

Jesus – His Aim

In 1991, when I went to theological college, I joined the local rugby club. Now the club was very competitive, so during the summer I received a long and rigorous training schedule in preparation for what was called 'Club Pre-Season Testing and Training' in September. I dutifully circled the date on my calendar, before throwing the schedule away and thinking, 'I'll go on some runs and do some sit-ups – I'll be fine.'

September rolled around eventually, after a fairly casual summer in which I nevertheless did more exercise than I had ever done before. In fact, I felt pretty confident as I turned up at the training ground. As I walked into the changing room, I noticed that all the blokes were very quiet. You spot this very quickly if it occurs in rugby players. Then the coach came in and said, 'Right, we'll start with the bleep test.' For the bleep test, we ran back and forth over a 20-yard stretch in time to a bleep that got faster and faster. We literally ran until we dropped. In my case, the 'drop' part was not long in coming.

Immediately after that, it was time for the fat tests. We had to strip down to our shorts which, as people who know me would tell you, is a terrifying thought. A machine with a large set of tweezers pinched the flesh on our biceps, triceps, stomachs, sides, thighs and calves. (There was one bloke who had an even higher percentage of body fat than I did. We became firm friends.) And so the tests went on. The results of each were recorded, and each test was – to a greater or lesser degree – humiliating. When it was finally over, the coach said, ‘Well, it’s not comfortable, but at least we’ve found out the truth here on the training ground before the real questions get asked out there on the playing field. Some of you have really been exposed, haven’t you?’

Listening to what Jesus has to say about you and me is like going through fitness tests. It means being told what we are really like beneath the surface, and it is a very uncomfortable experience. In a way, a better title for this chapter would be ‘I wish I didn’t have to tell you this, but...’

The last chapter described Jesus’ unique power and authority to teach, cure illness, calm storms and raise the dead. In the light of that, we might ask, ‘Why? What was Jesus’ ultimate aim in doing these things?’ Did he want to bring peace on earth? (That’s the Jesus of Christmas carols.) Did he want to end the

sufferings of the world? (That's Jesus the great healer.) Did he want to give us a supreme example of how we should live and treat each other? (That's Jesus as a sort of schoolteacher.) Or was he aiming to bring about the reform of society? (That's Jesus the political activist.) Although there is an element of truth in all of those options, Mark's Gospel doesn't give any of them as Jesus' ultimate aim.

Jesus came to rescue rebels

Mark wants us to know that the reason Jesus came was to rescue 'sinners': those who have rebelled against God. Look at chapter 2, verses 14 to 17:

As he [Jesus] walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

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.'

In this passage there are two groups of people: the goodies and the baddies. The baddies are made up of people such as Levi, who is a tax collector. Bear in mind that tax collectors were even less popular then than they are now. In fact, they were universally reviled as traitors, working as they did for the occupying Roman forces.

The goodies in this passage are the senior religious figures of the day, the Pharisees. They are the religious establishment, their credentials as religious people are hugely impressive, they seem whiter than white. The question is: who would you expect Jesus to hang around with? The tax collector, or the local church leader? Instinctively we'd expect him to want to be with the goodies, the religious people, the elite. It would be a bit like a school prize-giving, with Jesus patting the religious do-gooders on the back, while scum like Levi look on enviously. But this is the shock for us (as indeed it was for them): 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'

It upsets the religious people enormously to hear this powerful and authoritative figure say, 'I can heal you, but if you don't think you need a cure, you can forget it. I'm here for the sick.' Jesus makes it clear that people who think they are good enough without him don't want his help, just as healthy people don't want doctors.

That's a problem for a lot of us. As Tom Ripley says in *The Talented Mr Ripley*: 'Whatever you do, however terrible, however hurtful, it all makes sense, doesn't it, in your head? You never meet anybody that thinks they're a bad person.' But Jesus says here, 'I've come for people who *realize* that they're bad people, for those who know that they're living as rebels in God's world.' In other words, for sinners.

So, the qualification for coming to Jesus is not 'Are you good enough?' but 'Are you bad enough?' Jesus is categorically not interested in people who think they are good. He is devoted to those who realize that they are bad. Jesus' aim is to call rebels back into a relationship with the God who made them, with the God who gives them each breath and yet is treated like a footnote in their lives. In the next chapter we'll see exactly how Jesus achieves that rescue, but for now I want to focus on the assumption Jesus makes: that we are *all* rebels in need of rescue, even if we believe we're basically good people.

We are all rebels

Did you detect a note of sarcasm when Jesus refers to the Pharisees as 'righteous' ('I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners')? Jesus recognizes that although the Pharisees are righteous by their own standards, they are not

righteous by God's standards. If we are in any doubt about this, fast forward to chapter 3 where these Pharisees, these people who consider themselves good enough for God, begin jealously plotting to kill Jesus. Clearly, despite what they may think, the Pharisees need rescuing just as much as anyone else does. Jesus makes it quite clear that *everyone* – however 'good' they consider themselves to be – is in desperate need of rescue.

If that idea grates with you, as it certainly once did with me, then we need to expose ourselves to a tough question: what is the world *really* like? If we take an honest look at the world, we will see good and evil mixed together. We take a stroll in the park and see a little child toddle excitedly towards its mother with arms outstretched. Nearby is a young couple ambling slowly along, lost in each other's company. When we see those kinds of things we think – quite rightly – that this world is a pretty special place. As Rickie Fitts says in *American Beauty*, 'Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world I feel like I can't take it, like my heart's going to cave in.' But then, if the child in the park falls over and starts screaming, we remember that pain is never far behind happiness in our world. If we see the loving couple shouting angrily at one another, we recall the article in the newspaper saying that nearly one in two marriages end in divorce. The world is

not all bad, but who can honestly claim that it's all good? One hundred *million* people died violent deaths during the one hundred years of the twentieth century. That's more than two thousand four hundred a day, more than during the previous 19 centuries *put together*. It seems safe to say that war and death are as much a part of our world as peace and life. And there are certainly no signs of improvement. If anything, the reverse is true.

Yes, Louis Armstrong was right to say that it's a wonderful world, but we have to admit that there is something profoundly wrong with it, too. We sense that the world could be, *should* be, a wonderful place – but the reality repeatedly dashes our hopes. The Bible says that we have our sense of what *should* be because God made you and me 'in his image'. In other words, because we are like him in lots of ways, we also have his sense of perfection. The Bible goes on to say that the reason the *world* is not as it should be is because *we* are not as we should be. That, says Jesus, is why we need rescuing.

And yet it still offends us to think that we need anyone's help. Of course, some people are definitely 'bad' – murderers and rapists for a start – but not *us*, and certainly not our family and our friends. We're basically good people with a few human faults here and there. We tend to be confident that our good points outweigh the bad, that we are good enough for

God. But at this point we need to ask another tough question: what are we *really* like? The truth is that we're much more flawed than we're willing to admit.

I came across this gleeful advertisement recently on the internet:

You're in Serious Trouble – It's a Proven Fact! Deleting 'Internet Cache and History' will NOT protect you, because any of the web pages, pictures, movies, videos, sounds, e-mail, chat logs and everything else you see or do could easily be recovered to haunt you forever! How would you feel if a snoop made this information public to your spouse, mother and father, neighbours, children, boss or the media? It could easily ruin your life!

The people who wrote that certainly understood that human beings are susceptible to great weakness on occasion. I understood this fact for myself when my brother once challenged me to think, say and do nothing impure, unkind or untrue for 15 minutes (I don't think I made it past the first minute). And it's not only the things we've said, done and thought that are a problem. There are the things we *didn't* say, do and think. People we should have helped, perhaps. Those lapses which may have bothered our consciences at the time but which were forgotten an hour or two later. Or there

may be other, more bitter failures that we have never been able to forget. If all my thoughts, words and actions were displayed for all my friends and family to see, it would be a nightmare. I wouldn't even be able to make eye contact with them, I would be so ashamed.

So what's the problem? Why is there so much to be ashamed of? Verses 18 to 23 of Mark chapter 7 have the answer. The Pharisees have been arguing that it's the *external* things that make us 'bad': the things we touch, the places we go, the things we eat. But Jesus tells his disciples that the problem is much closer to home:

'Are you so dull?' he asked. 'Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him "unclean"? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.'...

He went on: '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".'¹

The problem, says Jesus, is our hearts. *They* make us unclean. If we were to trace all the evil

¹ For the sake of clarity, I should point out that the word 'man' here refers to all mankind (in other words, all human beings).

in the world back to its source, the place we'd end up is the human heart. To the people of Jesus' day, the heart wasn't just the pump that sent blood around our veins. It wasn't even simply the emotional core of the body. It was even more than that: it was 'the real you', the inner you, the seat of human personality. Why is it so hard to keep good relationships going? Why do we hurt those we love most? Why aren't people at college or in the office more cooperative? Because each of us has a heart problem.

Unfortunately, according to Jesus, our problems don't end there. It's not just the fact that we often treat each other in a shameful way: *we treat God in that way too*. (And just as there are consequences when we treat other human beings carelessly, so there are consequences when we neglect God.) Look at Mark chapter 12, verses 28 to 31, where Jesus is debating with some religious leaders:

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?'

This was a famously tricky question to answer. *Which of God's commands is the most important?* All the religious leaders debated it endlessly. After all, God made us and sustains us. He

gives us every good thing we enjoy. Not only that, he has power and authority over our lives. So how should we respond to him? Jesus answers quickly and clearly: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

Note the word 'all': no part of our life is to be cordoned off from God. The appropriate response to a God who is deeply and personally committed to us is that he deserves all of everything we are. But, in reality, God has had all of nothing. We decide exactly what we'll do with our hearts, minds, souls and strength. We give our hearts to many things, but we keep them from our God. We don't even *know* his commands, let alone seek to obey them.

I read Anthea Turner's autobiography, *Fools Rush In* (for research purposes, in case you're wondering), and in it she talks about her difficult and well-publicized relationships. At one point she describes the time she went to a Whitney Houston concert: 'Whitney had real star quality and I was hugely impressed. When she sang the lines, "learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all", I nearly cried. She was spot on.' But is loving ourselves really the greatest love of all? What does it achieve for us? The tragic fact is that in doing so, we turn our backs on the very relationship for which we were primarily designed, because we were

designed first and foremost to love *God*. Instead, we live as if we *were* God, ignoring our loving creator who gives us all that we cherish: love, friends, laughter – even life itself. We decide what is right and wrong, we are our only point of reference, and we are the highest authority. We ignore the very person who is keeping us alive. And that fact brings us to the final point.

We are in danger

The passengers on the *Titanic* didn't know that they were heading for trouble. As they headed for the iceberg, they were having the party of their lives. In the film, there were even those who deliberately ignored the warnings. But whether they liked it or not, the reality was that every single person on that ship was in serious danger.

Let's look now at the harshest verses of Mark's Gospel in order to determine the reality of our own situation. In these verses – Mark chapter 9, verses 43 to 48 – Jesus himself warns us just how serious our sin 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 ...'

Because of our sin, we are in terrible danger and, if we ignore Jesus' warning, we will be punished by God. The Bible says that hell is the place where, for all eternity, people will be punished if they die still rebelling against their creator. It will be a real place of conscious torment and pain. Believe me, I take no pleasure in relating these words of Christ, just as God takes no pleasure in punishing people. The reason God warns us about hell is because he loves us and does not want us to go there.

When I was in Australia staying with a friend, he took me to a beach on Botany Bay. It was deserted, the sun was out, and the clear water was completely calm. I decided I had to go for a swim, but just as I was taking off my shirt, my friend said in a broad Aussie accent, 'Mate, what are you doing?' I told him I was going for a dip. 'But what about these signs?', he said, pointing to a huge billboard behind me. It read: 'Danger – Sharks. No Swimming.' It seemed hard to believe, because everything looked so calm and beautiful. He must have seen my incredulous reaction, because he

continued very dryly, 'Listen, mate, 200 Australians have been killed by sharks over the years. And you have to work out whether those signs are there to save you, or to ruin your fun. You're of age, you decide.' With that he walked off up the beach, and I rather sheepishly put my shirt back on.

The words of Jesus are like a huge warning sign to us. But many people – understandably – want to dismiss this disturbing idea of hell as a fairy tale. They don't see how serious their sin is. Like the passengers on the *Titanic*, they are blind to the fact that they need to be rescued. But ask yourself this question: if hell is not a reality, why did Jesus bother coming at all? 'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.' If sinners don't really need rescuing, why the rescue mission?

According to Jesus, hell is real. So much so that we should do anything to avoid it. '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.' If the problem is the foot, we should cut it off. If the problem is the eye, we should gouge it out. But here is the crux of our predicament: where is the root of all our problems, according to Jesus? *The heart*. If the cause of sin was somehow localized in the hand, the foot, or the eye, we could cut it out and have done with it. But not the heart. We can't cut out our own heart.

We are sick, we need heart surgery, but we are helpless to do it ourselves. And that is why we need Jesus to rescue us. 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick...' As much as I hated the fat tests and the bleep tests, I would still rather be exposed as unfit on the training ground than in front of spectators in a key match. That's exactly what Jesus does, exposing what we are really like so that we can do something about it while there is still time. If there's no danger, we can forget about Jesus, put down this book, and get on with our lives. But if there is any possibility that we might face punishment from God, then ignoring Jesus would be as foolish as swimming with the sharks.