

Can the gospel really change the world?

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[0 : 00] So the title, Can the Gospel Really Make a Difference? And you'll see I'm asking quite a provocative question. We know the answer. As you're getting a whole sermon where you already know the answer. But it's important for us to have confidence in the answer that we know.

You know, we're all standing around at brides on the weekends, watching the rugby or trying not to watch the rugby. And the manna at the bride, the ladies are inside making the sly.

And, you know, we start chatting about the problems of South Africa and the solutions that are coming that are potentially out there. You know, it's interesting. We hardly ever hear someone say, hey, you know, the real solution that people need is Jesus.

You hardly even hear Christians say that, although sometimes we do. So I want to try and make Jesus part of our answer to the problems of South Africa. In fact, not just part of the answer.

I want to make us have confidence that Jesus is central to the answer and that if you don't have Jesus, you're not going to fix the problems of South Africa. Now, just to put us into a bit of context here, South Africa continues.

[1 : 07] If South Africa continues on its current path, it is doomed. We are in desperate need of change and we are in desperate trouble. You don't need me to tell you, but we do need to give ourselves a bit of context.

The only thing that can change our future is the gospel of Jesus. Most people think the government must fix it. Or maybe if they fix the police. Or maybe if they fix the courts.

Now, all of those are true. We do need fixing in all of those areas. But hardly ever do we stop to consider how the gospel can change our country. Well, how much trouble are we in?

So I've got some stats for us to consider. The cost of crime. You've ever thought how much crime costs? Nearly 30 billion rand a year.

And that's just the Department of Correctional Services to keep the jails and the courts running. We've got 165,000 prisoners in South Africa at the moment. The 12th highest prison population in the world.

[2 : 08] China and America are the winners there. But they've got... Well, China has a population of over a billion. It costs 350 rand per prisoner per day in our justice system.

That's kind of conservative. That works out to... Well, you know, to work it out to a whole year. I'm just giving some stats just so that you can see how deeply in trouble we are.

Now, and by the way, that 30 billion that's going to the Department of Correctional Services is not working. The people who come out of prison are not being helped to stay out of prison. The recidivism rate, the return rate is huge.

Close to 100%. Just so that you know, of all the cases that are brought to the police, less than 10% get guilty sentences in the court.

So that 165,000 prisoners is less than 10% of the people that are being referred to the police. And then just to point out that our families are in crisis.

[3 : 14] These are from stats SA. Of the nearly 1 million babies born in South Africa last year, it was like 989,000, just basically a million. And 61%, 62% have no information on the birth certificate about the father.

They just leave it blank. Now, it's obviously a father, but the baby's being born, the moms are saying either they don't know or they're just not important enough to put the father's name on the birth certificate.

60% of South African kids are growing up in homes that have absent fathers. About 44%, nearly 45% of the divorces in 2016, the marriages didn't reach their 10th wedding anniversary.

Now, you know, you compound this year after year, and you're growing up with a nation without dads and with broken families. And it's amazing how quickly those stats have changed. So, people who are my age and younger, 40s and younger, will remember how anomaly it was. It wasn't normal to have divorced parents in your school, in my class.

[4 : 28] I remember, I think I was, it was only in high school, I was a teenager. Ooh, I can't remember now, 80s. It was only in high school that I started having kids with parents that had divorce.

In fact, I was the last one in my class before my parents got divorced. I was, I don't know, 16. I think it's way more now. Okay, and then just, okay, so what am I, so broken families, so what?

Can't we live in an enlightened age? Family is such an old age institution. No one needs to get married anymore. It's just a piece of paper. You can just fall in love and do what you like. Okay, well, let's have a look at what happens when you don't have fathers in the homes.

Now, these statistics are taken from America just because they're easy to find, basically. I have no reason to think that South Africa is any different. 70% of unplanned teenage pregnancies occur in homes where there is no father.

69% of kids are more likely to use drugs. 76% children from homes without a father are more likely to commit crimes.

[5 : 38] 85% of children who show behavior disorders come from fatherless homes. That's 20 times the national average. 80% of rapists with anger problems, and I don't know any rapist that doesn't have anger problems, come from fatherless homes, 14 times the average.

71% of all high school dropouts come from fatherless homes. Nine times the average. My contention then is, if you fix the problem of not having men in the homes, you're going to fix 80% of the problems in a country.

Can you imagine how much money is released when you don't need 30 billion rand to keep these people in the prisons? But how do they get there? Well, they come from fatherless homes. Homes. Like Natalie's. But of course, it's the men that cause the most damage. And they cause the most damage too. Although women can cause lots of damage as well. Clearly then, what we need are good, godly men.

You all know what's happened recently, and the hashtag men are trash movement, and all the stuff that's been happening, and they're calling out men. Now, there is an element where that's needed, of course, but you can't throw all men into the trash can.

[6 : 51] But what we need are not just men. We need good men, and we need godly men. Now, how do we get good, godly men? Well, what I want to do today is help us think through how the gospel does that.

My contention, then, is that the gospel is the thing that makes a difference in the world. Not programs, not projects, and not politicians. I saw on Facebook recently a post.

Someone is now really, really tired of the politicians making promises that they never keep, and they say, oh, the politicians can't save us. They've come to realize the politicians can't save us, as if they ever really could.

But we've got to have hope in something, otherwise we're doomed. So, what can save us, or who can save us? I hope you agree with me. We do need to be saved.

If the trends continue, it's going to be a total disaster in our country. Okay. Well, what I want us to do is look back at the story of the Bible. Let's turn to the Old Testament, that Ezekiel reading.

[7 : 51] Ezekiel 36. So, let's turn there, and I'll unpack that for us and see how God answers this question for us. We're going to see what man's problem is and how God plans to fix it.

Now, Ezekiel, as Adam mentioned, he's alive 600 BC, about 600 years before Christ. God had been working with the nation of Israel since Moses for close to 1,000 years.

Moses is 1,500 BC. Ezekiel is 600 BC. That's nearly 1,000 years. That's 900 years. And time and time and time again, the nation of Israel proved that they are unworthy to be part of God's covenant. And what does God say about them? What is their problem? So, we'll just look at verse 18. I poured out my wrath on them because they had shed blood in the land and because they had defiled it with their idols.

You can see that whole section, God is not happy with his people. But you wouldn't be happy for 900 years if you're trying to get them to do the right thing and they're not listening. Now, there are two sins that God most accuses his people of Israel committing.

[8 : 58] Shedding of blood and idolatry. Now, the shedding of blood is not just about murders committed on a personal level. But it's a systematic thing that goes up and down the community.

It goes all the way up to the kings of the land and the law courts and the court systems and business practices. Everything is corrupt. They cared nothing for God's laws. They cared nothing for doing social justice.

They cared nothing for caring for the poor, the widows, or the needy. In fact, they went out of their way to go and snatch land out of their hands. Interesting. A nation full of blood and full of corruption. And this is Israel 600 years before Christ. You could say the same thing about South Africa. It's exactly the same. And the result is that they profane the name of the Lord.

They're not a good advert to the nations of the God that they worship. So God finally scatters them to the nations, throwing them out of the land, and wanting nothing to do with them. And yet, because God has made a covenant and clearly has a plan to bring about his purposes for the world, he makes a startling new promise here in Ezekiel.

[10 : 11] He knows that he's got to do something totally and completely radically different in order to make sure his people are saved from judgment, but also in a sense to make sure that his people are saved from themselves.

Let's see what God's promises and plans are to change a nation. Verse 24. I will take you out of the nations. I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land.

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. God promises to restore his people back to the land, to clean them from their sins.

Now, that doesn't just mean that God will forgive them their sins. God has already set up the sacrificial system in the Old Testament to do that. This cleaning has to do with more than just forgiveness.

It includes something new. Something God had not done before. Something that will both make them clean and keep them clean, if that makes any sense.

[11 : 19] The problem isn't that God just forgives his people. He's been doing that for years. Yes, he can forgive them, but they're still doing the sins. So something must change if he wants to stop them from doing their sins.

Now, as you know from God in the Bible, he's got two options. We've got lots of options. One of them he does fairly regularly. He just kills people. We've been doing Genesis. You know what he does in the flood, what he did to Babel, and what he does over and over again to his people. But you've also seen from Genesis that the story is that God doesn't like to kill, just kill people. After all, he made us. If you've made something by your own hands and it's not working, you don't just throw it away.

It's precious to you. It's special. We're the same for God. But how does God do this change in us? Verse 26. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.

I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. God knows where the problem of humans lie. It lies inside us.

[12 : 27] Our hearts. Our minds. What that means is our feelings, our desires, our internal drivers. Our thought processes.

The plans. The things that we think about. Our anxieties. Our worries. The things we wish for. The things that we want.

The things we are worried about and scared for. Our internal thought processes. How we see ourselves. How we see our families. What we think others think of us.

And the lies we tell ourselves that justifies our sin. You'll remember, of course, that Jesus says the same thing in the New Testament. It's not what goes into a man that makes him unclean. But from his heart. From what's inside that comes out of him.

That's the thing that makes him unclean. Okay. God's answer then is, okay. Well, let's do some open heart spiritual surgery. I need to fix the heart. He needs to fix the root of the problem.

[13 : 23] And we've seen the root of the problem from Genesis. It'll play itself out through the whole Old Testament. But you must realize that we can't change ourselves. Just like if you had a physical heart condition.

You can't operate on your own heart. You need someone else who knows what he's doing to operate on your own heart. You need the power and the wisdom of the creator God. To deal with

those things going on inside of you.

You just don't have the strength to do it by yourself. We don't have the insight and the wisdom. Because the heart lies to us. It's a perpetual lying factory. Or an idle factory, as Calvin used to say. The heart is wicked and deceitful above all things. It's deceitful. You don't even know the things it's telling you to do. You think it's telling you to do the right thing. And meanwhile it's telling you to do the wrong thing. But you think it's the right thing.

And I don't mean you. I mean, you know, us. God promises to reach in. Wash away. Make clean. Wipe down.

[14 : 22] Restart. Revive. Make strong. Rebuild. Bring to life a dead, broken, torn up, shriveled little thing that's living inside us.

Our hearts. It's obviously picture language. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. God tells us our problem is that our hearts are dead. Cold. Hard.

Stony heart. That's what a stony heart is. It's hard. It doesn't want to do anything nice. Just sits there. Cold. Dead.

Lifeless. Dead to God's laws. Dead to our relationship with him. Cold and hard towards him. And cold and hard towards others. Uncaring. Unloving.

Unkind. Harsh. Hard. Unforgiving. Unwilling to change. Stubborn. Now we all know these kinds of people. They're us, by the way. The husband that doesn't listen to his wife begging him to spend more time at home and to be more engaged with the family.

[15 : 25] The wife who's more interested in alcohol or the mom more interested in alcohol than her children. The rapist that doesn't hear the cries of mercy from his victim. The businessman who loots the pension fund to pay for his lifestyle.

The politicians who do the same without taxes. No, this is not the kind of people God originally created us to be in Eden. This is not the kind of people that God can use to restore his creation. God needs people with hearts of flesh. Now what's that? It's a soft heart. It's a living heart. It's a human heart. Hearts that are soft towards God and soft towards others.

Hearts that draw inspiration and life from God. God is the one that is going to change our hearts. It's just impossible for us to change it. We don't have that ability.

It's just outside of our abilities. Hearts that are suddenly and acutely aware of their own misdoings and sin and feel bad about it. Hearts that respond to the needs of others.

[16 : 31] Hearts that see and hear the pain of others. Hearts that beat with compassion. That beat with love and sincerity and truth and courage.

Hearts full of faith and hope and truth and justice and mercy and kindness. Hearts moved by the pain of others. What I call human hearts. Humane hearts. Hearts that are soft and tender to the needs of my wife and my husband and my kids.

Hearts that when they see injustice burn with a fire in them to fix the problems of our society. Hearts moved to tears when we see the pain of our own brokenness and what that pain has caused to others.

And hearts moved to righteous anger when we see the abuse being done to others. In short, we need hearts that God can use to restore humanity and the world back to Eden again.

So that story of the Bible that we're beginning in Genesis plays itself out through the whole scriptures. Hearts that are restored to God can then begin to restore family and community back to God.

[17 : 39] God then spells out how he's going to do this. How is he going to change our hearts? Well, he does two things. Verse 27. I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

He gives us his spirit and he makes our hearts want to keep his laws. These new living, beating hearts get new life from the Holy Spirit.

We've got echoes of Eden and creation here. Do you remember Adam? He's some dust, lump of clay. How is it that he was made alive?

God puts his spirit into him. Poof! His eyes open. His brain starts working. His heart starts beating. Oh, hello God. Hello Adam. Wow, this is a cool place.

Yes. Now God doesn't even have to tell him what to do and what not to do. He's just created that way. Except later on he does tell him what to do and for some reason something inside Adam and Eve says don't do the thing that God said.

[18:47] Do the opposite. We know that's where all the problems start. So to solve it we need something to solve our hearts. the problem of our hearts. Our hearts are basically stillborn if you think of it.

We're born dead. And we need God's spirit to bring us to life. Once they've come to life what God does he says I'll put my spirit in your hearts so that you will want to keep my laws.

Did you see that in the text? A very important little ending to that section. Verse 27 I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Our new hearts want to follow God. Our new hearts want to be obedient to them. Again echoes of Eden. We know what happened in Eden what went wrong.

Now God can forgive us but if he doesn't change our hearts we're not going to get any better at obeying him. Does that make sense? In a sense this passage in Ezekiel it's the one big new thing that God is going to do for his people.

[19:59] It's the one big new thing that gets fulfilled in the New Testament. God has always known what the problem of his people are but he waits and he makes a promise in Ezekiel 600 years before Christ okay your problem is your heart you need a new heart okay here's the promise I'm going to give you a new heart I'm going to take out your bad heart I'm going to put in a good heart I'm going to do that by breathing my spirit out on you so that you become good because the spirit gives life and creates life out of death in a sense.

Now that didn't happen at the time of Ezekiel that happens later but here's what will happen when God does that verse 33 onwards this is what the sovereign Lord says on the day I cleanse you from all your sins on the day when I do this on the day I do it when I do this I will resettle your towns and the ruins will be rebuilt the desolate land will be cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it they will say this land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden the cities that were lying in ruins desolate and destroyed are now fortified and inhabited you will know that I've done it I the Lord have spoken and I will do it so notice what happens when people with new hearts start living in the power of the spirit loving God and loving their neighbors things that are broken are fixed places that are desolate become little Edens things that are weak become strong where there was once nothing but weeds and thorn bushes become oasis of life and abundance places that are scary become safe places full of danger and vulnerable become places of shelter and provide sanctuary for others good people change homes neighborhoods cities and nations and all of this starts with God's work in the human heart right well how does that relate to the gospel well let's end our time together in Romans 8 just turn this along while I

Romans chapter 8 now Paul uses slightly different language but I'm hoping that you'll see he's talking about the same thing I'm just going to focus really on those first four verses there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because through Christ Jesus the law of the spirit of life has set me free from the law of sin and death for what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by sinful nature God did by sending his own son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering and so he condemned sin in sinful man in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the spirit okay we've got newness of life and forgiveness of sins what the Old Testament calls being clean no condemnation freedom but notice it's only available to those in Christ this is one of the great gifts the gospel has for us to free us from our own guilt and shame to free us from our past to free us from the sins of our past to be free to live a new life not shackled by the weight of the knowledge of our past lives gone free never to return or to haunt us clean brand new ready to start again now they do haunt us every now and then you just tell them to go packing because you've got Christ verse 2 because in Christ

I've been set free from the law of sin and death now this is New Testament language for having a heart of stone law of sin law of death being not able to break free from the problem of your heart a dead heart killed and crusted over by sin the law of sin and death you're bound up by it notice the spirit gives life just like it does in the Old Testament but notice again the spirit only operates through Christ because verse 2 through Christ Jesus the law of the spirit of life has set me free from the law of sin and death remember how before he left for heaven Jesus breathed on his disciples saying receive my spirit Jesus begins to act as the Lord and King because he's become the spirit giver he's the gatekeeper the Lord of life and death the spirit now moves according to Jesus' word and command that's the gift that

God gave Jesus at his resurrection or even before that really yeah sorry after his resurrection and before his ascension and now we get to the heart of the matter verse 3 for what the law was powerless to do God did by sending Jesus to condemn sin in sinful man this is how Jesus is able to free us and give us his spirit God could see that just giving the law just telling us what to do was never going to work it was never intended to work that way he has to do God has to do something else to make us want to obey his laws so he sends Jesus to become a sin offering for us and not to condemn us but to condemn the sin inside of us now just notice that we should be even more condemned for what we did to Christ both Jews and Gentiles rising up as one to kill God's son and yet that's the very instrument that God uses not to condemn us he's like the super physician he skillfully kills not the sinner but the sin inside the sinner now you've heard that saying

[25 : 49] God hates the sin but loves the sinner now to be fair that's only true in Christ if you're outside Christ he both hates the sin and he hates you because he sends people into hell he doesn't just send sin into hell but in Christ you've got a master position who can look at you and say you're a big problem but I love you so I'm going to take away the bad parts to be honest there aren't really any good parts but I'll give you the good parts that you need Jesus is the active ingredient in getting us new hearts and in giving us the Holy Spirit and in killing off sin and in giving us life he's the active ingredient if you want to say it like that in not condemning us the active agent Jesus is the one that activates all the Old Testament promises or rather he's the one that makes it happen the New Testament is really saying hey do you know what God told you was going to happen in Old Testament it's happened that's shortcut for the whole what happens in the New Testament

God made all these promises 600 years ago it's happened boys Jesus has come the Spirit has been given new hearts new lives new minds and then to top it all off at the end of our reading verse 15 and verse 16 for you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear but you received the spirit of sonship and by him we cry Abba Father the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children now if we are children then we are heirs heirs of God and co-heirs of Christ if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory he lifts us out of slavery frees us from our sin and guilt and shame and makes us members of his household his family his sons and daughters co-heirs of Christ heirs of the covenants of promise whatever Jesus receives from the father he then begins to share with us and he does it now in this life but ultimately in the life to come how does all of this relate to our original question can the gospel really change the world we saw that a major social problem in

South Africa is fatherless homes you fix that you will save the South African economy billions of rands in damaged of damage not to mention damage in countless lives and families can the gospel really save South Africa yes of course it can it does it one human heart at a time the only real hope for South Africa is hearts that are changed by the gospel specifically we need men to be challenging other men to become men of God and to return to their families families that have a mom and a dad are vitally important for our country you saw the stats I can explain those things just further I don't know if you've ever thought about that but it's one of those things that bear out the truth of God's word God's plan for humanity is for a man and a woman and to raise kids in a family Christians we need to open our homes to children and other families to see what it so that they can see what it's like to have a dad we need to start practicing that ancient art of hospitality again need to invite friends from broken homes for dinner you'll be amazed to see the difference you can make speak to your kids about God and the gospel pray with your kids men take up your gospel mandate as godly heads of your house women honor and respect and praise your men when last did you say to your man something that really

I really appreciate you doing that that was really great I really enjoyed that and you'll see the guy it was nothing men pray for your families pray with your families if you're a single mom make sure your kids have godly men in their lives don't just bring someone home they don't need that ask God to send you good men don't stop praying until he does if you have a stable home make a point of looking for single parent homes and support them as best you can godly single moms are doing an amazing work and they need all the support and the help that they can get and then just to say the gospel doesn't just change individuals and then leave them as individuals you see what God does he changes us and brings us into his family God creates communities and families we call it church so then the church is the place where God is rebuilding and restoring broken lives into new families just like in Ezekiel the barren land turns into a garden of

Eden again we saw in Genesis remember God calls Abraham and then he goes he calls him to Canaan the broken land and then Abraham at strategic points puts those altars down and calls and he's like planting a flag this is a place of light and hope and healing and all the good things that we need in South Africa we need to St. Mark needs to be that it is that just giving us courage and hope that we are doing that as we embrace the gospel and have our hearts challenged and changed we become the place where others can come to find rest from hard and difficult lives they find forgiveness from their past mistakes and hope for the future and our country needs hope and the only thing that can deliver that in real time and real space in real people's real changed lives is the gospel of Christ let's pray together heavenly father lovely reminder of the promise that you give us in the gospel of changed hearts and minds of washing us clean and giving us the gift of your holy spirit calling us into a new family to be the place of hope and change and a future lord our country is in desperate need of godly men leading their homes in godly ways and of moms staying at home and raising their kids well and of family units working together lord bless the families in our community help us to see those who are hurting and in need and help us to reach out and to love them with the gospel and to open our hearts and homes so that your love can flow out to a broken and hurting

[32 : 28] South Africa that needs it in Jesus name amen