



GOOD NEWS FOR PEOPLE WITH BIG PROBLEMS

A Series Of Talks Introducing Christianity

The Christian message bears endless repeating. Deeply counterintuitive in nature, it is quickly forgotten and easily distorted. This has been true throughout history, and it is true today. The need for the basic Christian Gospel, or Good News of Jesus Christ, to be re-articulated is as pressing as it ever has been.

In our culture, Christianity is seen almost universally as negative, out of touch, judgmental, etc. The evidence in pop-culture alone (Flanders from *The Simpsons*, Angela from *The Office*, etc.) tells us that Christians have failed to connect.¹

Why have we failed to connect? This series posits two reasons:

1. The message has been distorted. Christianity is not primarily about morality, it is about the *good news* of God's one-way love for sinners – *i.e. people with big problems* – as revealed/expressed in Jesus Christ.
2. Whatever the message is, we do not communicate it in words or language that people understand.

So we have the wrong message, which we then communicate in a way that no one understands. This series is an attempt to remedy that: to get the message right and to present it in terms that are meaningful within the context of our everyday, real lives. As such, we hope that it will serve both as a basic introduction of the faith to those who have never engaged with it, as well as a re-introduction for those whose faith has become burdensome to them.

Methodology

1. We start with ourselves. Just as when we visit a doctor's office, the doctor needs to determine what is wrong with us before giving a prescription. The "cure" must be preceded by the disease. So each talk begins with a Problem.
2. Then, to give our discussion some perspective, we read a couple of supporting verses from the Bible. Even if the audience does not view the Bible as the inspired word of God, that's fine – a few (short) introductory passages will probably be of interest.

¹ *unChristian* by David Kinnaman (2007) is just one recent example of the research behind such claims.

3. Next, we present numerous illustrations and examples to get a sense of what this problem looks like and how it functions. We want to connect what the Bible says with our day-to-day experience.
 - a. We have purposely provided an over-abundance of illustrations, so as to allow the program leader to pick and choose according to their preference/audience. Feel free to find your own! We only caution you against using anything explicitly religious.
 - b. If you cannot seem to find a proper illustration for a point, we encourage you to visit our weblog (www.mockingbirdnyc.blogspot.com), which constitutes our running attempt to locate the Christian ideas and truth in the surrounding culture.
4. Finally, we look to see how/if Christianity addresses that Problem.

Format

These talks were originally presented over consecutive weeks, during two-hour evening meetings, where dinner and drinks were also served. The talks themselves, including the accompanying clips, lasted roughly 45-60 minutes and were followed by 20 minutes of discussion. A few of the outlines below may be too extensive to cover in a single session. Feel free to sub-divide them.

Although it was written with an audience of 20- and 30-somethings in mind, this series is not meant to be limited to that age group. That said, some of the subject matter may not be entirely appropriate for teenagers.

Please note, since video and audio clips are essential to this material, some kind of playback/screening capability is required. We have tried to indicate exactly which media needs to be obtained for each talk. Of course, if something is not readily available, feel free to substitute anything comparable.

Discussion Questions

For the sake of authenticity, we suggest that you develop your own questions. But if you get stuck, the following three usually work well:

1. What stood out for you in tonight's presentation (talk)?
2. Can you think of any other similar examples or illustrations from music, movies, television, literature or the web?
3. Do you have any personal illustration – something that's happened to you personally - that will help illustrate the topic we discussed tonight?

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TALK 1 – *Starting With The Man In The Mirror: Self-Involvement and Suffering*

1. The Problem: Self-Centeredness, Suffering and Sin

- a. We begin with ourselves. What are we actually like?
 - i. Play a clip from episode #304, "The Devil in Me," of the nationally syndicated radio show *This American Life*. (Play the clip from the beginning of the episode to the 2 min 20 sec mark; the full episode is available for download on iTunes or at www.thisamericanlife.org.)
 1. The host, Ira Glass, knows his problem, but he won't admit it.
 2. He's not doing a "mental computation." That is, his action is not premeditated; it just happens.
- b. **Problem:** Human beings are narcissistic, self-involved, and morally bent.
 - i. This diagnosis applies to everyone and is potentially limitless.
 1. The Rev. Sam Shoemaker (Co-Author of The Twelve Steps):
"Everybody either has a problem, is a problem or lives with a problem."
 - ii. This creates a never-ending cycle of victimization and victimhood, hurting and being hurt. Suffering. Which is just one empirically verifiable symptom of a "fallen world" – LIFE IS HARD.
 1. Beat writer Jack Kerouac wrote in 1945, *"There is a grave fault in the nature of human life. Somewhere in the soul there is an error in the construction, a dark misgiving intimate and mute that prevents us from being happy when there seems to be no particular unhappiness abroad in our lives. In this dark cave is stored the universal essence of all sufferance."*
 - iii. Universal self-centeredness also means that as human beings we are all constantly asserting ourselves and trying to exert control over our lives. Bumping into one another and reacting when others get in our way.

2. Bible Passages: This idea is expressed throughout the entire Bible.

- a. **Jeremiah 16:12b (OT)** *"Each one of you has followed the stubborn inclinations of your own wicked heart and not obeyed me."*

- b. **Matthew 15:19 (JC)** *“For out of the heart come evil ideas, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”*
- c. **1 John 1:8** *“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”*

In biblical terms, Self-Centeredness translates almost directly into “SIN.”
Original Sin: choosing *ourselves* over God.

3. Illustrations/Extrapolations

a. The problem of Self-Centeredness is directly linked to that of suffering.

i. The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous puts it this way (pg. 62):
“Whatever our protestations, are not most of us concerned with ourselves, our resentments, or our self-pity? Selfishness- self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles. Driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity, we step on the toes of our fellows and they retaliate. Sometimes they hurt us, seemingly without provocation, but we invariably find that at some time in the past we have made decisions based on self which later placed us in a position to be hurt.”

ii. **Movie Illustration: *Annie Hall*.** Written and directed by Woody Allen. The story of a rocky romance between a neurotic New York comedian and a Midwestern singer named Annie Hall. Told in a non-linear and self-conscious fashion. It won the Oscar for Best Picture in 1977. Play first 12 minutes of the movie.

1. Woody/Alvy interprets everything in terms of himself (Anti-Semitism, Annie’s therapy).
2. He acts out against others (Annie, man in line, schoolmates), contributing to their suffering.
 - a. The cause seems to be a mixture of nature (biology/givens) vs. nurture (parents/circumstance).
 - b. Does global tragedy (Holocaust) put Alvy’s sin in relief – or does it seem like an exponential reflection of it?
3. *The view of human nature that Woody Allen is depicting here: These are fascinating, highly talented and high-achieving people. **But their weaknesses tell the story, not their strengths.***

- iii. **Michael Jackson example:** The selfish ambition of MJ's father drove the formation of the Jackson 5, when Michael was just 8 years old. Joe, the father, demanded almost militaristic discipline from his kids, which took an enormous toll on them esp. the lead singer and star, Michael. Children used as a means to a selfish end → wealth and fame. Michael understandably saw himself as a victim in the equation, a person whose childhood had been taken from him and whose every move was scrutinized and judged (play "Scream" video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1Zl1stDsUI>; it can also be helpful to hand out printed lyrics).
1. Michael used his hurt to justify his megalomania and self-deification, his personal tragedy as an excuse for his own sin/negligence. Preventing him from seeing himself honestly.
 2. A self-perpetuating cycle → Two ways people react to suffering: Victim or Villain. Never to blame, always to blame. Both are totally self-centered!

4. So what is the Good News for this Big Problem?

- a. First, Christianity understands the gravity of the problem. That life is really tough, that we hurt people constantly and are hurt by them in return. That we cannot seem to fix or outrun our self-involvement or the suffering it causes. The fact that Christianity recognizes, rather than denies this truth, is helpful for two reasons:
 - i. **When we feel understood, we feel loved.**
 - ii. We are free to be honest about who we really are.
- b. The second piece of good news is that our suffering and self-involvement are symptoms of a sickness (like an allergy or a predisposition). Rather than, say, the result of bad choices.
 - i. **We can therefore adjust our thinking about ourselves and our problems from "predicament" to "sickness," from "solution" to "cure."**
 - ii. This affords us an infinite amount of compassion for our fellow sufferers.

- c. **Finally, although at its core, our self-involvement/sin is a rejection of God, *God has not rejected us.*** In fact, quite the opposite is the case. He has sent his son to be our savior. He has intervened upon human history, which is what our self-involvement requires. Christianity posits a savior, who is Jesus Christ. More on this next week.

Closing Passage. Matthew 2:17 - ***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."***

Additional Illustration: New Yorker cartoon



TALK 2 – *It's Not You It's Me And Other Lies: Judgment, Guilt and Identity*

1. **Recap/Intro:** Last week we talked about human nature. About how our chief attribute is debilitating self-involvement (sin), which produces suffering in ourselves and others. We agreed with Woody Allen that people's lives are more defined by their weaknesses than their strengths.
 - a. We talked about how Christianity reorients our thinking about life. We cease to see suffering/self-involvement as a problem that can be solved. But rather as a sickness which needs a cure.
2. **This week's Problem: Judgment and Guilt → aka The Law.**
 - a. Judgment is one of the driving forces in all of our lives, something we are almost all trying to either escape or appease. It engenders guilt and fear.
 - b. Christianity claims that there is an absolute moral standard from God, or Law, and that this is something we instinctively know (indeed, it was implied in much of last week's talk).
 - i. So judgment is not an illusion and our self-centeredness is not a construct. We know this because of the Law.
 - c. In the Bible the word "law" refers to something different than in the newspaper. The Law is an OUGHT from God (i.e. The 10 Commandments). The law tells you what you should do, and who you should be (in order to live). It demands results/performance/works, it needs to be appeased!
3. **Bible Passages:**
 - a. **Exodus 20 (OT): The 10 Commandments**
 - b. **Luke 10: 25-18 (JC)** *"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered: " '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, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."*
 - c. **Matthew 5:8 (JC)** *"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*
4. **Extrapolation on The Law.**
 - a. The Law shows us who we are.

- i. The great 20th century American writer Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "*To know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks. It is to measure oneself against Truth, and not the other way around. The first product of self-knowledge is humility.*" (The Fiction Writer and His Country, 1957)
 - ii. "*Without the law I would not have known what sin was...*" (Paul in Romans 7:7b) The "should" actually reveals the "shouldn't." It almost draws attention to it.
- b. **The Law works internally and externally**, and it takes many forms.
- i. It is written on the human heart (Romans 2) → we all know it instinctually, on some level. "Ought" is our default setting.
 - ii. There are plenty of watered down, non-religious versions of the Law, both internal and external. We all feel that there are things we should do and ways we should live, which lead to inner tension, struggle, and pressure.
 1. Internal: The voice inside our heads that accuses us. That makes us feel guilty. "You should've said the right thing, You're not as good as so-and-so, etc."
 2. External: The voice from the world (in advertising, for example) that says, you ought to be successful, you ought to be beautiful, you ought to be smart. Almost all human enterprise is about fulfilling somebody's law.
- c. How do we recognize it?
- i. The Law is revealed not by its content but by its accusing nature, i.e., its "tone of voice," the way it is received/perceived/heard by human wiring.
 - ii. A "should statement" is basically a judgment. Think of unsolicited advice. "You should really try a new deodorant."
 1. In the service of Holy Communion in the Anglican Church, the first thing the minister does after the opening prayer is to read Christ's summary of the Law ("Love God and love

neighbor"). And the immediate response of the congregation is "Lord have mercy."

- iii. IF-THEN statements. Again, unsolicited advice, e.g. *If you really want to be happy, then you should be sure to marry the right person.*

5. **Illustrations - Relationships.** We've all heard the line, "It's Not You It's Me," and we all know that in most cases, it is a lie. It is rarely said in earnest. The real meaning is, "You have failed to live up to my standards in some way and I reject you." You are not good enough. ("He's Just Not That Into You")
 - a. But on a more basic level, The Law (demand/judgment – "oughts") in a relationship creates resentment and guilt, or self-righteousness and fear, or micro-managing and secrecy/defensiveness.
 - b. Relationships can become a never-ending quest to fulfill the other's expectations.
 - i. To make any relationship run cold, introduce some criticism. Make a face of disapproval or utter a comment that even vaguely implies that your partner needs to be different. Any subject will do: cooking, health, habits, family, etc. It has the opposite effect. *"The Law was added so that the trespass might increase"* Romans 5:20.
 1. This is known as "the Pauline insight": the attempt to pour water on the fire (of poor performance), actually has the effect of pouring gasoline. Like a container that says "water," but is actually filled with lighter fluid, and nobody has been told the truth about the container's contents.
 - ii. Changing a person. **I'll love you when/if you change (Law) vs. I'll love you in spite of the fact that you may not (Grace).**
 - c. Clip from *Seinfeld*, "The Lip Reader," (Season 5, Episode 6), from roughly the 2 minute mark to the 12 minute mark.
 - i. There are standards and we fall short of them.
 - ii. The consequence is rejection. No one ever meets these standards, but they are there nonetheless.
 - iii. The "Rules" are deeply ingrained. Not surprisingly, dating frequently becomes a façade. A game.

6. **Identity.** Our identities are often infused with the same dynamic. When our value is directly related to our actions/abilities/attributes, our identity quickly becomes another never-ending attempt to meet some crushing Standard or Law: where you're from, who you know, what you have, where you work, your gender, your race, what others think of you... You are either in or you're out.

a. **Read T.S. Eliot – from his play The Family Reunion**

We all of us make the pretension
To be the uncommon exception
To the universal bondage.
We like to appear in the newspapers
So long as we are in the right column.
We know about the railway accident
We know about the sudden thrombosis
And the slowly hardening artery.

**We like to be thought well of by others
So that we may think well of ourselves.**

And any explanation will satisfy:

We only ask to be reassured

About the noises in the cellar

And the window that should not have been open.

**Why do we all behave as if the door might suddenly open,
the curtains be drawn,**

The cellar make some dreadful disclosure, the roof disappear,

And we should cease to be sure of what is real or unreal?

**Hold tight, hold tight, we must insist that the world is what we have always
taken it to be.**

Each of us is afraid of being exposed for who we really are. There is some standard that we have not met, and we live in fear of others finding out.

- b. **New York City.** Many people move to NYC either to escape judgment or meet it. Everyone has a reason for moving to NYC.

i. *"If you can make it there, then you can make it anywhere.*

ii. Do you look forward to telling people where you live? Or do you dread it? How about your job? About your friends (namedropping)?

- c. The late great American author David Foster Wallace wrote about this idea in terms of worship, *"An outstanding reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship is that **pretty much anything else will eat you alive.** If you worship money and things – if they are where you tap real*

meaning in life – then you will never have enough. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you.” (from This is Water)

- i. The above constitutes a fairly accurate description of what the Bible calls Idolatry.
- d. **Axl Rose example.** The rock band Guns ‘n’ Roses caught a glimpse of fulfilling the world’s “Law” with their album *Appetite For Destruction* – the best-selling debut record of all time. The success defined them. Overnight they became “the biggest band in the world.” But then something interesting happened. Their record had been a pure collaboration (all five members sharing the songwriting royalties equally). As soon as they became successful, each one wanted to take credit (and get more money). Their success bred infighting and resentment and finally creative paralysis and fear – it took Axl Rose, their lead singer, 16 years to release another album. His identity was on the line. Nothing short of *Appetite* part 2 would suffice, in both his eyes and the eyes of the music press.
- i. Not surprisingly, most of *Chinese Democracy*, the album he finally released, is about judgment – either Axl’s unquestioned ability to meet it, or his desire to escape it. Self-justification!

1. **From the song “IRS”:**

*Do you think I'm doing this all for my health?
I should've looked again then at somebody else
Feeling like I've done way more than wrong
Feeling like I'm living inside of this song
Feeling like I'm just too tired to care
Feeling like I done more than my share
Could've been the way that I carried on
Like a broken record for so long
There's not anymore that I can do*

7. **Good News:**

- a. Christianity understands that at the core of human life, **there is a tension between trying live up to judgment and the need to escape it. The gap between who you should be and who you actually are.**

- i. There's the person you aspire to become – e.g., New Year's Resolutions – and then there's the person who watches all the TV and eats all the ice cream. ***We are not crazy for feeling this way.***
- b. This is the primary problem that Christianity understands God to be dealing with in Christ and the Cross, the primary dilemma in human life to which God has responded. The Gospel presents an alternative solution to the problem of judgment, one that does not propose more works (or rules).
- c. Christ has fulfilled the Law. He has succeeded where you have not. This is an empirical fact. He is the end of the Law (Romans 10:4).
 - i. Instead of turning a person back in upon themselves as the solution to their problem, Christianity turns the human gaze away from itself and toward the life that has beaten the Law's oppression and relays its credit to the one who appreciates/believes the substitution.
- d. ***The world may judge us, and we may judge ourselves but because of Christ, God does not judge us.***
- e. Some Implications for Everyday Life
 - i. You will NEVER be cool enough, good-looking enough, wealthy enough. Christianity explodes the idea of reaching peace through personal achievement from the outset.
 - 1. What would life be like for you if you lived without any reference to the judgments that you encounter everyday?
 - ii. Identity is no longer a matter of doing or not doing, of fulfilling some standard. It is external, bestowed not earned.
 - iii. Relationships are re-wired. You cannot and will not meet another person's needs, nor they yours. Instead, you are simply two human beings. Both always have something to apologize for. We all know where "tit-for-tat" thinking leads → straight to resentment!

Additional Passages: Galatians 3: 19-25, Romans 7:7b-10

TALK 3 – Check Out Any Time You Like (But You Can Never Leave): Anger, Depression, Addiction and Christian Hope

1. **Recap last week:** We talked about the problem of Judgment/Law. The difference between the way that we ought to live and the way that we actually live. Between who we should be and who we are. Morally, Physically, Religiously, Professionally, Socially, etc. We heard at the end about the Good News that although the world may judge us, and we may judge ourselves, because of Christ, God does not judge us. (Romans 10:4)
2. **This Week’s Problem: Powerlessness And Lack Of Control.** Many/most/all of us lack the ability to control completely our tempers, our moods, our appetites, and most of our life circumstances – we do not have as much power as we need or as we’d like to have. We know what is right and we do what is wrong (even when we know we’ll regret it). We do not have the power or strength to fulfill the Law perfectly, internally or externally, religious or cultural. In fact we don’t have half as much power as the world would like to convince us we have.
 - a. Think about it: People are very susceptible to getting stuck in deep, seemingly self-inflicted ruts. **We all know people who have gotten incredibly enmeshed in circumstances, habits, and relationships that were not good for them. If they were able to see their situation objectively, they usually lacked the power to extricate themselves from the problem that held them in its grip.**
 - i. **Advice and “consequences” often seem to have little impact.**

Telling the depressed person to feel better because they have so much to be grateful for, or the obese person that they just need to eat less, rarely seems to solve these kinds of problems and tendencies. Exhortations and warning labels do not relieve cigarette smokers of their addiction to nicotine or provide them with the ability to kick their habit.
 - b. Christianity suggests that human nature suffers from recidivistic propensities of the most stubborn variety, and that appealing to one’s own inner resources in an attempt to save oneself from an established habit will prove insufficient. **In short, people cannot save themselves from the things that they most need to be saved from.**
 - c. In theological language, this is what Martin Luther called **The Bondage Of The Will.**

3. Bible Passages:

- a. **Romans 7: 15-19 (Paul)** *“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”*
- b. **John 6:44 (JC)** *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”*

4. Illustrations. What does this look like? → Doing the exact opposite of what you know is good for you.

- a. Play the song “Do it Again” by Steely Dan
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZH8pY3C0skM>). The song describes human beings consciously engaging in destructive or self-destructive patterns of behavior, repeatedly.
- b. Anglican historian Ashley Null describes it this way: *“According to [archbishop] Thomas Cranmer’s anthropology, what the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies. The mind doesn’t direct the will. The mind is actually captive to what the will wants, and the will itself, in turn, is captive to what the heart wants”* (From Null’s book, Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of Repentance: Renewing the Power to Love)
 - i. So we have a will, it just isn’t free. And that’s a problem. We do not have as much control as we would like to think, over both our world and ourselves. Although it is very rare/unpopular, the bound-will understanding of human beings does a good job of accounting for the data found in a newspaper (and our lives).
- c. B. F. Skinner, the godfather of behavioral psychology, described this same state of affairs like this: ***“The only difference between men and rats is that rats learn from their mistakes.”***
- d. Sigmund Freud described the bondage of the will as “the indestructibility of what lies in the unconscious mind.” He’s not referring to the indomitable human spirit... He’s talking about that thing in our heart that works against us.

5. **Bigger Picture.** Likewise, human nature is characterized more by regression than progress, in spite of many claims to the contrary. Just as we are not always in control of our actions, neither are we of our lives. In fact, life (and world history) is often defined by impasse – feeling stuck. Or even, things getting worse. It all boils down to the question, ***Do people change and if so, how?***
- a. **Illustration. Whit Stillman’s film *The Last Days of Disco*.** The story of young adults (yuppies) in New York in the very early 80s, dealing with love and work. The clip is a conversation between Des (dark hair) and Josh (lighter hair), both of whom like the same girl, Alice. Des has a history of womanizing, while Josh has a history of mental illness. From the DVD, play Chapter 18, the discussion of *Lady and The Tramp*. (1hr 13min mark to 1hr 17min 20sec). Not only a comment on socialization, but a strong, non-Hollywood sentiment about how/if people change, aka “I don’t believe people change that way.”
 - i. Then play Chapter 25 (1hr 40min mark to 1hr 42min 45sec). Des and Jimmy leaving the city at the end of the movie. Des has cheated on Alice after saying he’d changed. The Shakespearean admonition: *“What if ‘thine own self’ is not so good? What if it’s pretty bad? Wouldn’t it be better not to be true to thine ownself?”*
 - b. Emily Dickinson, Poem 688
***But the Heart with the heaviest freight on—
Doesn’t—always—move—***
 - c. In fact, the heart often gets heavier as time goes on, and less likely to move. Likewise, our lives are rarely a record of steady improvement.
 - i. Mrs. Havisham, the spurned bride and recluse in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, demonstrates how time doesn’t heal all wounds; they often get worse: *“I knew not how to answer, or how to comfort [Mrs. Havisham]. That she had done a grievous thing in taking an impressionable child to mould into the form that her wild resentment, spurned affection, and wounded pride, found vengeance in, I knew full well. But that, in shutting out the light of day, she had shut out infinitely more; that, in seclusion, she had secluded herself from a thousand natural and healing influences; that, **her mind, brooding solitary, had grown diseased, as all minds do and must and will that reverse the appointed order of their Maker; I knew equally well.**”* (ch. 49, pg. 495)

1. Do you have any recurring dreams? We never stop waking up in the middle of the night, anxious. The content of the worry may change (term papers, children, career), but the waking up doesn't.
2. Have you ever been in a romantic relationship where you keep having the same fight over and over? All roads lead back to the same place.

d. Anger, Addiction and Depression are all areas where willpower is shown to be ineffective/limited.

- i. Anger. How many times have we heard about "crimes of passion" that, "I let my emotions get the better of me"? Anger is not something people anticipate or can control, especially when it matters most. It is always a surprise. Road Rage.
 1. Fighting in sports that results in a suspension (basketball player Ron Artest; French soccer player Zinadine Zidane in the World Cup Final; Amazing clip of U of New Mexico Women's Soccer player Elizabeth Lambert. After she was suspended and watched the video of her own aggressiveness, she said, "I look at it and I'm like, 'That is not me'... I have so much regret. I can't believe I did that." Read the full story here: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/18/sports/soccer/18soccer.html>).
- ii. Addiction. Christians will always find a place in Alcoholics Anonymous. The understanding of the human will as bound is the foundation of the entire program. Step 1: *"We admit that we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable."*
 1. Another AA quote: *"...If a mere code of morals or a better philosophy of life were sufficient to overcome alcoholism, many of us would have recovered long ago. But we found that such codes and philosophies did not save us, no matter how much we tried. We could wish to be moral, we could wish to be philosophically comforted, in fact, we could will these things with all our might, but the needed power wasn't there. Our human resources, as marshaled by the will, were not sufficient; they failed utterly."* (Big Book, pg 44-45)

- iii. Depression. Author David Foster Wallace describes the self-perpetuating nature of depression in his short story: “The Depressed Person.” *“The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror.”*

Or from his early story “The Planet Trillaphon As It Stands In Relation To The Bad Thing”: “Because the Bad Thing [depression] not only attacks you and makes you feel bad and puts you out of commission, it especially attacks and makes you feel bad and puts out of commission precisely those things that are necessary in order for you to fight the Bad Thing, to maybe get better, to stay alive. This is hard to understand but it's really true. Imagine a really painful disease that, say, attacked your legs and your throat and resulted in a really bad pain and paralysis and all-around agony in these areas. The disease would be bad enough, obviously, but the disease would also be open-ended; you wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Your legs would be all paralyzed and would hurt like hell ... but you wouldn't be able to run for help for those poor legs, just exactly because your legs would be too sick for you to run anywhere at all. Your throat would burn like crazy and you'd think it was just going to explode ... but you wouldn't be able to call out to any doctors or anyone for help, precisely because your throat would be too sick for you to do so. This is the way the Bad Thing works: it's especially good at attacking your defense mechanisms. The way to fight against or get away from the Bad Thing is clearly just to think differently, to reason and argue with yourself. just to change the way you're perceiving and sensing and processing stuff. But you need your mind to do this, your brain cells with their atoms and your mental powers and all that, your *self*. and that's exactly what the Bad Thing has made too sick to work right. That's exactly what it has made sick.”

1. In other words, an essential part of what makes depression more depressing is the inability to do anything about it.

All of these examples point to the fact that when it comes to the really important stuff, we are too often powerless to change ourselves or our world, that things rarely improve as a result of our efforts. In fact, those efforts tend to make things worse. In the same way, we are powerless to choose God. To please Him or to love Him. Instead we love weak things – idols – thing that cannot last and that are detrimental to our well-being.

6. Good News:

- a. Jesus' death is a “ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). Which implies that he came to rescue people who have been kidnapped, i.e. held *against their*

will. We talk about Jesus as the one who releases the captives, who gives sight to the blind, and release from dungeons those who sit in darkness (Luke 4:18-19). He works with bound people!

- i. *“The principle that we shall find no enduring strength until we first admit complete defeat is the main taproot from which our whole Society has sprung and flowered.” (Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions, pg. 21-22)*
- b. JC: “Come to me all you who are weary or burdened” (Matthew 11:28), i.e. he welcomes those with “heavy freight” on their hearts.
 - i. **Defeat and despair are things that enable people to find God, rather than things that keep Him from them.**
- c. Christianity understands the regressive and/or static nature of human life. The impasse – the “stuck” ness. This is a relief to people who find they are not getting better. Or people dealing with loved ones who are getting worse.
- d. **God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves.** It is a one-way scenario. *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* Romans 5:8
 - i. Addicts view life in a hopeful/honest way. Still an addict, but day by day, relying completely on God. What does this look like?
 - 1. **Once more from AA’s Big Book:** *“But my friend sat before me, and he made the pointblank declaration that **God had done for him what he could not do for himself. His human will had failed.** Doctors had pronounced him incurable. Society was about to lock him up. Like myself, he had admitted complete defeat. Then he had, in effect, been raised from the dead, suddenly taken from the scrap heap to a level of life better than the best he had ever known!”*

TALK 4 – *Getting Out of Jail Free: Death, Despair and Sacrifice*

1. **Recap/Intro.** For three weeks we've heard about some very big problems – taken together, they've described the jail we all live in.
 - a. Sin/Self-centeredness: Even the ways in which we try to love one another are inherently flawed. Have you ever been confronted with how selfish your love is?
 - i. Marriage – a husband giving his wife flowers or taking her out to a nice dinner so that she'll warm up to him buying a motorcycle...
 - ii. Dads watching sons or daughters play sports – getting too involved, living vicariously. Mothers relying on their children to meet their emotional needs.
 - b. Judgment: the demands of this world are too heavy to bear, let alone the demand of God to be perfect.
 - c. Powerlessness: We know what's right and do what's wrong. We fail to improve ourselves. Addiction, depression, anger.

This week, we look at another problem. As Woody Allen jokes at the beginning of *Annie Hall*: ***“Life is full of misery and suffering, and it's all over much too soon.”***

2. **Problem: Death, Sickness, and the Fear thereof.**

- a. **We all die.** Physical death, as well as mini-deaths throughout our lives. The death of dreams, relationships, etc.
- b. **Death is the final question that every life has to answer.** Death in all of its forms is enormously painful. Not only the cause of deep sorrow and regret and grief (and perceived injustice) but also the ultimate affront to people who want to be in control.
 - i. The Christian conception of death is the exact opposite of The Lion King's "Circle of Life" song, which suggests that death is a natural part of life. Christianity says that death is not natural, not the way things are supposed to be. It is a consequence of the Fall (sin), and we all know and feel instinctually how wrong it is.
 - ii. The idea of physical resurrection, or of being able to avoid death/aging speaks to our deepest instincts and needs. Ex: Oscar Wilde's book *A Portrait of Dorian Gray* (via a substitute no less!).

- iii. The idea of legacy, of creating a lasting impression or memory via having children or doing something substantial, is partly born out of this desire to escape the inevitable, encroaching reality of death.

3. **Bible Passages.** The Bible claims that death is the expression of our alienation from God. Wherein man's own efforts are given their due reward.
 - a. **Genesis 3:19 (OT)** *[God speaking to Adam, post-Fall] "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."*
 - b. **Romans 6:23a (Paul)** *"The wages of sin is death..."*
 - c. **John 5:24 (JC)** *"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."*

4. Illustrations

- a. **Play the song "Not Dark Yet" by Bob Dylan** (from his *Time Out Of Mind* album), with a hand-out of the lyrics. One of the greatest popular songs about death and dying. Approaching physical death, life and the world has already killed him. Immense sadness. Feels deeply unnatural ("against my will"). Confronting the meaninglessness.

*Shadows are falling and I've been here all day
It's too hot to sleep time is running away
Feel like my soul has turned into steel
I've still got the scars that the sun didn't heal
There's not even room enough to be anywhere
It's not dark yet, but it's getting there*

*Well my sense of humanity has gone down the drain
Behind every beautiful thing there's been some kind of pain
She wrote me a letter and she wrote it so kind
She put down in writing what was in her mind
I just don't see why I should even care
It's not dark yet, but it's getting there*

*Well, I've been to London and I've been to gay Paris
I've followed the river and I got to the sea
I've been down on the bottom of a world full of lies
I ain't looking for nothing in anyone's eyes
Sometimes my burden seems more than I can bear
It's not dark yet, but it's getting there*

*I was born here and I'll die here against my will
I know it looks like I'm moving, but I'm standing still
Every nerve in my body is so vacant and numb
I can't even remember what it was I came here to get away from
Don't even hear a murmur of a prayer
It's not dark yet, but it's getting there.*

- b. Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, one of the most powerful and masterful works on the subject, depicts the death of a Russian nobleman from a wholly internal perspective:

"Whether it was morning or evening, Friday or Sunday, made no difference, it was all just the same: the gnawing, unmitigated, agonizing pain, never ceasing for an instant, the consciousness of life inexorably waning but not yet extinguished, the approach of that ever dreaded and hateful Death which was the only reality, and always the same falsity. What were days, weeks, hours, in such a case?"

"It is as if I had been going downhill while I imagined I was going up. And that is really what it was. I was going up in public opinion, but to the same extent life was ebbing away from me. And now it is all done and there is only death."

5. Good News: A Crucified Savior

- a. From W.H. Auden's "Christmas Oratorio" (Advent Portion)

***We who must die demand a miracle.
How could the Eternal do a temporal act,
The Infinite become a finite fact?
Nothing can save us that is possible:
We who must die demand a miracle.***

- b. Jesus saves us from death by acting as our substitute. We don't, we won't and we can't do what God wants us to do. We don't, we won't and we can't be who God wants us to be. *Jesus did and was. He fulfilled the Law of God perfectly.*
- c. Jesus' ultimate act of substitution is his death. He dies on the cross in our place. Substitution may sound a bit mathematical or economical (or formulaic), but it is actually the most emotional and loving act possible. This is what it looks like:

- i. **Illustration:** Set up clip from Clint Eastwood's film *Gran Torino*: The story of the relationship between an Asian immigrant teenager, Thao (or Toad), and a disgruntled bitter old man, Walt (Eastwood). The boy has gotten into trouble with a local gang, by standing up to them (with Walt at his back) and refusing to join them. In retaliation they beat and rape his sister. The clip begins with Walt and Thao getting ready for a violent confrontation with the gangsters.

Warning: The clip contains significant bad language as well as some violence. It is not suitable for children or youth. Be sure to screen it (the entire movie) for yourself before showing it to a larger group. Please know that we wouldn't recommend the clip if it weren't so powerful. We believe the vulgar language, while obviously not ideal, does serve to ground the notion of substitution in real life. One suggestion is to watch Scene 27 on mute, explaining it to the audience – it retains much of its power. As a safer alternative, we might suggest using the beginning of the new Star Trek movie, in which Kirk's father sacrifices himself for the entire fleet by piloting his ship into the enemy.

- ii. **Play Clip:** Scenes 26-29 or 1hr 38min to 1hr 52min

1. Walt dies in place of Thao. An act of love and sacrifice. The death is the only solution to an otherwise intractable situation. It affects genuine redemption! And freedom for Thao whose life will forever be shaped by this event, lived in its shadow.
2. As powerful as this clip is, it only hints at the power of Christ's death on the Cross.

- d. **Jesus dies in our place.** But unlike in *Gran Torino*, the crime and the guilt is ours – We are helplessly self-centered sinners, deserving of God's wrath and justice. Jesus is not; he is holy and perfect. But he is crucified as a lawbreaker in our place. By dying the death we deserve, he satisfies God's judgment. The theological term for this is justification. He deals with the situation once and for all. Our savior.

- i. **Illustration. Play the video for Johnny Cash's "Hurt".** Similar in tone to the Dylan song, it takes things one step further. On the verge of death ("everyone I know goes away in the end") Johnny looks back on his life, full of pain and regret. He calls his life an "empire of dirt".

1. Jesus enters, carrying the Cross, at the exact moment when Cash sings "I will make you hurt", the implication being that

Johnny is the one responsible for the pain Jesus is suffering, pounding the nails in with the piano. Jesus takes it all, all of our “empires of dirt”.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o22eIJDtKho>

- ii. Just as he takes on the burden of our Sin (who we are and we have done - past, present, future), his righteousness is given to us. We are made right with God. “At one” with God – Jesus makes Atonement. *Our sins are forgiven.* (Additional Scripture: 2 Cor 5:21)
- iii. This is **GRACE**: We are treated the opposite of how we deserve to be treated.
 1. **Read the parable of The Prodigal Son. Luke 15:11-24**
 2. **The beat writer Jack Kerouac wrote in 1961:** *"Nothing else in the world matters but the kindness of Grace, God's gift to suffering mortals."*
- e. The condemnation against us is over. Guilt and Fear are no more. There is real assurance. “It is finished” - John 19:30. Without the threat of punishment, we can be honest about who we really are – with ourselves, with others and with God (“repent and believe”) – knowing that our identity is no longer the final word. To quote Bob Dylan, “Death Is Not The End”.

*When you're sad and when you're lonely and you haven't got a friend
Just remember that death is not the end
And all that you've held sacred, falls down and does not mend
Just remember that death is not the end*

*When you're standing at the crossroads that you cannot comprehend
Just remember that death is not the end
And all your dreams have vanished and you don't know what's up the bend
Just remember that death is not the end*

*Oh, the tree of life is growing
Where the spirit never dies
And the bright light of salvation shines
In dark and empty skies*

Christians believe that death is not an end but a beginning. More on this next week.

TALK 5 – *What Would Uncle Scrooge Do? Finding Freedom, Recovery and Grace (One Mistake At A Time)*

1. **Recap.** Each week we've looked at a different "problem" (Self-centeredness, Judgment/Guilt, Powerlessness, and Death) and, with the help of numerous illustrations, tried to understand how these problems express themselves in day-to-day life, and what the Christian faith might have to say about it/in response to it.
 - a. In the process, we've gotten a sense of the grand sweep of Christianity. Of why the Gospel is Good News for real people with real problems. Hopefully in both a general theological and concrete, specific sense.
 - b. Last week we talked about Death. Specifically, how Jesus' death and resurrection has dealt with the reality of the grave, once and for all. We spoke about Jesus as our substitute, and the resulting justification we receive through his death. We spoke about Grace.

2. **Intro/Problem:** Today we want to talk about the future. Obviously life continues, and so do our problems. *The future is scary.* Uncertainty is hard. Loneliness is painful. But remarkably, this Good News enables us to understand and see the problems we've been/are facing more clearly. It also addresses head-on the uncertainties of life. This final session looks at some of the implications of the Good News for our lives. We want to ask the question, **What Now?**

3. **Bible Passages:**
 - a. **Mark 1:15 (JC)** *"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"*
 - b. **Luke 7:47 (JC)** *"He who has been forgiven much loves much."*
 - c. **Galatians 5:1 (Paul)** *"It is for **freedom** you have been set free."*

4. **Good News:** The Christian life is a **response** to this message of God's grace. This message has power! It can create faith (via the Holy Spirit).
 - a. **One response is Repentance.** The first of Martin Luther's 95 Theses reads: "the whole life of believers should be repentance". What did he mean?
 - i. Another word for repentance is honesty. (Or confession). Because we are forgiven, we are *free* to talk about what's really going on in our lives. Remember Johnny Cash's "Hurt" video from last time?
 - ii. Repentance is God meeting us at our place of weakness, not strength. **2 Corinthians 12:9-10** ⁹ *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will*

boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ ...For when I am weak, then I am strong.

1. Strength in Weakness is a key theme, truth and hope of Christianity. In his wonderful one-act play The Angel That Troubled The Water, the great American author Thornton Wilder once wrote: [an angel addresses a paralytic who wishes he would be healed] *“Without your wound, where would your power be? It is your very remorse that makes your low voice tremble in the hearts of men. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve.”*

- iii. **Repentance often takes the form of Prayer, of talking with God.** In his book Grace In Practice, Paul Zahl describes prayer in this way. ***“Prayer is the expression of a relationship. This is easy to say, and sounds a little trite. But prayer is one word: ‘Help!’ That is what prayer is. It is the cry for aid in the circumstance where there is no aid and no resources to provide aid. Prayer is the ‘Help!’ of the person whose intrinsic givens offer no way out.”*** (pg 246).
 1. Play “Help” by The Beatles – Their first non-love song strikes such a chord(!) because of its honesty. The song is a prayer. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXh4Euj2TU>)

- iv. **Oddly enough, repentance often produces love. Illustration: Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol.** Play *Scrooge* (1951) or the Disney version (the entire thing).
 1. Clip 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayW4c9aZXyw> (2:15 to 3:20)
 - a. Death leads to repentance.
 - b. Are you yourself? “I hope not!”
 2. Clip 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWdJ1EXf5zo>
 - a. New life
 - b. “I can’t help it.”
 3. Via the visitation of three ghosts, Scrooge’s lost love, his financial swindles, his meanness is acknowledged and exposed. He sees himself in the mirror and is terrified. When Scrooge wakes up after the third ghost, he remembers what he

deserved and what he was just spared from. He got away scot free, and is deeply grateful that the burden has been lifted. Scrooge is a repentant man.

- a. **As we see in the story, generosity and love flow from his forgiven-ness. They are natural, spontaneous, unpremeditated outgrowths. This is why they are called “fruit” (see below).**

v. **Illustration 2: The Useful Sinner by David Hawkins.** Read pages 15-17. A man sits down with his wife and confesses his year and a half long adulterous affair.

1. They had kids; he was active in his church; he was a successful lawyer; and all of it was colorless because of the guilt of his betrayal.
2. He was brought back to square one. “I did what I did not want to do: hurt you, the kids, and myself.” At that moment, he realized how he was “dead in his trespasses”. He needed forgiveness terribly. The cross stands across time as saying, David, I know your crime, I paid for it myself, you are forgiven, I am with you and will never leave you. Grace was given to Louisa, his wife, who, after a few questions read a passage from the New Testament, Romans 7: *“I do what I do not want...who will save me from this body of death?”*
3. David says that was his first experience of grace. It flooded his heart with gratitude, relief, and a desire to comfort, serve, and reconcile with his wife. The book continues with their powerful journey of healing together.
4. Repentance/confession → forgiveness → faith and love.

b. **The Second way to think about the response is in terms of Gratitude.**

Which we also see in the Scrooge story.

- i. **Lifesaver illustration (Rod Rosenblatt).** Imagine you fall off the side of an ocean liner and, not knowing how to swim, you begin to drown. Someone on the deck spots you, flailing in the water and throws you a life preserver ring. It lands right in front of you and you grab on. They pull you up onto the deck, and you cough the water

out of your lungs. People are gathered around you on the deck, rejoicing that you are safe and watching you come back to your senses. After a few seconds, you look up and say: “Did you see the way I grabbed onto that life preserver?! How tightly I held on to it?! Did you notice the definition in my biceps and the dexterity of my wrists? I was all over that thing!” That would be a crazy response. To draw attention to the way you facilitated/cooperated with your own saving denigrates the whole point of what happened, which is that the person was saved...

- ii. Watch clip from Episode 4 (“Hello, Goodbye”) of Season 3 of the TV show *Friday Night Lights*. 34:50-37:15, 39:20-42:30. Set-up: Star high-school running back Brian “Smash” Williams blows out his knee at the end of his senior year, losing his scholarship to play football at Univ. Texas, and is forced to work at the Dairy Freeze to make ends meet for his struggling family. His former coach, Eric Taylor, promises to keep working with him to rehabilitate and eventually sets up a tryout at A&M. **Watch clip.** (www.youtube.com/watch?v=zi-zFcUVIFw)

1. Eric does for Smash what Smash could not do for himself. Smash’s natural, immediate and deeply felt response is one of gratitude, of honoring his coach. His life is forever changed. He has been “saved”.

- iii. **From Paul Zahl’s *Grace in Practice*:** *“The one-way love of grace is the essence of any lasting transformation that takes place in human experience. You can find this out for yourself by taking a simple inventory of your own happiness, or the moments of happiness you have had. They have almost always had to do with some incident of love or belovedness that has come to you from someone outside yourself when you were down. You felt ugly or sinking in confidence, and somebody complimented you, or helped you, or spoke a kind word to you. You were at the end of your rope and someone showed a little sympathy.”* (pg. 36).

1. The Good News of Christianity is that we have been shown grace by God. We have been saved. And naturally, as we come to realize/internalize this, we will focus more on the saving agent and less upon ourselves. We are the object, not the subject of this event. To the extent that we come to see ourselves as we truly are, we see our continued need and the way that it has been/and is met and dealt with on the Cross.

5. The Holy Spirit

- a. It doesn't end there. God has given us the Holy Spirit to comfort and transform us. We need not fear the future because we are not alone! God is not just *for* us, he is *with* us, too.
- b. We are made alive by a power outside of ourselves. The Holy Spirit is the fuel that runs this entire cycle of repentance and forgiveness (death and resurrection).
 - i. The Holy Spirit is not something we control. Growth and transformation happen to us. Like a tree growing fruit. Which is good news! Like with Scrooge, it occurs, "while you were sleeping." We are passive. We can relinquish our futile attempts to control our lives and rest in the assurance that God has taken care and will ultimately take care of our real "Problems". *And even if we don't, that's doesn't change the Good News.*
 - ii. We are not talking about personal holiness as a pet project—not about Jesus as a life coach; the Christian *faith* is not about rules to follow, or a formula to live by. Simply: Freedom → Fruit.
 1. **Galatians 5:18, 22** *"But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness..."*
- c. As God's action on Earth, more often than not the Holy Spirit works outside of us knowing it. It is the substitute for the Law.
 - i. A description (not a prescription!) of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives might look like this:

Helplessness/Hopelessness/Conviction →
Repentance/Confession/Prayer →
Grace/Absolution/Assurance/Forgiveness →
Gratitude/Joy/FAITH! → Love (hopefully)
- d. Still, even with the Holy Spirit as our comforter and change agent, while we are alive our problems will persist. We will remain self-centered sinners. We will continue to suffer. Those around us will continue to suffer. But these things are no longer the ultimate reality. The theological way of saying this is a Latin phrase that Martin Luther coined: *simul justus et peccator*, which means "simultaneously justified and sinner". The thrust of this idea is that the Christian becomes two (opposing) things at the same time. Like being in

Colorado and Antarctica at the same moment. This paradoxical double-identity remains until...

6. **The Resurrection of the Dead and Heaven.** The spiritual re-birth that Scrooge experiences as a second chance is a foreshadowing of the physical one.
 - a. To complete **Romans 6:23** *“For the wages of sin is death... but the gift of God is **eternal life** in Christ Jesus our Lord”!* Not only is there no more condemnation or guilt, but there is eternal life.
 - b. The ultimate claim of Christianity has to do with Christ’s Resurrection from the dead. We believe in the “resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come” (Apostles Creed).
 - i. **Just as Christ was (physically) raised from the dead, so will we be. “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”** (Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows by way of 1 Cor 15:26)
 - c. **Illustration:** Think of it in terms of college admissions. Two friends apply to their top choice for early admission. One gets in while the other is deferred. Their next four months may look exactly the same – they may take the same classes, they may even get the same grades – but they will feel completely different. The former friend will be living out of freedom and assurance, while the latter will be living out a need to prove and self-justify. **What you believe about your future influences how you live in the present.** So it is with heaven.
 - i. **A description of Heaven from Revelation 7:16-17**
*Never again will they hunger;
 never again will they thirst.
 The sun will not beat upon them,
 nor any scorching heat.
 For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd;
 he will lead them to springs of living water.
 And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”*

7. A Final Word. What does this mean for us right now?

We “go home”; We “live our life.” The fruit of love, joy, peace, comes as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Fear and guilt have been put to death. Our hope is not found in ourselves but in God and his power and promises. Ultimately in Heaven. As the post-communion prayer in Rite 1 of the Anglican prayer book reads: *“Step into the good works that God has prepared for us in advance”.*