by lust.”

The Greek word used by Peter for “escape” means “to escape completely.”¹ Escaping the corruption in the world is a precursor to partaking of the divine nature. This is quite understandable, isn’t it? After all, how can you be a partaker of the divine nature while *at the same time* being a partaker of the corruption in the world? If you are participating in the corruption of the world you *cannot* be participating in the divine nature. And, equally true, if you are participating in the divine nature you *cannot* be participating in the corruption of this world. The two conditions are mutually exclusive.

As the second quarter of the Gospel so clearly reveals, we have not just been saved from sin; we have also been saved from the corruption of this world. But for this aspect of our salvation to become a reality to us, we must see the corruption of the world as God sees it. There can be no repentance without there first being a revelation of sin and of God. We must see the corruption of the world for what it really is.

Seeing the Corruption

Read 2 Peter 2:20-22

Peter speaks with a vehemence against people whom he describes as “slaves of depravity” (**verse 19**). It’s important to understand that this is depravity as God defines it, not as man defines it. Depravity is the state of being mastered by sin, whatever its guise (note Paul’s definition of depravity in **Romans 1:28-31**).

In **2 Peter 2:22**, Peter uses two proverbs – the first one drawn from the Old Testament (see **Proverbs 26:11**) and the second from the pagan writer Epictetus* – to describe the corruption these Christians had becoming entangled in again:

- ➡ A dog returning to its vomit
- ➡ A pig returning to its filth

* Epictetus writes of those who refuse to keep themselves clean and says: “Go and talk to a pig, that he may wallow no more in mud!”²

To a Jew, no two animals could be more repulsive and degraded (note **Matthew 7:6; Revelation 22:15; Luke 15:15-16**). They were the epitomy of what it meant to be “unclean.” And so Peter’s use of these two animals depict the depth of his revulsion at the corruption that these so-called Christians were revelling in.

We live our lives surrounded by a cesspool of spiritual corruption, yet it is easy to become so immune to its smell that we no longer notice it. Like a person who lives in a garbage dump, we can grow accustomed to the odor of the garbage to the point it no longer bothers us. The stench has become “normal” and thus we no longer flinch at its smell.

But God sees the world very differently. The world has become like a toxic waste dump, polluted by the daily outworking of the deified self. This is what he has saved us out of. For us to return to the filth of its ways is like a child, once clean, running out and jumping back in a nearby sewer.

Read Philippians 2:14-16

The Glory of This World

One of the things that hinders a Christian from seeing the reality of the world’s corruption is that it actually looks good. The garbage is not obvious. It comes wrapped in pretty paper.

There is something enticing about the world’s values. This is because it panders to the very core of the old self. It promises great things – beauty, wisdom, power and fame – everything that the old self holds dear. And it boasts of great glory.

Just to take one example, look at the glamor of Hollywood, the pageantry of the movie stars, the glory of the Oscars. This is the height of worldly success. Yet it is all colorful tinsel enwrapping a putrid mess. Look behind all the Hollywood hype at the real lives of the movie stars – the divorces and heartbreaks, the drug dependence, the suicide rate. This is the product of the very best that the world has

The Spirit of the World

The Bible describes two diametrically opposed spirits – the Spirit of God and the spirit of the world (**1 Corinthians 2:12**). These two spirits are also called the Spirit of Christ (**Romans 8:9; 1 Peter 1:11**) and the spirit of antichrist (**1 John 4:2-3**), and each propogates a different viewpoint – the viewpoint of God versus the viewpoint of the world (see **1 John 4:4-6**). These two spirits are in direct contention and it is of vital importance that the Christian be aligned with the right one.

Read 1 John 3:13

When we are aligned with Christ, the spirit of this world is at war with us, and this expresses itself in persecution, ridicule and opposition. In fact, by linking your life with Christ, the world’s reaction to you will be the same as the world’s reaction to Christ.

Read John 15:18-21

Read 1 John 3:1

“Do not be surprised,” says John, “if the world hates you.” In fact, be surprised if the world *doesn’t* hate you. For this is an alarm bell, a signal that we may well be enamored enough by the world to be hardly distinguishable from it. Remember, it is impossible to be aligned both with God and with the world.

to offer! And yet so many people model their lives – their values, their hopes, their dreams – on what comes out of Hollywood. They are chasing a glory that is just in the gift-wrap. Inside the box, there is nothing new – merely the same old corruption and decay of the old self at work.

Read **Philippians 3:19**

The glory of this world is the glory of the deified self. There is an apparent glory – enough to attract the undiscerning person, even as a flame attracts the moth – but as Nebuchadnezzar discovered (the hard way), the glory of one’s own achievements is fleeting (**Daniel 4:29-37**). Even Babylon the Great now lies in the dust (**Isaiah 21:9**).

Read **Isaiah 40:6-8**

The glory of this world is a fading glory, a decaying glory. This is part of the meaning of corruption: It rots, it self-destructs, it fades, it falls apart, it decays. Only that which is under the Lordship of Jesus Christ has a true glory that will last. His is an *eternal* glory.

Read **2 Corinthians 4:16-18**

Read **1 John 2:17**

The antidote to the world’s lure is the perspective of eternity (read again **Philippians 3:19**, but this time in the context of **verses 18-21**). The way you are to respond to this world has already been pioneered by the heroes of faith, who called themselves “aliens and strangers on earth” (**Hebrews 11:13**).

Read **1 Peter 2:11-12**

You are an alien, a stranger in the world. You have taken up residence here, but your citizenship belongs elsewhere. You are a transient in this world’s system, and as long as you see yourself that way, the world’s pull is much weaker than the Lord’s pull.

But if you allow yourself to settle down, to patriotize yourself to this world’s lifestyle, then your transient status begins to change. Suddenly the glory this world has to offer you actually becomes important. Its values are the values by which you measure your life. You have “gone native.” You have conformed yourself to the pattern of this world.

The Message expresses **1 Peter 2:11** in this way:

“Friends, this world is not your home, so don’t make yourselves cozy in it. Don’t indulge your ego at the expense of your soul.”

The Bible constantly encourages you not to be enamored by the transient glory that you see around you. You are told to view yourself as a transient – an “alien,” a “foreigner,” a “stranger,” a “temporary resident” – in the world (see **1 Peter 1:1,17**), but from heaven’s perspective, it is in fact the other way around. You are also the only permanent thing in this world. You are going to be around long after

the so-called glory of this world has passed the way of Babylon.

Read 2 Corinthians 6:17-18

Here Paul draws on an Old Testament promise to highlight the fact that the Christian should not be “yoked” with the world (see **verses 14-16**). But when he quotes the command, “Touch no unclean thing,” the meaning is in fact more accurately rendered in the *New King James Bible* as, “Do not touch what is unclean.”

This world is “unclean” in the Biblical sense of the word. It is contaminated spiritually. We live in the world – in the midst of that which is “unclean” – but we are not to partake of the unclean. This is the meaning of “come out from them and be separate” (see **verse 17**). This does not mean physical separation, but spiritual separation.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:6-11

Being separate from the world does not mean disassociating ourselves from the *people* of this world but rather disassociating ourselves from the *spirit* of this world. The marvel of the Gospel is that the Holy Spirit equips us to be *associated with Christ* as we live in the world. If you are joined to Christ in an on-going vibrant relationship of prayer and mutual fellowship, any spiritual ties you have with the world will be quickly severed.

The Church and the World

But just as you thought the bad news could not get any worse, we’re going to look at how the corruption of this world can infiltrate the Church. Remember: We first have to diagnose the problem in order to administer the “cure” – the Gospel for the Church! So let’s take a deep breath and look at the condition of the Church generally today.

Read 2 Timothy 3:1-5

Paul lists for Timothy a comprehensive description of the old self at work. But he is *not* talking about people in the world. He is talking about people *in the Church*. These “Christians” have “a form of godliness but [deny] its power.” They have a form of the Gospel, but deny its total solution for their lives.

The number one problem in the Church today is not heresy or greed or apathy or any of a long list of obvious problems. The number one problem is *unresolved self*. If church leaders have an unresolved old self, there will be constant friction within the congregation and with other churches in the area. If the people of a church have unresolved old selves, then these problems multiply.

Read James 4:1-3

There are seven principal areas where the old self raises its head in church life:

- **The love of money** – This is one of the world’s main corrupting influences on the Church (see **Luke 16:13; 1 Timothy 3:6-11; Hebrews 13:5**).

➤ ***The struggle for power*** –

Power struggles are rife in the Church, evidence of what the Bible calls “selfish ambition” (see **Philippians 2:3; 1:15-18; James 3:14-16**). Ambition in God is good, but when it is rooted in an unresolved self, it is devastating.

➤ ***Apathy*** –

It has been observed that 80% of the workload of a church is carried by 20% of the people. Although this figure is only a generalization, it does show that around 80% of Christians are ensnared in apathy and comfort-zone Christianity, which are expressions of unresolved self-interest (note **1 Thessalonians 5:5-6**).

➤ ***Revised morality*** –

What we are talking about here, of course, is what the Bible calls “immorality” (see **Colossians 3:5-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8; Jude 4**). This is a word out of vogue today, even for many Christians, for the very reason that it is so rife within the ranks of many churches.

➤ ***Back-biting*** –

Gossip and slander are two of the principal tools of the old self, weapons at one’s disposal to perpetrate harm against another in the guise of self-righteousness (see **1 Timothy 5:13; Ephesians 4:31-32; Colossians 3:8-10,12-14**).

➤ ***Arguments*** –

Whenever arguments and controversies abound, this is a sure signal of an underlying problem with unresolved self (see **1 Corinthians 3:1-3; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 2:23-26; Titus 3:9-11**).

➤ ***Friction in relationships*** –

Breakdowns in relationship come about for many reasons, but when they are common, you can be sure that most are due to insecurities, hurts, fears, jealousy and envy – all core attributes of the old self (see **2 Corinthians 12:20; Philippians 4:2** ;).

Put It To Death!

In **Colossians 3:5**, Paul writes:

“*Put to death*, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”

Many Christians, just reading this verse, think that Paul is instructing them to crucify their old nature. If we read this passage in context, however, we see that Paul is making this statement on the basis of the finished work of the Cross.

In **2:20**, he writes:

“Since *you died* with Christ to the basic principles of this world...”

In **3:3**, he writes:

“For *you died* and your life is now hidden with Christ in God...”

It is then that Paul writes and says, “Put to death therefore...” He is not in fact telling you to *do* the work of the Cross. He is telling you to *apply* what has already been done for you.

All these problems are symptoms of a more serious underlying disease. They are evidence of a self that is aligned to this world and a church which has been poisoned by the corruption of the world. Whenever the lifestyle of the church-goer is almost indistinguishable from the lifestyle of those in the world, we can be sure that the message of the Gospel has only made a surface impact on the day-to-day Christian life.

Read James 4:4

James has a diagnosis for the reason there are “fights and quarrels” among Christians (see **verses 1-3**). The diagnosis is that these Christians are spiritually “adulterous.”

Spiritual Adultery

The Church has had a running love affair with this world. Like the Roman god Janus, the Church so often is two-faced. It is as if we are sitting, our face half turned to God while he is speaking to us, but our eyes flirting with the world. How do you think that makes God feel?

Read James 4:5

Read Exodus 34:14

Read Deuteronomy 4:24

God describes himself as a jealous God. His love is total, but he allows no love triangle. He refuses to share your love with a love of this world’s corruption.

Adultery is one of the most hurtful sins, for it involves a betrayal of trust and a disowning of the love of another. To get an idea of what *spiritual* adultery means in the eyes of the Lord, take a look at the following scripture. But be forewarned. It’s a disquietening passage.

Read Ezekiel 23:1-21

This is a horrifically vivid portrayal from the Lord’s perspective of the spiritual adultery perpetrated by Samaria (the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel) and Jerusalem (the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah). When Christians pursue an intimacy with this world, the Lord views this spiritual adultery in the same way he viewed that of Israel.

Read 1 John 2:15-16

The Gospel’s Answer to the World’s Corruption

Read James 1:27

There is only one way to “keep oneself from being polluted by the world” and that is the Gospel’s way. Now that we have diagnosed the disease (spiritual adultery), let’s have a look at the cure – the *good* news that treats the *bad* news.*

* You’re probably feeling just like I do: At last! The good news!

Read 1 Timothy 6:11

Paul instructs Timothy to flee from “all this.” This fleeing is not just a running *away* from the corruption of the world, it is also a *pursuing* of “righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.”

We saw in the beginning of this lesson that it is impossible to “participate in the divine nature” unless you have escaped “the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.” Now we’re going to discover that it is *as you participate in the divine nature* that you are actually enacting your escape from the corruption of this world. You cannot escape and then live in limbo between God and this world. You escape *by* turning to God!

Here are the two key scriptures that encapsulate the revelation and the repentance required to “escape from the corruption of the world.”

- **Revelation – Galatians 6:14**
- **Repentance – Romans 12:2**

It is at the point of revelation and repentance that the power of the Gospel – God’s grace – gets to work. The act of repentance is a turning from the world to God. You *count yourself* dead to the world and alive to God (note **Romans 6:11**). It is not just being dead to the world that matters, it is being alive to God! The answer to fleeing from the world is pursuing God! The answer to turning *from* a love of this world is a turning *to* a love for God! (note **Matthew 6:24; 22:37**). And in this act of repentance – a turning *from* and a turning *to* – lies the secret of the Gospel’s power.

You see, the answer to the problem of spiritual adultery is not law. It didn’t work for Israel and it won’t work for the Church. Just because you legislate against adultery doesn’t mean that that law has any actual power to curb adultery, for adultery in itself is the breaking of the law. You can only change the desire on the inside. And this is the heart of the Gospel message.

Read again Ephesians 4:22-24

The answer to the old self is the new self! The old self, by its very nature, is adulterous. It thrives in the corruption of the world. On the other hand, the new self has been “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” It thrives in the presence of God. The old self is energized by the spirit of this world, but the new self is energized by the Spirit of God.

So, once you’ve had a revelation of God’s jealousy in the face of spiritual adultery, how should you repent? The Bible’s three-fold prescription is simple:

- You recognize that since the Cross has dealt with your old self, you now put it off. You turn your back on the world.
- You expose yourself to God’s Word, allowing it to wash your mind and renew your thinking.

- You put on the new self and begin to pursue God's righteousness and holiness in the power of God's Spirit.

The importance of this revelation, and its accompanying repentance, cannot be overemphasized. This is the key to cleansing the Church from all mixture, all syncretism, all worldliness. And so, as we close this study, let's take one more look at the two most important scriptures in this lesson:

Read again Galatians 6:14

In this verse, Paul describes *two* principal revelations of the work of the Cross:

- I have been crucified to the world
- The world has been crucified to me

Read again Romans 12:2

This is the point of repentance that comes after you have received a revelation of the finished work of the Cross.

What better way to summarize this lesson than to quote from *The Message's* rendition of **Romans 12:1-2**:

“So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out.”

¹ Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), p.768.

² *Epictetus*, IV, XI, 29, quoted by Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), p.780.