

SERIES: LET'S BE HONEST

Week 7 - The Gospel

Preacher: Pastor Phil

Date: August 9, 2026

Primary Scripture: Romans 1:16–17; Isaiah 53:5; Colossians 2:13–14

Key Principle: Bribe vs. Gift

Good morning, Menlo Church. Everyone in Mountain View, Menlo Park, Saratoga, San Mateo, and online—you did it; you made it to the last message in a long series. Well done! Seven weeks ago we started something a little risky. We said we'd be honest about the biggest belief systems in the world—not the cartoon versions, but the real ones: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Mormonism, Catholicism, and last week, the most popular religion in the Bay Area, the religion of being a good person. Every week we asked: *What does this faith ask of you? And how does the Gospel compare?*

Today we answer those questions directly with Christianity. A few weeks back, Matt stood up here talking about the Mormon faith, and he gave us a picture of a ladder. Every religion offers a version of a ladder. You see a better version of yourself somewhere above you, and you climb.

Then he said something I hope has stayed with you: *The ladder was never meant to be climbed up to God. It exists so God could come down to us.* Hang onto that truth.

Before I go any further, a confession—because this morning highlights something I can be guilty of, too. I've had times in my life trying to pay God. I've prayed louder when I wanted something, like God couldn't hear my quiet prayers of desperation. At times, I've served out of fear more than love, staying busy so God would have a reason to keep me around. Some mornings I've read my Bible the way someone feeds a parking meter—just trying to avoid a ticket. It felt like devotion, and part of it definitely was, but some of it was me trying to buy something God had already decided to give me before I was ever born.

Every worldview we've looked at is a transaction. You bring something, you hope it buys something, and you hold your breath. The currencies change, but that arrangement doesn't.

- **Judaism** handed you the law. Keep the commands, keep the covenant. But the law was a thermometer, not a thermostat—it reads the temperature, but it can't change it.
- **Islam** handed you the pillars. Pray, give, fast, make a pilgrimage, and hope the scales tip in your direction. It's a report card where you never stop waiting on the grade.
- **Buddhism** handed you detachment. Empty the glass: want less, suffer less, get free.
- **Mormonism** handed you grace after all you can do. But when you're up high on a ladder, do you feel safer, or do you just see how far you could fall?
- **Catholicism** handed you merit—a lifetime of staying in a state of grace. The debt was paid, but the tollbooths stayed up.
- And last week, **the good person** handed over a résumé: *Look at the record. Look at what I did.*

A friend of mine likes to say that the Gospel isn't a math problem. Jesus looked at "good person faith" and said the four most frightening words in the Bible: *"I never knew you."* Different currencies, same transaction. You pay, you hope, but you never quite know.

No matter what faith background you started with or when you started it, there is time to reexamine it. So today, on our final day of this series, I ask you to reevaluate your faith one more time, even if you are already a follower of Jesus, as we examine the beautiful offer of hope from Him. Let's pray that we would be ready to receive it.

The Side Door vs. Belonging

In March of 2019, the FBI unsealed an indictment called Operation Varsity Blues. Fifty people were charged. At the center of it was a man named Rick Singer, who had built a business getting the children of wealthy families into elite schools like USC, Georgetown, Yale, and Stanford.

Singer had a pitch he had narrowed to 30 seconds. He told parents there were three ways into a school like these: the front door (where your kid gets in on their own), the back door (where you donate a building costing ten times as much with no guarantee), and then he'd lean in and say, *"I've created a side door."* Singer told parents that the back door only buys a second look, but families working with him wanted a guarantee. He wasn't selling education; he was selling certainty.

It would be easy to stand here and make those parents the villains. Some of what they did was fraud, taking seats from kids who earned them. But I understand the fear. These were people who loved their kids and were terrified that the world keeps a scoreboard and their child wasn't going to make the cut. So they paid.

Fear is the most expensive thing many of us spend our lives trying to pay off. Consider this: many of those kids never knew; they walked onto campus believing they had earned it. And the ones who did know sat in those lecture halls for four years, and not one of them ever knew if they truly belonged there. Because a bribe can get you in, but it can never make you belong. That is the one thing money has never been able to buy.

Every belief system we've looked at for seven weeks feels like a side door: *Pay this, perform that, and we'll guarantee you God.* What you end up with, if you're honest, is a seat you're never quite sure is yours. We all want a guarantee. The Apostle Paul wrote a letter about exactly that, and he sent it to the most transactional city on earth: Rome.

Rome ran on transaction. The whole city was built on who owed whom—patrons and clients, favors and debts. Everybody kept a ledger on everybody. And into that city, Paul writes:

Romans 1:16–17

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"

First to the Jew, then to the Gentile. First the ones with the law, then everybody else. There is not a faith we've examined in seven weeks that this sentence doesn't reach. Here is the reality that makes the Gospel completely different from any other faith: In every other system, the value moves up—you paying God. In this one, it moves down—God bringing something to you.

The righteous will live by faith, not by effort. And it has to be faith, because faith is the only thing a gift can be received with. You earn a wage; you receive a gift. You can't earn a gift—the second you pay for it, it stops being a gift. Faith simply opens its hands and says thank you.

Put another way, there is a massive difference between a bribe and a gift. A bribe is about getting away with something, but a gift is what God has been giving away all along. By the way, when Paul says, "Just as it is written," he is quoting Habakkuk from the Old Testament. So this whole idea—that a person gets right with God by trusting, not by earning—is not a New Testament revision that sands off the edges of an angry Old Testament God. It was shared through history, the prophets, and the story of God's people the whole time. Same God. Same grace. All the way through.

The Story of the Gift: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration

The story this gift comes out of is one cohesive story, not four separate ideas. A lot of us have the pieces but have never heard them put together:

1. Creation: It opens with a good world. God makes it, calls it good, and makes us in His image to walk with Him with nothing to hide. Nobody is climbing anything. Nobody owes anybody. It is all a gift.

2. Fall: Then comes the fracture. We decided we'd rather be God than be with God, and everything broke after that—our relationship with Him, with each other, and with the creation around us. Every ladder in this series was invented from that problem. The climbing started the second humanity fell. We have been trying to get back up to a place we fell out of ever since. Religion is humanity's ladder back to Eden, but it has never once been long enough.

So God does not lower a better ladder. He does not send clearer instructions. He climbs down on His own. He steps in as one of us and does the one thing for us we were never going to do for ourselves. Listen to Isaiah, writing 700 years earlier:

Isaiah 53:5

"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed."

3. Redemption: Seven centuries before the first Christmas, in the same passages people assume are about an angry God, the gift was already on the way. He was pierced for us, crushed for us. The bill was going to be paid so that a gift could be made available to everyone. And the story doesn't stop when He dies for us—He rises for us, too.

4. Restoration: The promise is that one day everything the fall broke gets put back, the world we lost comes home, and we walk with Him again with nothing to hide. It ends where it started: in a garden.

Within that framework, a gift still has to be received. A gift you refuse is still refused. A gift left sitting on the table is not the same as a gift opened. God only takes up residence in the hearts of willing people; if you don't want it, you don't have to have it. The gift is for everyone, but it is not automatically in everyone. Those are two different statements: we want hope for everyone and believe everyone needs it, but all we can do is offer it and trust God to work in people's lives to reveal their need for it.

Paid in Full

Forgiveness cost something; it just didn't cost you.

Colossians 2:13–14

"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."

Dead. Not sick. Not behind. Not a fixer-upper with good bones. *Dead*. And here is where the ladder idea falls over: a dead man can't climb. He can't reach, and he can't help. Whatever God was going to do, He was going to do it while you brought nothing, because nothing was all you had.

In a world of bribes where we are looking for a way out, religion says settle your account and pay something. Paul says God took the charge that stood against you—the entire record—and He didn't collect it. He canceled it by paying it Himself. He nailed it to the cross and absorbed it.

In every other system, you're bribing God, hoping to get a good deal to get right with Him. Christianity is the only faith on earth where the founder does the work for the followers. It is a gift you cannot achieve; you can only receive.

That's what Jesus meant with His last breath: *"It is finished."* Not "I'm finished." Not "I'm done trying." Finished the way a debt gets marked settled. Finished the way a job gets completed. He looked at the whole bill—the one with your name at the top—and said, *Paid*.

So the worst news and the best news show up in the same sentence: You needed to pay a debt you could never afford, and a loving God poured out the judgment you deserved on Himself to win you back.

Three Distortions (Bribes) in the Church

Now for the part I'd rather skip. If the Gospel is a gift, the church has one particular sin that is uniquely ours: We keep trying to put a price tag on the gift.

In a survey out of Australia, people were asked what words they would use for Christians. Near the top were predictable answers: hypocritical, judgmental, old-fashioned. But the top five overall were: honest, faithful, kind, loving, caring. For years, we'd read a survey like that and assume there were two crowds—people who hate us and people who love us. But that is not what they found. It was the same people! The same person on the same survey called Christians hypocrites, and then pictured one believer they actually knew and called that person loving. Two definitions of Christian living together in the same mind. It doesn't take much to move a mind from one to the other.

Let me show you the difference. Last week we looked at John 1: Jesus came full of grace and truth. Both. All the way up on both at the same time, without minimizing either one. Every distorted gospel, every bribe, is what you get when the church keeps one of those and turns the other down.

Picture two lines: Grace runs one way; Truth runs the other. Where both go all the way up, you get the real thing. Drop one, and every single time, you get a bribe. There are three ways we try to drop it:

1. Prosperity Gospel (Grace without Truth): Its loudest form is "give to get." Plant the seed, name it, claim it, and God pays you back with interest. It sounds like generosity, but it works like a vending machine—a bribe you slide across the counter to God so He will slide something better back. But the truth this bribe can't say out loud is that the most faithful people you know still suffer. A faith not built with that in mind isn't built to last. Sometimes the seed goes in the ground and dies. A gospel that cannot sit in a hospital room is not the way of Jesus.

2. Christian Nationalism (Truth without Grace): In our moment, this usually wears a flag. Hear me carefully: I am grateful for our country. There is a seat in this room for you no matter how you voted or how you think about America. I am not talking about loving where you live. I am talking about what happens when the church trades the kingdom of God for the power of a nation—belonging in exchange for unchecked allegiance to a political party. It's a bribe you slip to a system so your faith and your flag get wound so tight together that you never have to hold either up to the light. It is truth with the grace drained out. And truth with no grace always ends up needing an enemy. The second your gospel needs an enemy, you are holding a bribe, not a gift.

3. Cultural Christianity (Neither Grace nor Truth): This one is quieter, more pervasive, and wears our own name. It drops both grace and truth and just keeps the label. You have the box checked—a family that always went, a holiday you show up for, a word sitting on a form. Underneath the word is nothing that has ever cost you anything, because you can't appreciate a gift you never actually received. This corner should scare us the most because it looks like us. It has the jersey on. Remember Jesus' words: "*Lord, Lord, did we not do all of it in your name?*" Those were not outsiders; they had the label, too. But the label was never going to gain access to the kingdom.

Three bribes: Prosperity Gospel (grace without truth), Christian Nationalism (truth without grace), and Cultural Christianity (neither, just the name). Three ways to take a gift that was already paid for and quietly hang a price tag back on it.

The Corner of Grace and Truth: The Way of Jesus

There is a fourth corner—the one where both lines run all the way up. That corner is not a bribe because you aren't paying. That corner is the gift. Grace and truth, full strength, standing together in one person: Jesus.

We have a name for that corner, and it is the road we are going to walk together for the next year: *The Way of Jesus*. It does not start with climbing; it starts with receiving. Here is what that corner grows in a person:

The **truth** gives you a foundation. You know exactly where you stand because "it is finished," and nobody can hand you a bill that is already stamped paid. That is confidence, not arrogance. And the **grace** keeps your foundation from ever turning into a club. You did not earn a thing; you walked up with empty hands like every other person in this room.

Author and historian John Dickson calls these distinctives: **cheerful confidence** and **cheerful humility**.

- **Cheerful confidence:** because you are sure and safe—a guarantee by grace, through faith, in Christ.
- **Cheerful humility:** because you have nothing left to prove and nothing left to defend.

That is the person the gift makes—not the anxious striver, not the smug gatekeeper, but someone sure enough to be kind, and humble enough to be unafraid.

Hands Empty, Hearts Home

At the beginning of our series, we asked: *"What does it take to get right with God?"* Every system in the world walked up with an answer and a price: Keep the law. Tip the scales. Empty the glass. Climb the ladder. Stay in a state of grace. Show me your résumé. Pay, hope, and never quite know.

Remember what I told you about the side door. A bribe might get you into one of those clubs, but it can never give you belonging with God. The Gospel is the only thing in this whole series that does not sell you a way in; it hands you a way home. It doesn't get you a seat you have to keep paying for like a religious season ticket. It makes you a son or daughter with perfect, permanent access to a Father who adopts you.

I told you at the top that I've spent long stretches of my life trying to pay God. That didn't end when I became a pastor. Here is what I am still learning: God was never taking my payments. Not one of them ever cleared—not because He was turning me away, but because there was nothing left to pay.

One Sunday morning in 1865, in a church in Baltimore, Elvina Hall was sitting in the choir loft during a long service. Her attention wandered to the cross. Having no paper, she opened the hymnal in her lap and wrote on the blank page inside its cover. She wasn't a professional hymn writer; she was simply a woman in a choir loft writing on a blank page.

That same year in that church, renovations were underway, and the cabinet organ was in the care of John Grape, a coal merchant who served as church organist. Playing that organ, Grape came up with a tune. When he shared it, friends called it "very poor," but his wife knew it would stand the test of time. Their pastor heard the tune and remembered the words Elvina Hall had handed him. Her words, his music—written independently, brought together by a pastor who saw how they fit.

Nobody in that story was famous. The whole thing began in the margins. And before we sing what she wrote, I want you to hear one line you might trip on: *"Jesus paid it all... all to Him I owe."*

After seven weeks of telling you the ledger is closed, we sing the word "owe." But it is the one debt in the world you can't pay and aren't being asked to. It isn't a balance; it's gratitude with nowhere to put itself but up. It is what comes out of a person when somebody covers what they could never have covered, and there is nothing to hand back—so you simply hand over your life, not to earn hope, but to receive it as a gift.

Let's pray together.

Discussion Questions

- 1. Phil opened with a confession about praying louder, serving out of fear, and reading his Bible the way someone feeds a parking meter. What is your version of that? Where do you catch yourself trying to pay God for something He already gave you?**
- 2. The message drew a line between a bribe and a gift. A bribe buys you access; a gift makes you family. Why do you think we find the bribe easier to trust, even when we know better?**

3. Seven weeks in, which of the worldviews we studied made the most sense to you? (Not which one you agreed with, but which one you understood?)
4. Three distortions were named within the church: Prosperity Gospel (grace without truth), Christian Nationalism (truth without grace), and Cultural Christianity (neither, just the label). Which one is closest to the water you swim in?
5. The survey found the same person calling Christians hypocritical while calling one Christian they personally knew loving. What do you think moves someone from the first perspective to the second?
6. John Dickson's phrase was "cheerful confidence and cheerful humility." Which of those two comes harder for you, and why?
7. Colossians says you were dead—not sick and not behind. What changes about how you approach God if that is literally true?
8. The hymn says, "All to Him I owe." If that is not a bill, what is it? How would you describe it in your own words?

Five-Day Devotional

Day 1: Which Direction It Moves

Passage: Romans 1:16–17

Every system we studied for seven weeks moves in the same direction: value goes up. You bring something to God and hope it buys something back. The Gospel is the only one where the movement reverses—God brings something down to you. This is the whole distinction, meaning faith is the only possible response. Where in your life is the value still moving up?

Prayer: "God, I keep trying to send things up to you. Help me see what you have already sent down. Teach me what it means to receive."

Day 2: Dead Men Don't Climb

Passage: Colossians 2:13–14

Dead. Not sick, not behind, not a fixer-upper. A dead person cannot climb or reach. Whatever God was going to do, He was going to do while you brought nothing, because nothing was all you had. If He made you alive, nothing about your standing depends on your performance.

Prayer: "Jesus, thank you that you did not wait for me to improve. Help me stop trying to earn a verdict you already handed down."

Day 3: It Was Always Coming

Passage: Isaiah 53:5

Seven hundred years before the first Christmas, in the very pages people assume are about wrath, the gift was already on its way. Same God. Same grace. All the way through. If you have carried a suspicion that God's kindness is a recent development, sit with Isaiah today.

Prayer: "God, I have sometimes imagined you as reluctant, as though your mercy had to be talked into existence. Show me that you have been the same all along."

Day 4: Grace and Truth, Both All the Way Up

Passage: John 1:14–17

Every distortion comes from turning down grace or truth. Grace without truth becomes a vending machine; truth without grace needs an enemy. Both go all the way up in Jesus. Which do you turn down first when you are tired or challenged?

Prayer: "Jesus, you were full of both and never traded one for the other. Show me where I have turned one down, and give me the courage to turn it back up."

Day 5: Nothing Left to Prove

Passage: John 19:30; Ephesians 2:8–9

Cheerful confidence and cheerful humility: sure enough to be kind, humble enough to be unafraid. You will still reach for your wallet, but you can put it down. It is finished.

Prayer: "Jesus, I have spent a long time trying to pay you. I am done. I am opening my hands. Take my life, all of it, because it is yours."

Resources & Works Consulted

Kingdom of the Cults by Walter Martin — Comparative reference anchoring the series.

So What's the Difference? by Fritz Ridenour — Accessible side-by-side comparative guide.

Bullies and Saints by John Dickson — Source of "cheerful confidence and cheerful humility."

The Cross of Christ by John Stott — Definitive treatment of the atonement.

Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel by Kate Bowler.

Taking America Back for God by Andrew Whitehead & Samuel Perry.

Losing Our Religion by Russell Moore.

The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self by Carl Trueman.