

Galatians

Paul's letter to the

Participants Guide



Living in line with the truth of the gospel

Galatians 2:14

HOW TO USE THIS MATERIAL

This study of Galatians is organized into 13 units. Each unit consists of two sections: 1) a Bible study and 2) a Reflection or Exercise section. The first section studies a portion of the Galatians text, while the second section takes some concept from the Scripture and helps you get a better understanding of it ("Reflection") and/or to apply it practically to your life ("Exercise").

There are three ways to use this material to grow in Christ. I will list the ways in ascending order of profitability and helpfulness.

An individual could use this workbook by first buying a popular commentary. I suggest John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, The Bible Speaks Today Series. (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968). Then, reading both the Galatians text and the commentary, go through the whole workbook by yourself.

An informal mini-group of two or three people could also decide to do this together. In this case you should buy the Stott commentary and go through the workbook, meeting periodically simply to share the most important things you have been learning. This is much better than the first approach, because it injects a level of accountability and community into your study.

A home fellowship group with an equipped leader is by far the best context for the use of this workbook. A life changed by the Gospel happens best in a balanced community of worship and friendship as well as study. The concepts in this material are life-changing but take a great deal of reflection in order to grasp them. They will be grasped much better in a small group community that meets regularly. If you want to truly understand and grow through the material in this workbook — get thee into a home fellowship group!

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Historical Setting of the Letter to the Galatians

The apostle Paul was a church-planting missionary. After he planted a church and left a region, he continued to supervise new congregations through his letters. One of these letters is this Epistle to the Christian churches in the area of Galatia in Asia Minor. Most scholars agree that this letter was written by Paul around 50 A.D. (only 15-20 years after the death of Christ). It is helpful to recognize the following three things from the historical setting which will help us understand this epistle:

- This letter addresses a social and racial division in the churches of Galatia. The first Christians in Jerusalem were Jewish, but as the gospel spread out from that center, increasing numbers of Gentiles began to receive Christ. However, a group of teachers in Galatia were now insisting that the Gentile Christians practice all the traditional Mosaic ceremonial customs as the Jewish Christians did. They taught that the Gentiles had to observe all the dietary laws and be circumcised for full acceptance and to be completely pleasing to God.
- Although this specific controversy may seem remote to us today, Paul addressed it with an abiding, all-important truth. He taught that the cultural divisions and disunity in the Galatian churches were due to a confusion about the nature of the gospel. By insisting on Christ *plus* anything else as requirement for full acceptance by God, these teachers were presenting a whole different way of relating to God (a “*different gospel*” 1:6) from the one Paul had given them (“*the gospel I preached*” 1:8). It is this different gospel that was creating the cultural division and strife. Paul forcefully and unapologetically fought the “different gospel” because to lose one’s grip of the true gospel is to desert and lose Christ himself (1:6). Therefore, everything was at stake in this debate.
- The most obvious fact about the historical setting is often the most overlooked. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul expounds in detail what the gospel is and how it works. But the intended audience of this exposition of the gospel are all professing *Christians*. It is not simply non-Christians, but believers who continually relearn and reapply the gospel to their lives.

The Abiding Importance of the Gospel

It is very common in Christian circles to assume that “the gospel” is something just for non-Christians. We presume that the gospel is a set of basic “A-B-C” doctrines that Christians do not need to hear or study once they are converted. Rather, they should move beyond the gospel to more “advanced” doctrines. But the great declaration of the gospel of grace in Galatians was written to believers who did not see the implications of the gospel for life-issues confronting them. Paul solves the disunity and racial exclusivity not with a simple exhortation to “be better Christians.” but by calling them to live out the implications of the gospel. So Christians need the gospel as much as non-

Christians do. Their problems come because they tend to lose and forget the gospel. They make progress only as they continually grasp and apply the gospel in deeper ways.

The gospel shows us that our spiritual problem lies not only in failing to obey God, but also in *relying* on our obedience to make us fully acceptable to God, ourselves and others. Every kind of character flaw comes from this natural impulse to be our own savior through our performance and achievement. On the one hand, proud and disdainful personalities come from basing your identity on your performance and thinking you are succeeding. But on the other hand, discouraged and self-loathing personalities *also* come from basing your identity on your performance and thinking you are failing.

Belief in the gospel is not just the way to enter the kingdom of God; it is the way to address every obstacle and grow in every aspect. The gospel is not just the “ABCs” but the “A-to-Z” of the Christian life. The gospel is the way that anything is renewed and transformed by Christ — whether a heart, a relationship, a church, or a community. All our problems come from a lack of orientation to the gospel. Put positively, the gospel transforms our hearts, our thinking and our approach to absolutely everything.

The gospel of justifying faith means that while Christians are, in themselves still sinful and sinning, yet in Christ, in God’s sight, they are accepted and righteous. So we can say that *we are more wicked than we ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted in Christ than we ever dared hope — at the very same time*. This creates a radical new dynamic for personal growth. It means that the more you see your own flaws and sins, the more precious, electrifying, and amazing God’s grace appears to you. But on the other hand, the more aware you are of God’s grace and acceptance in Christ, the more able you are to drop your denials and self-defenses and admit the true dimensions and character of your sin.

This also creates a radical new dynamic for discipline and obedience. First, the knowledge of our acceptance in Christ makes it *easier* to admit we are flawed because we know we won’t be cast off if we confess the true depths of our sinfulness. Second, it makes the law of God a thing of beauty instead of a burden. We can use it to delight and imitate the one who has saved us rather than to get his attention or procure his favor. We now run the race “for the joy that is set before us” rather than “for the fear that comes behind us.”

What was the most helpful to you in this brief background/overview and why?

Galatians

The uniqueness of the Gospel

Study 1 | Galatians 1:1-9

In most of his letters to churches, Paul follows his salutation with a paragraph of thanksgiving and appreciation for the lives of the people. But news has reached him about the church in Galatia that has moved him deeply. His emotions almost immediately express themselves. He gets immediately into the substance of his argument.

Read Galatians 1:1-9

- 1. Describe Paul's mood or frame of mind when he wrote this. What caused this attitude? Does it seem justified?**
- 2. Paul calls himself an apostle. What can you learn from vv.1-9 about what an apostle is or does?**
- 3. Paul offers an outline of the gospel in the early verses. No outline can be complete, but does this one seem complete to you?**

4. According to vv.6-7, any change to the gospel makes it null and void. Why?
5. How do people “add to the gospel” today in ways that diminish its power?
6. What is Paul’s attitude toward those who distort the gospel (vv.8-9)? How can we ensure that the gospel we believe is “true?”
7. Write the gospel in your own words to the best of your current understanding. Share and discuss. Later, return to this answer and compare it with your understanding at the end of the course.

READING AND REFLECTION

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Martin Luther’s preface to Galatians

(Abridgement and paraphrase by Tim Keller)

1. The most important thing in the world

The one doctrine which I have supremely in my heart is that of faith in Christ, from whom, through whom and unto whom all my theological thinking flows back and forth, day and night. This rock, which we call the doctrine of justification through faith, was shaken by Satan in paradise when he persuaded our first parents that they might by their own wisdom and power become like God. Every since then the whole world has invented innumerable religions and ways through which, without the aid of Christ, use their works to redeem themselves from evil and sins.

When Paul discusses the biblical doctrine of justification by faith he explains that there are several kinds of “righteousness.” First, there is political or *civil righteousness* — the nation’s public laws — which magistrates and lawyers may defend and teach. Second, there is *cultural righteousness* — the standards of our family and social grouping or class — which parents and schools may teach. Third, there is *ethical righteousness* — the Ten Commandments and law of God — which the church may teach but only in light of Christian righteousness. So all these may be received without danger, as long as we attribute to them no power to satisfy for sin, to please God, or to deserve grace... These kinds of righteousness are gifts of God, like all good things we enjoy...

Yet there is another righteousness, far above the others, which Paul calls “the righteousness of faith” — Christian righteousness. God imputes it to us apart from our works — in other words, it is *passive* righteousness, as the others are *active*. For we *do* nothing for it, and we *give* nothing for it. We only receive it.

2. The need for Christian righteousness

This “passive” righteousness is a mystery that the world cannot understand. Indeed, Christians never completely understand it themselves, and thus do not take advantage of it when they are troubled and tempted. So we have to constantly teach it, repeat it, and work it out in practice. Anyone who does not understand this righteousness or cherish it in the heart and conscience will continually be buffeted by fears and depression. *Nothing gives peace like this passive righteousness.*

For human beings by nature, when they get near either danger or death itself, will of necessity examine their own worthiness. We defend ourselves before all threats by recounting our good deeds and moral efforts. But then the remembrance of sins and

flaws inevitably comes to mind, and this tears us apart, and we think, “How many errors and sins and wrongs I have done! Please God, let me live so I can fix and amend them.” We become obsessed with our *active* righteousness and are terrified by its imperfections. But the real evil is that we trust our own power to be righteous and will not lift up our eyes to see what Christ has done *for* us... So the troubled conscience has no cure for its desperation and feeling of unworthiness unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by *grace*, offered free of charge in Jesus Christ, which is this passive or Christian righteousness... If I tried to fulfill the law myself, I could not trust in what I had accomplished, neither could it stand up to the judgment of God. So...*I rest only upon the righteousness of Christ... which I do not produce but receive, God the Father freely giving it to us through Jesus Christ.*

3. Law and grace

It is an absolute and unique teaching in all the world, to teach people, through Christ, to live as if there were no law or wrath or punishment. In a sense, they do not exist any longer for the Christian, but only total grace and mercy for Christ’s sake. Once you are in Christ, the law is the greatest guide for your life, but until you have Christian righteousness, all the law can do is to show you how sinful and condemned you are. In fact, to those outside of Christian righteousness, the law needs to be expounded in all its force. Why? So that people who think they have power to be righteous before God will be humbled by the law and understand they are sinners.

Therefore we must be careful to use the law appropriately. If we used the law in order to be accepted by God through obedience, then Christian righteousness becomes mixed up with earned/moral righteousness in our minds. If we try to earn our righteousness by *doing* many good deeds, we actually do nothing. We neither please God through our works-righteousness *nor* do we honor the purpose for which the law was given. But if we first receive Christian righteousness, then we can use the law, not for our salvation, but for his honor and glory, and to lovingly show our gratitude.

So then, have we nothing to do to obtain this righteousness? No, *nothing at all!* For this righteousness comes by doing nothing, hearing nothing, knowing nothing, but rather in knowing and believing this only — that Christ has gone to the right hand of the Father, not to become our judge, but to become *for* us our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness, our salvation! Now God sees no sin in us, for in this heavenly righteousness sin has no place. So now we may certainly think, “Although I still sin, I don’t despair, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my eternal life.” In that righteousness I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life of mine and in my own righteousness, but I have another life, another righteousness above this life, which is in Christ, the Son of God, who knows no sin or death, but is eternal righteousness and eternal life.

4. Living the gospel

While we live here on earth, we will be accused, exercised with temptations, oppressed with heaviness and sorrow, and bruised by the law with its demands of active righteousness. Because of this, Paul sets out in this letter of Galatians to teach us, to comfort us, and to keep us constantly aware of this Christian righteousness. For if the truth of being *justified by Christ alone* (not by our works) is lost, then all Christian truths are lost. For there is no middle ground between Christian righteousness and works-righteousness. There is no other alternative to Christian righteousness *but* works-righteousness; if you do not build your confidence on the work of Christ, you must build your confidence on your own work. On this truth and *only* on this truth the church is built and has its being.

This distinction is easy to utter in words, but in use and experience it is very hard. So I challenge you to exercise yourselves continually in these matters through study, reading, meditation on the Word and prayer, so that in the time of trial you will be able to both *inform* and *comfort* both your consciences and others, to bring them from law to grace, from active/works-righteousness to passive/Christ's righteousness. In times of struggle, the devil will seek to terrify us by using against us our past record and the wrath and law of God. So if we cannot see the differences between the two kinds of righteousness, and if we do not take hold of Christ by faith, sitting at the right hand of God (Heb.7:25) and pleading our case as sinners to the Father, then we are under the law, not under grace. Christ is no savior, but a lawgiver, and no longer our salvation, but an eternal despair.

So learn to "speak the gospel" to one's heart. For example, when the law creeps into your conscience, learn to be a cunning logician — learn to use arguments of the gospel against it. Say:

O law! You would climb up into the kingdom of my conscience, and there reign and condemn me for sin, and would take from me the joy of my heart which I have by faith in Christ, and drive me to desperation, that I might be without hope. You have overstepped your bounds. Know your place! You are a guide for my behavior, but you are not Savior and Lord of my heart. For I am baptized, and through the gospel am called to receive righteousness and eternal life... So *trouble me not!* For I will not allow you, so intolerable a tyrant and tormentor, to reign in my heart and conscience — for they are the seat and temple of Christ the Son of God, who is the king of righteousness and peace, and my most sweet savior and mediator. He shall keep my conscience joyful and quiet in the sound and pure doctrine of the gospel, through the knowledge of this passive and heavenly righteousness.

When we are assured of this righteousness, we not only cheerfully work well in our vocations, but we submit to all manner of burdens and dangers in this present life, because we know that this is the will of God, and that this obedience pleases him. This then is the argument of this Epistle, which Paul expounds against the false teachers who had darkened the Galatians' understanding of this righteousness by faith.

Discussion questions

- 1. What is the key difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds?**
- 2. What do we mean by passive righteousness?**
- 3. Why is the difference between passive righteousness and active righteousness so important?**
- 4. What is the single best thing you learned from Luther? How would it make you different if you really understood and applied it?**

Galatians

A Gospel-changed life

Study 2 | Galatians 1:10-2:21

Galatians 1:10-2:21 is often called the autobiographical section of the epistle, since Paul does much recounting of his conversion and early Christian experience. But Paul is not sharing his testimony for general inspiration. We saw last week that '*some people*' (1:7) had come to the Galatian Christians with certain claims and teachings which diverged from the message Paul had originally presented to them. In this section he uses his personal testimony to refute some of those claims.

Read Galatians 1:10-24 and Acts 9:1-9

1. What kind of claims or assertions does Paul appear to be refuting in this account of his conversion and early Christian experience?

2. Paul's account does not simply establish his authority as a teacher of the gospel. It also illustrates some aspects of what the gospel is. How does it do so?

3. How does Paul indicate that God's grace was working in his life before his conversion? In what ways can you see how God worked in your life before your conversion?

4. What happened to Paul in and after his conversion that facilitated his growth as a believer and equipped him for ministry? How do these factors apply to us?

5. Read v.10 and vv.23-24. What results do you see here of a gospel-changed life?

6. Why has Paul shared his testimony? How can Paul give us guidance about why, when and how to share our own testimony of God's grace with others?

EXERCISE

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Testimony

The ‘Doctrine’ of Workmanship

One of the glories of Christianity is the assurance that *“we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do”* (Ephesians 2:10). This statement by Paul that we are “created” does not simply refer to our physical formation, as God has, of course, created all human beings (see Genesis 1:26-27). Rather, Paul is talking about being “created in Christ.” It means that every person who believes in Christ does so because she or he is the object of a process of God’s “spiritual creation.” The word *workmanship* is very important; it is the Greek word *poema* from which we get our word “poem.” It means that every believer is essentially a work of art — God’s art! Consider how artists work, whether they are writers, musicians, painters, sculptors, etc. They labor long and hard and with the utmost care and detailed attention. Sometimes they do very little, only a stroke here or there. Other times they make massive changes. But always they seek to bring the raw material into line with an artistic vision. Thus Paul is telling us that God labors over all believers throughout our entire lives, intervening and guiding and shaping us to bring us into line with a vision he has for us. This is mentioned also in Ephesians 2:10 — *“created to... good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”* Thus, God has a particular set of *“good works”* for us to do, for which he prepares us our whole lives.

Looking at our Lives

It is therefore of utmost importance to look back on our lives and see everything that has happened through this grid, namely that:

- **God has been at work through the various influences of our lives** — *“created in Christ.”* All of our experiences and troubles and our family and friends must be seen as the instruments of an artist used to mold and shape us. He has been at work all of our lives!
- **God has been at work to make us something beautiful** — *“workmanship.”* God is out to make our *beings* something great—to give us characters of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, integrity, humility and self-control.
- **God has been at work to make us something useful** — *“good works... prepared beforehand.”* God is also out to make our *doings* something great — to make us helpful and able to serve others in special ways.

Paul uses this “doctrine of workmanship” like a pair of spectacles through

which to view his entire life. In Galatians 1:13-23, he shows us that he now sees God at work throughout his whole life (*"God, who set me apart from birth and called me,"* v.15). Secondly, he now sees that God used the gospel to make him something beautiful. He had been a fanatically intense person who felt superior in his self-righteousness and only criticized others (*"intensely I persecuted... extremely zealous for the traditions,"* v.14). But God humbled him and showed him he was nothing apart from undeserved grace (*"called me by his grace and was pleased to reveal his Son in me"*) so that now he loves to lead people to praise and thanks (*"they praised God because of me,"* v.24). Thirdly, he realizes that though his obsessive study of the Bible and theology (*"the traditions"*) was originally motivated by self-righteousness and the need to feel superior, he was now, as a Christian, uniquely equipped to be a preacher, teacher and evangelist (*"so that I might preach him among the Gentiles"*). His scholarship and knowledge of the Bible enabled him to bridge the gap between Christianity and various pagan philosophies and religions.

Discussion questions

1. What most helped you? What were your biggest ["!"] exclamation points?

2. What questions did this raise? What were your ["?"] question marks?

Re-examining your life

Let's take time to look back at your own life, using three questions based on the three aspects of Paul's teaching. Take several minutes to individually answer each of the questions below. Then go through each question as a group. Encourage all who feel free to share their answers.

1. As you look back on your life, how can you see that God was working, even though you didn't know it at the time:

- a. To protect you?**

- b. To wake you up to things you denied?**

- c. To show you weaknesses or flaws in yourself?**

- d. To show you your value to him?**

Note: There may be some overlap between these categories. i.e., God may have worked to wake you up (b) to a particular flaw in yourself (c)

2. How did God help you to see that salvation was by grace, not good works? Or how has he been doing so? (You may still be in process!)

3. What practical difference in your character has God made with his grace? (In other words, in what way would you be a fundamentally different personality had God not shown you his love?)

4. How has God prepared you to be of service and help to others? What has he equipped you to do in service to God, your loved ones, your neighbors?

Galatians

Unity in the Gospel

Study 3 | Galatians 2:1-10

The rite of circumcision refers to what has been called the Old Testament “ceremonial law.” This was not what we might call the *moral principles* of the Old Testament, such as the Ten Commandments against lying, murder, and adultery. Rather, these were very detailed prescriptions about food, dress, and other daily practices that, under the Mosaic code, made one “ritually clean” and acceptable for God’s presence in temple worship. Thus they were called the “clean laws.” Under this code, the Gentiles as a whole were “unclean” and unfit for the presence of God unless they were circumcised and adopted the entire Mosaic code for daily living.

The ceremonial law had two practical purposes. First, it served to keep the Jews a culturally distinct group and kept them from being assimilated into the larger, idol-worshipping cultures around them. This was the cultural purpose of the law — to make it hard for the Jews to form partnerships and marriages with unbelievers. Second, it served to show that God is a holy God, and we can only come into his presence if we are cleansed of our impurities. This was the didactic purpose of the law — to teach us we are not naturally clean or acceptable in God’s sight.

Read Galatians 2:1-10

- 1. If Paul did not need human authorization to preach the gospel, why did he present his gospel to the leaders in Jerusalem in 2:1-2?**
- 2. Why was it very significant that Titus (a non-Jew) was not required by the Jerusalem leaders to take on the Jewish mark of circumcision in 2:3-5? What are the implications of this?**

3. **What, then, was at stake in this meeting in Jerusalem? How might “the truth of the gospel” been lost (2:5)? Imagine the bad things that could have happened so you can appreciate what God did for us all that day.**
4. **Paul says that the false teachers were threatening the “freedom we have in Christ Jesus” (2:4). In what ways does the gospel give us freedom that normal “earn-your-salvation” religions do not?**
5. **What are some common ways that people today lose the freedom of the gospel and try to add to the gospel (2:6)?**
6. **In 2:7-10 we see not only that there should be unity among gospel believers, but also unity among gospel proclaimers. How is this unity expressed?**
7. **Why do you think the Jerusalem apostles stressed that Paul “remember the poor” (2:10)? Does your personal life reflect the importance of this?**

READING AND REFLECTION

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

The two prodigal sons

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

(A Sermon by Tim Keller)

Introduction

This parable is nearly always called, “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” but not by Jesus. When he begins the story, he says, “A man had two sons” (v.11); the story is a comparison and contrast of *both* brothers. We have sentimentalized this parable because of our almost complete concentration on the middle of the story regarding the younger brother. We imagine that the hearers’ eyes welled with tears as they heard how God will always love and welcome us, no matter what we’ve done. But if we truly come to understand why Jesus told this parable and what he meant, we will come to see that the listeners were actually thunderstruck, offended, and furious. For Jesus’ purpose here was not to warm hearts, but to explode the normal human categories of how to approach God. He does this by showing us *two* kinds of people, and thus *two* kinds of “lostness” and running from God, but still just *one* way home.

Two Kinds of People

At the beginning of the chapter, Luke gives us the setting of the parable. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were muttering and complaining about Jesus (v.2) but *tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him* (v.1). These two kinds of people correspond to the two brothers later in the parable. Tax collectors and sinners are like the younger brother in the parable. They have engaged in immoral, irreligious *wild living* (v.13). They have left the traditional morality of their families. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law, however, are like the elder brother in the parable. They have stayed with the traditional morality of their upbringing. They are deeply devoted to studying and obeying the Word of God. They pray and worship constantly.

The religious and moral elder brothers were shocked by Jesus’ ministry. The Greek tense of the verb (*were gathering round*) and the context indicate that the prevailing trend and pattern in Jesus’ ministry was to attract the very people who most hated and despised religion! Moral people were put off by Jesus, but those socially and morally out of the mainstream were strongly attracted to him. We see this continuously in the gospels. When there is a religious person with a political outcast (Zaccheus-Luke 19), or a sexual outcast (the “fallen” woman-Luke 7) or a racial outcast (Samaritan woman-John 4), it is always the “younger brother” who connects with Jesus and the “elder brother” who does not.

Jesus is continually saying to the respectable and upright, “*The tax collectors and the prostitutes enter the kingdom before you*” (Matt.21:31). Thus, the puzzled and angry

reaction of the moral and religious people is not surprising. They are saying, "Why, these kinds of people *never* come to *our* services! They despise our meetings and organizations. They are completely turned off to religion. Therefore, there is something wrong with this. He must just be telling them what they want to hear!"

The point? *When the message of the gospel is clear, moral people tend to dislike it, while irreligious people are intrigued and attracted.* The way to know that you are communicating and living the same gospel message as Jesus is that "younger brothers" are more attracted to you than elder brothers. This is a very searching test, because almost always, our churches are not like that. The kinds of people that were attracted to Jesus are not attracted to us. We only attract conservative, buttoned-down, moral people. The licentious, the "liberated," the broken, the people out of the mainstream very much despise us. That can only mean one thing. We may think we understand the gospel of Jesus, but we don't. If we don't see the same *effect* Jesus saw, then we lack the same *message* Jesus had. If our churches aren't filled with younger brothers, then we must be more like the elder brother than we'd like to think.

Two Kinds of Approaches

Jesus' story of the two sons demolishes the natural human categories for salvation and how we are to approach God. The world has only two "grids" through which it understands spiritual issues (though there are an infinite number of variations on each one!). First, there is a *moralistic* grid. This says that [salvation] is finding God by obeying his law, or by living up to standards of some kind. Though God may forgive if the repentance is very sincere, we must measure up with our goodness. The second grid is a *relativistic* grid. This says that "salvation" is finding ourselves by following our hearts. In this view, there may be a God or there may not, but if there is, he will accept us as long as we are sincerely seeking what we feel to be our principles.

Both grids then divide the world into two basic groups, one seen favorably and the other unfavorably. The moralistic sees the religious people as *in* and the immoral as "out." But the relativistic sees the free spirits as *in* and the judgmental people as "out."

How does Jesus' story address these views? Well, if the last eight verses were left out, if the story were mainly about the younger brother, this parable could be taken by *either* moralists or relativists as confirming their grid! The relativistic grid could appropriate it for itself, saying, "Ah, see! The son returned home after all that sin, and he was just accepted! There was no need for punishment, no need for atonement, no need for payment. There's the ticket — God accepts us no matter what we do." The moralistic grid could appropriate it for *itself*, saying, "Ah, see! The son ruined his life when he didn't do the father's will, but when he came back to live a good life, then he was received. There's the ticket — God only welcomes you if you are good."

But the parable's ending completely changes all that. For one thing, the story mightily challenges the urban "liberated" grid that sees evil as mainly a lack of personal freedom. We see the ruin of such a life. And there is a final, hidden argument against the relativistic view that we will get to later.

However, Jesus' *main* target here is the moralistic grid. And here is the shocking heart of the parable. Jesus shows us a father with *two* sons, and actually *both* are equally alienated from his heart. One has expressed alienation by running far away, but the elder brother is just as angry and just as much a stranger to the father. The father must "*go out*" to each of them to urge them to come in (vv.20, 28). But here's the remarkable part. One of his sons is a very good person, one is a very wicked person, but in the end, it is the evil son who comes in to the father's feast and dance, and it is the good son who absolutely will not. The listeners knew what that meant. They were utterly stunned. It was a complete reversal of everything they believed. You can almost hear them gasp as the story ended. The lover of prostitutes enters the kingdom of God, and the moral man does not.

But notice — what is keeping the elder brother out? Why does he stay out when the younger brother goes in? He tells us: It is because *all these years live been slaving for you and never disobeyed...* (v.29). It is not his badness keeping him out, but his "goodness." It is not his sins that are keeping him from sharing in the feast of the father so much as his "righteousness." The elder brother in the end is lost, not despite his good record, but because of it. Now we are getting to the heart of how the gospel differs from the moral grid. As one writer put it, "*The main thing between you and God is not your sins, but your damnable good works.*"

The gospel is neither simply religion nor irreligion; it is neither simple morality nor immorality. Most everyone thinks that the moralistic grid seems to be the Christian one, yet the gospel is a radically different approach. The moralistic grid says, "The good are in and the bad are out," and the relativistic grid says, "The liberated are in and the oppressive are out," but the gospel says, "The humble are in and the proud are out." And Jesus is telling us here (as we see throughout the gospels) that when the elder-types and the younger-types clearly hear this new gospel "grid," the younger types are generally more open and less offended. That is why the real gospel faith is one that religious people by definition do not like.

Two Kinds of Running

So what *is* this gospel "grid" for approaching God? The parable of the Two Prodigals gives us several important planks.

First, we learn that the gospel provides a radically deeper view of the concept of sin than either of the other two grids. Of course, the relativistic view of sin is well known to be shallow, yet ultimately it does not really differ from the moralistic. They both think of sin as basically "breaking the rules" — they just differ in what the rules are! But the governing theme in this parable (and all the stories of Luke 15) is that *sin is running from God — avoiding, escaping, saying, "I don't need you!"*

This is a much more profound concept than "breaking rules." Why? Flannery O'Connor grasped this when she said of one of her characters, "*There was a deep, black, wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin.*" How could

that be? Here is a man who knows that the only way to avoid Jesus *as Savior* is to avoid sin. If I feel I am a good person, I may look to Jesus as Example, or as Helper, or as Strength — but I won't need to utterly rely on him for every breath and obey him unconditionally. If I am a good person, then I have rights — Jesus owes it to me to listen to my prayers, to protect me and reward me.

This is clearly the attitude of the elder brother. Why is he so angry with the father? He feels he has the right to tell the father what he should do with his robes, rings, and calves. It shows that he is just as resentful of the father's control of his goods as was the younger brother. The younger brother went away to get out from under the father's control of his wealth, but the older brother stayed home and "*never disobeyed*" as *his* way to do the same thing. At heart they were absolutely the same. Both were trying to escape the authority of the father, both resented his control and rebelled. But one did it by breaking all the father's rules, and the other did it by keeping them.

Now we see why "running from God" is a deeper definition of sin than "breaking the rules of God," because *you can run from God either by breaking his rules or by keeping them*. The difference between a religious person and a true Christian is that the religious person obeys God to get control over God, and to get things from God, but the Christian obeys just to get *God*. Religious persons obey to get leverage over God, to control him, to put him in a position where they think he owes them. Therefore, despite their moral and religious fastidiousness, they are actually attempting to be their own saviors. Christians, who know they are only saved by grace and can never control God, obey him out of a desire to love and please and draw closer to the one who saved them.

Another way to understand this is to ask, "Why do we obey *or* sin?" Until the gospel changes our hearts, the basic reason for either is exactly the same. The younger brother and the elder brother had the wealth of the father as their main goal. They wanted his things, but not him. The younger brother's sins allowed him to get his money and do what he wanted with it. The older brother's righteousness was motivated by the same thing. Thus their real trust was not in the father, but in the things that were their ultimate joy. Their real joy and sense of worth resided in these things, not in the father. So, sins against the father's will and "good deeds" done to get control over the father, are both ways to obtain things other than God. They are both ways to become your own Savior and Lord.

Now we can see one more reason why younger brothers are generally more open to the gospel than elder brothers. Younger brothers have literally run from the father physically and morally. It's easier for them to see their need. Older brothers have not. They are running away from God while they have physically and morally stayed close. See how hard it is for religious people to believe they are running from God! But they are.

The gospel does not agree that there are spiritually two kinds of people in the world — "good" and "bad." Instead, it says there are just two different kinds of "running from God." You can run away by breaking the rules or by keeping them. But you are running nonetheless.

Two Kinds of “Lostness”

Not only does the gospel give us a deeper definition of sin, but it also provides a deeper understanding of “lostness.” It is typical for people to think of “lost” people as wild and out of control. And there is a kind of person whose body and spirit are very broken through wild and riotous living. It would not be difficult to take this text, look at the breakdown of the younger brother’s life, and spend time showing the signs and remedies for “younger brother lostness.”

But because there are two kinds of “running from God,” there are also two sets of “lostness” traits. We will concentrate here on “elder brother lostness” because it is much more insidious (as we have seen) and misunderstood. Not only are there many, many people in churches who are not Christians because they are “elder brothers,” there are also many Christians who are deeply affected by the elder brother spirit. These are people who still have not grasped the gospel well, who maintain a moralistic grid through which they look at themselves and read the Bible. Richard Lovelace says that many Christians “*base their justification on their sanctification*” and thus are very touchy, unhappy, and insecure. We need to recognize the marks of “elder brother lostness.”

(1) One sign of the “elder brother” spirit is that *he is filled with anger about how his life is going* (v.28 — *became angry*). One sign of a moralistic spirit is a feeling that God owes me a good and comfortable life if I live up to his standards. Now that will continually lead to anger whenever your life takes a bad turn. If you feel you have been living right, you will be angry at God; if you feel that you have not been living right, you will be angry at yourself. Either way, your life will be filled with anger because you have been trying to control God through your goodness.

(2) A second sign of the “elder brother” spirit is a *joyless, mechanical obedience*. Notice that the older son “lets his slip show” when he says, “*I’ve been slaving for you*” (v.29). Look at it this way: There are two ways to listen to Mozart. You may listen to Mozart because it is instrumental (a means) to something else you love for its own sake. For example, you may listen to Mozart to get an iA in music appreciation class so that you can get your degree and a good job. Or you may listen to Mozart so you can feel (and look) like a cultured person. But you can also listen to Mozart because it is beautiful for its own sake. It gives you pleasure just for what it is in itself. Elder brother obedience treats God as instrumental means to an end. You don’t do good out of a delight in goodness for its own sake or for the pleasure of God. Instead, you do it joylessly and slavishly. But Christians are filled with amazement at the grace of God and so obey out of a delight in pleasing him for his own sake.

(3) A third sign of the “elder brother” spirit is a *coldness to younger brother-types*. And especially, elder brothers are *disdainful of or ineffective in evangelism*. The older son will not even “own” or acknowledge his brother — “*this son of yours*” (v.30). The person changed by the real gospel is always disposed toward evangelism. For one thing, if you believe you are a sinner saved by grace alone, you will not feel superior to anyone else, not to other cultural or racial groups, not to other faiths, not to immoral

people. You will treat them with respect because you know that your morality has been as sinful and “God-escaping” as their immorality. Secondly, if you understand the gospel, you will treat others with hope. You will never look at anyone and say, “Here’s someone who could never become a Christian,” because now you know that all “types” of people are equally unlikely to find God. Thirdly, if you understand the gospel, you will be very courageous in your witness. You will not be bound by what people think of you.

(4) A fourth sign of the “elder brother” spirit is a *lack of assurance of the father’s love*. The son says, “*You never threw me a party*” (v.29). There is no dancing or festiveness in the elder brother’s relationship with his father. As long as you try to earn your salvation by controlling God through your goodness, you will never, ever be sure you have “made it.” There will always be anxiety and fear and uncertainty in your relationship. No wonder there is no intimacy in the prayer life of the “elder brother” — no joy or closeness — though the elder brother may be very diligent in “saying his prayers.”

(5) A fifth sign of “elder brother” spirit is an *unforgiving, judgmental spirit*. If you are an elder brother, you lack two things necessary to forgive. First, you lack the emotional humility to say, “I’m no different.” You instead look at the sinner and say, “I would never do that!” Second, you lack the emotional “wealth” to say, “I am so loved and forgiven by my father, what does it matter that I was slighted or wronged by him?”

One Way Home

If there are two kinds of running and two kinds of “lostness,” are there two ways home? No — there is only one, though it must be applied in different ways. Not only is there one way home for both younger-brother and older-brother non-Christians, but there is one way for believers to grow out of the immaturity and old “false grids” that still bedevil us.

First, we need the father to come out to us. Even the younger brother gets the father’s kiss *before* he repents (v.20). The father’s kiss is not a response to our repentance, but the action that brings it about. With the older brother, the father must come out and plead with him (v.28), just as he pleads today with hardened religious people! We all need God’s grace to come to us first. We need him to seek us, or we will never seek him.

Second, we must repent, not just of our sins, but also of our righteousness. We need a deeper, more comprehensive repentance. We must recognize that the *reasons* for our righteous deeds have been the same as the reasons for our sins. We must admit that other things besides God are operating as our functional trusts and joy, and that our *main* sin has been our efforts at self-salvation, at trying to be our own Savior. Repentance means to admit that the reason we did right was to put God in our debt, so that we could have some say in the kind of life we “deserve,” and keep control of our lives.

Third, we must rely on and rejoice in what the father has provided for our salvation. We said earlier that, at first glance, the welcome of the younger brother seems “cheap.” There is no punishment, no atonement — he is just taken in! Does this mean that the relativists are right, that God just accepts us whatever we do, as long as we are sorry? No. Think: How was the younger brother put back in the family? He got a robe, a ring, he got a place back in the inheritance. But the only way the father could do this *is* at great expense. It is at the expense of the elder brother. The younger brother had already taken away his rightful portion of the inheritance, and now every cent of the father belongs by right to the elder. When he says, “*Everything I have is yours*” (v.31), he is speaking the literal truth. Every robe, every ring, every fattened calf is the elder brother’s. The salvation of the younger son is *not* free — it will be extremely expensive. The father *cannot* do it, except at the expense of his other son.

So are we stuck? No, *we* are not stuck. We have a different elder brother. That is the point of the parable. Jesus has shown the Pharisees what they look like; absolutely stuck in their self-righteous spirit, absolutely alienated from the gracious heart of the father. But *Jesus* is not. Hebrews 2:11 says, “*Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family.*” So *Jesus* is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says [to God], “*I will declare your name to my brothers!*” Jesus Christ is the true elder brother. By way of contrast with *this* elder brother, he is revealed to us. He came to earth and truly obeyed his father and never disobeyed his orders. He truly has the right to all the father owns. But instead, he came out and searched for us, and found us in the pigsty, and carried us home on his shoulders singing with joy. And he gave us his robe, his ring, his place, his wealth — all at his own expense.

Understanding this truth is essential and will transform you. We’ll never stop being elder brothers until we rejoice in the work of our true elder brother.

Discussion questions

1. Have you been more of a younger brother in your thinking and living or an elder brother?

2. What convicted you the most in this sermon?

3. What helped you most?

4. What questions did it raise?

Galatians

Living the Gospel

Study 4 | Galatians 2:11-21

In this section Paul for the first time lays out his gospel as “justification by faith.” And here he also introduces a principle that will surprise many — that Christians need the gospel as well as non-Christians. In 2:14 he insists that all of life must be continually thought out and lived out by believers “in line” with the gospel.

Read Galatians 2:11-21

- 1. Read Acts 11:1-18. Why did Peter originally begin “eating with Gentiles” (v.12a)? What led him to stop (v.12b)?**
- 2. What do you think Paul meant when he said that Peter was not “acting in line with the truth of the gospel” (v.14)?**
- 3. Why was Peter being particularly “hypocritical” in his attitudes toward Gentile Christians (v.13-14)?**
- 4. How can we make the same kind of mistake that Peter did? How can we focus on non-essentials? How can we fail to “eat” with other Christians?**

5. How is nationalism/racism “not in line with the gospel?” What difference does it make that Paul takes this approach rather than simply saying that it is wrong?
6. In verses 15-16, he begins to talk of being “justified” by Christ. How does the discussion with Peter shed light on the meaning of the word “justification?” (Refer to addendum below.)
7. What do you think it means that he “died” to the law? What do you think it means that he died to the law through the law? Though he was a law-keeping Pharisee, why was it only after “dying to the law” that Paul began to live for God?
8. Put vv.20-21 in your own words. What seeming contradiction is there between the two sentences of v.20? What mistakes does this “tension” help us avoid in the Christian life?
9. What is the best and most helpful thing you learned today? What verse is the most special to you? Why?

Addendum on Justification:

The actual word “justification” has a legal reference, and therefore it provides a different perspective on our salvation in Christ. The opposite of “clean” is “polluted” — and therefore, that word would not be sufficient to convey what Christ does for us. It would be easy to think that God accepts us because Christ “cleanses” and gets rid of our sinful thoughts and habits. In other words, we might conclude that we become acceptable to God by actually becoming righteous. But the opposite of “justified” is “condemned.” This means that in Christ, though we are actually sinners, we are not under condemnation. God accepts us despite our sin. So we are not acceptable to God because we actually become righteous. We become actually righteous because we are acceptable to God.

“‘Justification’ is a legal term borrowed from the law courts. It is the exact opposite of ‘condemnation’ (cf. Deut.25:1; Prov.17:15; Rom.8:33,34). ‘To condemn’ is to declare somebody guilty; ‘to justify’ is to declare him... righteous. In the Bible it refers to God’s act of unmerited favor by which He puts a sinner right with himself, not only pardoning or acquitting him, but accepting and treating him as righteous.” (Stott, p.60)

“To justify” in the Bible means... to declare... of a man on trial, that he is not liable to any penalty, but is entitled to all the privileges due to those who have kept the law. Justifying is the act of a judge pronouncing the opposite sentence to condemnation — that of acquittal and legal immunity.” — J.I. Packer, *God’s Words* (IVP, 1981)

EXERCISE

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Living “In line” with the Gospel

PRINCIPLE

In Galatians 2:14, Paul lays down a powerful principle. He deals with Peter’s racial pride and cowardice by declaring that he was not living “*in line with the truth of the gospel.*” From this we see that the Christian life *is a process of renewing every dimension of our lives — spiritual, psychological, corporate, social — by living out the ramifications of the gospel.* The gospel is to be applied to every area of thinking, feeling, relating and behaving. The implications and applications of Galatians 2:14 are vast.

IMPLICATIONS

Implication #1: The power of the gospel

First, Paul is showing us that we are changed by the power of God when we bring the gospel truth to bear on every area of life. The gospel is described in the Bible in the most astounding terms. Angels constantly long to look into it (1 Peter 1:12). It does not simply bring us power, but it **is the power of God** itself, for Paul says, “*I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation*” (Rom.1:16). It is also **the blessing of God**, with benefits for anyone who comes near (1Cor.9:23). It is even called the light of **the glory of God** (2 Cor.4:4,6). Finally, the gospel has **the life of God**. Paul said to the Corinthians, “*I gave you birth through the gospel!*” (1 Cor 4:15)

Implication #2: The sufficiency of the gospel

Second, Paul is showing that we never “get beyond the gospel” in our Christian life to something more “advanced.” It is not just the A-B-C’s but the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not just the minimum required doctrine for entrance into the kingdom, but the way we make all of our progress in the kingdom. We are not made right with God through faith in the gospel and then sanctified and matured through mere moral effort. Faith in the gospel is *also* the way to grow (Gal.3:1-3; Col. 1:3-6). It is common to think, “The gospel is for non-Christians. But once we are saved, we grow through work and obedience.” But work that is not “in line” with the gospel not will sanctify — it will strangle. All our problems come from a failure to apply the gospel. The gospel changes every area of our lives. How?

APPLICATIONS

The two “thieves” of the gospel

Since Paul speaks of being “in line” with the gospel, we can extend the metaphor by saying that gospel renewal occurs when we keep from walking “off-line” either to the

right or to the left. The key to understanding the implications of the gospel is to see the gospel as a “third” way between two mistaken opposites. However, this does not mean that the gospel is a compromise midway between two poles. It does not produce something in the middle, but something different from both. Specifically, the gospel critiques both religion and irreligion (Matt.21:31; 22:10).

Tertullian said, “Just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so this doctrine of justification is ever crucified between two opposite errors.” Tertullian meant that there were two basic false ways of thinking, each of which steals the power and the distinctiveness of the gospel by pulling us “off the gospel line” to one side or the other. These “thieves” can be called *moralism* or *legalism* on the one hand, and *hedonism* or *relativism* on the other. Another way to put it is that the gospel opposes both *religion* and *irreligion*. On the one hand, “moralism/religion” stresses truth without grace, for it says that we must obey the truth in order to be saved. On the other hand, “relativists/irreligion” stress grace without truth, for they say that we are all acceptable and have to decide what is true for *us*. But truth without grace is not really truth, and grace without truth is not really grace. Jesus was “full of grace *and* truth.” Any philosophy of life that de-emphasizes or loses one or the other falls into legalism or license. Either way, the joy, power, and release of the gospel is stolen by one thief or the other.

The gospel teaches us to say:

“I am more sinful and flawed than I ever dared believe” (vs. antinomianism).

“I am more accepted and loved than I ever dared hope” (vs. legalism).

How both ‘thieves’ differ.

How does moralism/religion steal joy and power? Moralism is the view that you are acceptable (to God, the world, others, yourself) through your attainments. Moralists do not have to be religious, but often are. When they are, their religion is pretty conservative and filled with rules that focus on behavior. Often moralists view God as very holy and just. This view will lead either to self-hatred (because you can't live up to the standards), or self-inflation (because you think you have lived up to the standards). It is ironic to realize that inferiority *and* superiority complexes have the very same root! Whether the moralist ends up smug and superior or crushed and guilty depends on how high the standards are and on a person's natural advantages (such as family, intelligence, looks, will power). Moralistic people can be deeply religious — but there is no transforming joy or power.

How does relativism steal joy and power? Relativists are usually irreligious, or else prefer “liberal” religion. On the surface, they are often more tolerant than moralist/religious people. They believe that everyone needs to determine what is right and wrong individually. Often they view God as a loving and/or impersonal force. They may talk a great deal about God's love, but since they do not think of themselves as

sinners, God's love for us costs him nothing. If God accepts us, it is because he is so welcoming, or because we are not so bad. The concept of God's love in the gospel is far more rich, deep, and electrifying.

How both "thieves" are the same.

They both seek to avoid Jesus as savior and keep control of their lives. Irreligious people obviously seek to be their own spiritual lords. ("No one tells *me* how to live or what to do, so I determine what is right and wrong for me!") But moralistic religious people subtly do the same thing. They have become their own saviors. ("I am more moral and spiritual than other people, so God owes it to me to listen to my prayers and take me to heaven. God cannot let just anything happen to me — he owes me a happy life. I've earned it!")

They are both based on distorted views of the real God. The irreligious person loses sight of the law and holiness of God and the religious person loses sight of the love and grace of God. Only the gospel message — that we are so sinful that we need to be saved completely by grace — allows a person to see God as he really is. The gospel shows us a God far more holy than the legalist can bear (Jesus *had* to die because we could not satisfy God's holy demands) and yet far more merciful than a humanist can conceive (Jesus *had* to *die* because he loved us).

In contrast to both, Christians are those who have adopted a whole new system of approaching God. They may have had both religious phases and irreligious phases in their lives, but they have come to see that their reason for both their irreligion *and* their religion was essentially the same and essentially wrong! Christians come to see that both their sins *and* their best deeds have all really been ways of avoiding Jesus as savior. A Christian says, "Though I have often failed to obey the moral law, the deeper problem was *why* I was trying to obey it! Even my efforts to obey it were just a way of seeking to be my own savior. With that mindset, even if I obey or ask for forgiveness, I am really resisting the gospel and setting myself up as my own savior." To "get the gospel" is to turn from self-justification to rely on Jesus' record for a relationship with God. The irreligious don't repent at all, and the religious only repent of sins. But Christians also repent of their righteousness. That is the distinction between the three groups — Christian, moralists (religious), and pragmatists (irreligious).

CASE STUDIES

Paul's point is that we must not simply ask in every area of life, "What is the moral way to act?" but "What is the way that is in-line with the gospel?" The gospel must be continually applied to our lives to keep us from moving into our habitual moralistic or individualistic directions. We must bring *everything* "into line" with the gospel.

Case Study #1 — Racism

Since Paul applied the gospel to racism, let's use it as an example.

Moralistic persons will tend to be very proud of their culture. They easily fall into cultural imperialism. They try to attach spiritual significance to their cultural styles to make themselves feel morally superior to other peoples. This happens because moralistic people are very insecure, since they look a lot at the eternal law and know deep down that they cannot keep it. They use cultural differences to buttress their sense of righteousness.

Relativistic/hedonistic persons will tend not to cultural imperialism but cultural relativism. This approach says, "Yes, traditional people are racists because they believe in absolute truth. But truth is relative. Every culture is beautiful in itself. Every culture must be accepted on its own terms." This, however, makes it impossible to make distinctions between evil and right in culture. Note: Relativists are ultimately moralistic. Since their identity (like anyone who does not grasp the gospel) is based on some human quality or achievement, they can be respectful only of other people who believe everything is relative! They will feel superior to all those they don't feel are open-minded. But Christians cannot feel morally superior to relativists or moralists or anyone.

The gospel approach to race. Racism is rooted in a failure to believe in grace. The gospel leads us to be somewhat critical of *all* cultures, including our own (since there *is* truth), yet we can feel morally superior to no one. After all, we are saved by grace alone, and therefore a non-Christian neighbor may be more moral and wise than we are. This gives the Christian a radically different posture from either moralists or relativists.

Case Study #2 — Suffering

Moralistic persons have a major problem when suffering strikes them. Why? The whole point of moralism is to put God in one's debt. Moralistic people feel that God owes them a safe life because of their goodness. So when suffering hits us, the moralistic heart is forced to either feel terrific anger toward God (if you feel you have been living up to moral standards) or terrific anger toward yourself (if you feel you haven't been living up.) You will either think "I hate God" or "I hate myself" or you will swing back and forth between both poles.

Relativistic/hedonistic persons are more likely to become bitter against life or God, since they don't feel they deserve troubles in life.

The gospel approach to suffering is different. On the one hand the gospel humbles us out of being mad at God. Jesus, the very best person who ever lived, suffered terribly. This demolishes the idea that good people should have good lives and bad people should have bad lives. If God himself was willing to become involved in terrible suffering of life out of love, then we should not think ourselves exempt. On the other hand, the gospel affirms us out of feeling guilty or mad at ourselves. Jesus suffered and died for us, "while we were yet sinners." The trouble we are experiencing at the moment might be designed to wake us up, but it can't be a *quid pro quo* punishment for our sins. *Jesus* got the punishment for our sins. If we realize that we are accepted in Christ, then (and only then) will suffering humble us and strengthen us rather than embitter and weaken us. As others have said: Jesus suffered, not that we might not suffer, but that when we suffer we could become like him.

The main problem in the Christian life is that we have not thought out the deep implications of the gospel. We fail to grasp and believe it through and through. Luther said, *"The truth of the Gospel is the principal article of all Christian doctrine... Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually"* (Luther on Galatians 2:14f). We live around the truth of the gospel but to some degree do not "get" it. So the key to continual, deeper spiritual renewal is the **continual re-discovery of the gospel**.

1. Generally, what helped you most? What puzzled you?

a. The moralistic way to handle this.

c. The gospel way to handle this.

Galatians

The Gospel and faith

Study 5 | Galatians 3:1-14

The first two chapters of Galatians have been called Paul's *personal* defense. It consists mainly of citations from his personal history and early church history that are given to prove that the gospel he preaches is a direct revelation from God, not a derivative of either his own wisdom or the teaching of others. Now in chapters 3 and 4 we get Paul's *theological* defense of the gospel. Here he clearly expounds the essential content of the gospel message itself and defends it with several arguments.

Read Galatians 3:1-14

- 1. What can we learn from 3:1-3 about how the Galatians came to Christ from paganism? (What was presented to them? How did they respond? What was the result?)**
- 2. What can we learn from 3:3-5 about how the Galatians are to grow spiritually, now that they are Christians? How are the Galatians to grow?**
- 3. Paul is warning the Galatian Christians that it is easy to fall back into works-righteousness as we try to overcome sin and live the Christian life. Give some examples of how we must deal with sin through "believing the gospel" rather than just "human attainment."**

4. Read Genesis 15:1-19 as background to vv.6. What does it mean that Abraham's faith was 'credited'? On what basis does God credit righteousness to Abraham?

5. How was Abraham's saving faith a model for us?

6. How does the experience of gospel faith contrast with that of a person who seeks to earn God's acceptance? (vv.10-12)

7. If v.10 is true, how can God credit us as righteous and not be unjust (vv. 13-14)? What does it mean that Jesus did not simply take our curse but "became a curse" for us?

READING AND REFLECTION

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Grace and growth

Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Ill.:IVP, 1979)

1. Justification and sanctification.

In the New Testament... *justification* (the acceptance of believers as righteous in the sight of God through the righteousness of Jesus Christ accounted to them) and *sanctification* (progress in *actual* holiness expressed in their lives) are often closely intertwined... However, they are quite distinct: justification is the perfect righteousness of Christ reckoned to us, covering the remaining imperfections in our lives like a robe of stainless holiness; sanctification is the process of removing those imperfections as we are enabled more and more to put off the bondages of sin and put on new life in Christ...

2. Justification reversed with sanctification.

a. Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives. Many have so light an apprehension of God's holiness and of the extent and guilt of their sin that consciously they see little need for justification, although below the surface of their lives they are deeply guilt-ridden and insecure. Many others have a theoretical commitment to this doctrine, but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for their justification... drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience. Few know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther's platform: *you are accepted*, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude...

b. A conscience which is not fully enlightened both to the seriousness of its condition before God, and to the grandeur of God's merciful provision of redemption, will inevitably fall prey to anxiety, pride, sensuality and all the other expressions of that unconscious despair which Kierkegaard called "the sickness unto death." [So] we start each day with our personal security resting not on...the sacrifice of Christ but on our present feelings or recent achievements... Since these arguments will not quiet the human conscience, we are inevitably moved either to discouragement and apathy or to a self-righteousness which falsifies the record to achieve a sense of peace.

3. Justification as the basis for all sanctification.

a. Much that we have interpreted as a defect of sanctification in church people is really an outgrowth of their loss of bearing with respect to justification. Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons — much less secure than non-Christians, because of the constant bulletins they receive from their Christian environment about the holiness of God and the righteousness they are supposed to have. Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce, defensive assertion of their own righteousness and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger. They cling desperately to legal, pharisaical righteousness, but envy, jealousy and other branches on the tree of sin grow out of their fundamental insecurity...

b. It is often said today, in circles which blend popular psychology with Christianity, that we must love ourselves before we can be set free to love others... But no realistic human beings find it easy to love or forgive themselves, and hence their self-acceptance must be grounded in their awareness that God accepts them in Christ... [There is much evidence in our experience against the idea that we are children of God, but] *the faith that surmounts the evidence and is able to warm itself at the fire of God's love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness...*

c. Presented in this context, even the demand for sanctification becomes part of the good news. It offers understanding of the bondage that has distorted our lives and the promise of release into a life of Spirit-empowered freedom and beauty. Ministries that attack only the surface of sin and fail to ground spiritual growth in the believer's union with Christ produce either self-righteousness or despair...

Discussion questions

1. What helped you the most? What questions did this raise?

2. In 2a, Lovelace mentions two equal but opposite ways you can fail to draw on the benefits of justification. What are they? (Note: They are mentioned also at the very end of 2b and 3c.)

3. In what specific ways do you “reverse” justification and sanctification (i.e., reverse the gospel)?
4. From what sources do you try to “steal love and acceptance” instead of “warming yourself at the fire of God’s love” (section 3b)? How do these things “distort our lives” and deny you “Spirit-empowered freedom” (section 3c)?

Galatians

The Gospel and the law

Study 6 | Galatians 3:15-25

There is no more practical question than that of the relationship of a Christian to the law of God. Whenever we hear the radical claims of salvation-by-grace, we immediately ask the following questions. “If we are ‘free from the law’ does that mean I don’t have to obey the law of God?” “Why then should I strive to live a holy life?” “What is the nature of my obligation (if any) to God’s law?” Paul addresses these important questions here.

Read Galatians 3:15-25

1. What principle is laid down in v. 18a? Compare and contrast what it means to receive something by promise vs. receiving something by law?

2. Why was the law of Moses not able to set aside or add to the promises spoken to Abraham? (You may wish to review Genesis 15:9-18.)

4. What, then, is the purpose of the law? (vv.19-22) [Key: What do you think it means that we are “prisoners of sin?”]

5. In vv.23-25, how does Paul explain that the law “leads a person to Christ?”

6. If we are not under the law’s “supervision” (v.25), does that imply that we can live any way we wish? Imagine the features of a relationship with the law based on salvation-by-grace rather than one based on fear and salvation-by-performance?

EXERCISE

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Deeds, words and heart

This exercise introduces an important concept: that underneath our behavioral sins lies a fundamental refusal to rest in Christ’s salvation and the drive instead to find our own. That is the point of Lovelace’s reading last week.

The ‘Sin underneath the Sins’

Here is an excerpt from Martin Luther *Treatise Concerning Good Works* (1520)

All those who do not in all their works or sufferings, life and death, trust in God’s favor, grace and good-will, but rather seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep the [First] Commandment, and practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments, and in addition had all the prayers, fasting, obedience, patience, chastity, and innocence of all the saints combined.

Comment: Luther says if you look to your moral performance as the basis of your relationship with God, then you are breaking the first of the Ten Commandments: “*Have no other gods before me.*” If you fail to grasp and believe the gospel of free justification through Christ’s work you violate the first command. How could this be?

“If we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious and pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him through our works, then all [our compliance with the law] is pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false [savior]... Note for yourself, then, how far apart these two are: keeping the First Commandment with outward works only, and keeping it with inward [justifying faith]. For this last makes true, living children of God, the other only makes worse idolatry and the most mischievous hypocrites on earth...”

Comment: Luther says that if we obey God’s law *without* a belief that we are already accepted and loved in Christ, then in all our “doing-good” we are really looking to something more than Jesus to be the *real* source of our meaning, and happiness. We are trusting in our being a good parent, or being a good spouse, or our moral uprightness, or our spiritual performance, or our service to other people as our *real* “Saviors.” If we aren’t sure God already loves us in Christ we will be looking to something else as our foundational significance and worth. This is why Luther says that we are committing idolatry (breaking the First commandment) if we don’t thoroughly trust in Christ for our acceptability, even if we are otherwise totally moral and obedient to God.

"And as this Commandment is the very first, highest and best, from which all the others proceed, in which they exist, and by which they are directed and measured, so also its work, that is, the faith or confidence in God's favor at all times, is the very first, highest and best, from which all others must proceed, exist, remain, be directed and measured..."

Comment: All people sin in general because we are sinners, but why do we sin in any particular instance? Luther indicates the First Commandment is foundational to all the others. Why? Because we will not break Commandments 2-10 unless we are in some way breaking Commandment One and serving some idol. Every sin is rooted in the inordinate lust for something which comes because we are trusting in that thing rather than in Christ for our righteousness or salvation. At the moment we sin it is because we are looking to something to give us what only Jesus can give us. Beneath any particular sin is the general sin of rejecting Christ-salvation and indulging in self-salvation.

Case study — A Lie

What if you find that you have a habit of lying? What do you do about it?

Moralistic ways to stop lying:

- Fear: "I must stop doing this because God will punish me, he won't bless me."
- Pride: "I must stop doing this, because I'm a good Christian. I don't want to be like the kind of person who lies."

In general, you will find that the more you simply lay Biblical principles on your heart, the more your heart resists it. (Rom.7:21 — Paul says *"When I [most] want to do good, evil lies close at hand..."*)

The gospel way to stop lying:

First, ask the question: "Why am I lying in this particular situation?" The reason we lie (or ever do any sin) is because at that moment there is something we feel that we simply must have and so we lie. One typical reason that we lie (though it is by no means the only one) is because we are deeply fearful of losing face or someone's approval. That means, that the "sin under the sin" of lying is the idolatry of (at that moment) human approval. If we break the commandment against false witness it is because we are breaking the first commandment against idolatry. We are looking more to human approval than to Jesus as a source of worth, meaning and happiness. Under the sin of lying is the failure to rejoice in and believe in our acceptance in Christ. Under the sin of lying is a kind of heart-unbelief in the gospel, whatever we may tell ourselves intellectually. As we will see below, anything you add to Jesus Christ as a requirement for a happy life is a functional salvation, a pseudo-lord, and it is controlling you, whether it be power, approval, comfort or control. The only way to change your habit of lying is to repent of your failure to believe the gospel, that you are not saved and acceptable by

pursuing this goal and serving this master, but through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Consider this case study in light of this excerpt from the Belgic Confession (1561):

Therefore it is so far from being true that his justifying faith makes us remiss in a holy life, that on the contrary without it we would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation.

Comment: Unless we believe the gospel, we will be driven in all we do, whether obeying or disobeying, by pride ("self-love") or fear ("of damnation"). Mere moral effort without the gospel may restrain the heart but cannot truly change the heart. It "jury rigs" the evil of the heart to produce moral behavior out of self-interest. It would be possible to use fear and pride as ways to motivate a person to be honest, but since fear and pride is also the root for lying, it is only a matter of time before such a thin tissue collapses. Luther was right. If you are obeying the law without deep joy in your acceptance in Christ, you are not *loving God with all your heart*. You are not obeying God *for God*. You are being moral so that you can put God in your debt, so he owes you a comfortable life. You are being moral so that you can feel secure in your uprightness. You are being moral in the service of self-salvation, out of the fear and pride that arise without an identity built on Christ in the gospel.

Other kinds of word-sins and what they reveal

1. Which of these three kinds of "mouth-sin" is the biggest problem for you? In which area do you struggle most?

- **TALKING ABOUT MYSELF.** Defensiveness rather than taking criticism graciously. Bragging rather than focusing on and complementing others. (cf. Gal. 6:14 – *"May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord..."*)
- **TALKING ABOUT OTHERS.** Talking unkindly about others more often than affirming and sincerely praising. Harsh or sarcastic when giving criticism. (cf. Gal. 5:15 – *"...biting and devouring one another..."*)
- **TALKING ABOUT LIFE.** Complaining and murmuring more than expressing gratitude and praise. More emphasis on the injustices rather than the mercies of life. (cf. Gal.5:22 – *"...the fruit of the Spirit is joy, peace, patience... gentleness."*)

2. Review the following quote from Richard Lovelace:

"The faith that surmounts the evidence and is able to warm itself at the fire of God's love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness..."

notes	THE GOSPEL AND THE LAW				
	Without a deep grasp of the gospel, we believe that salvation/happiness/blessing depends conditionally on something we are or do. Thus everyone builds their identity on something besides Jesus. Review one psychologist's categories of four basic ways in which people seek meaning and self-acceptance. Each of the following four things can become something we depend on to establish our adequacy and worth instead of depending on Jesus.				
	<u>What we seek</u> COMFORT (Privacy, lack of stress, freedom)	<u>Price we will pay</u> Reduced productivity	<u>Greatest nightmare</u> Stress, demands	<u>Others often feel</u> Hurt	<u>Problem emotion</u> Boredom
	APPROVAL (Affirmation, love, relationships)	Less independence	Rejection	Smothered	Cowardice
	CONTROL (Self-discipline, certainty, standards)	Loneliness; spontaneity	Uncertainty	Condemned	Worry
	POWER (Success, winning, responsibility influence)	Burdened; responsibility	Humiliation	Use	Anger
	3. Now look at the circumstances surrounding your typical mouth sins. Answer this question: "When I [commit this particular sin], what is it that I am after? What do I feel I must have for self-acceptance?"				
	(a) If you need to defend yourself against criticism, where are you "warming				

yourself?" *(Is it to get comfort, approval, control, power, or something else?)*

(b) If you need to run other people down or make them look bad, where are you "warming yourself?" *(Is it to get comfort, approval, control, power, or something else?)*

(c) If you cannot be grateful and happy unless life is going according to your plan, where are you "warming yourself?" *(Is it to get comfort, approval, control, power, or something else?)*

4. Imagine how you could draw on your hope and standing in Christ at these moments and get control of your tongue?

Galatians

Children of God

Study 7 | Galatians 3:26 - 4:7

Paul began his theological defense of the gospel in chapter 3 by demonstrating how the law of Moses was not a contradiction of the promise of salvation by grace, which God gave to Abraham. Rather, the law prepared us for grace, showing us how much we need a salvation-by-God's promise rather than by our works. Now, in this passage, Paul shows how the law and the gospel are not just stages in the world's redemptive history, but they are also stages in an individual's journey toward salvation in Christ.

Read Galatians 3:26-4:7

- 1. What do we learn about our sonship from verses 26-27 and from the illustration of 4:1-2?**
- 2. Verse 27 says all Christians have "clothed themselves" with Christ. Meditate on this image. What are the implications of the metaphor? What does it tell us about being in Christ?**
- 3. 4:1-2. Paul imagines a child-heir of a very rich family. Meditate on this image. In what ways does this illustrate the condition of a person who is under the law?**

4. **What is Paul saying in verse 28 and how does the radical unity of verse 28 flow from verse 26?**
5. **4:4-5. What two basic things did God send his Son to accomplish? How are the two things alike? What happens if we only remember the first but forget the second?**
6. **4:6-7. What are the privileges of sonship which are suggested by these two verses?**
7. **4:6-7. What has the Spirit been sent to do? How is it different from what the Son was sent to do? (Read the parallel passage Rom.8:15-16.)**
8. **What is the connection of the work of the Son and the Spirit (v.6)? How can we experience more of the Spirit's work? Share your own encounters with this work of the Spirit.**

READING AND REFLECTION

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Adoption in Christ

PART I. - UNDERSTANDING OUR ADOPTION

A. The importance of adoption

“The notion that we are children of God, His own sons and daughters... is the mainspring of Christian living... Our sonship to God is the apex of Creation and the goal of redemption.”

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

“If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how he much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all. [Adoption] is the highest privilege the gospel offers... I have heard it seriously argued that the thought of divine fatherhood can mean nothing to those whose human father was inadequate, lacking wisdom, affection or both, nor to those many more whose misfortune it was to have a fatherless upbringing... But this is silly. For it is just not true to suggest that in the realm of personal relations, positive concepts cannot be formed by contrast... The truth is that all of us have a positive ideal of fatherhood by which we judge our own and others’ fathers [how else could we be unhappy with our bad fathers?], and it can safely be said that the person for whom the thought of God’s perfect fatherhood is meaningless or repellant does not exist.”

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

B. Objections to and distortions of adoption

“The idea that all are children of God is not found in the Bible anywhere... The gift of sonship to God becomes ours not through being born, but through being born again. ‘To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or of a husband’s will, but born of God.’ (Jn.1:12-13) Sonship to God, then, is a gift of grace. It is not a natural but an adoptive sonship, and so the New Testament explicitly pictures it.”

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

C. Adoption defined

"Adoption is not a change in nature, but a change in status. If we fail to see this truth, we will reject the power of our adoption... Adoption is a declaration God makes about us. It is irreversible, dependent entirely upon His gracious choice, in which He says: 'You are my son, today I have brought you into my family.'"

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

"The profound truth of Roman adoption was that the adoptee was taken out of his previous state and placed in a new relationship of son to his new father... All his old debts are cancelled, and in effect the adoptee started a new life as part of his new family... [On the one hand, the new father] owned all the [new offspring's] property, controlled his personal relationships, and had the rights of discipline. On the other hand, the father was liable for the actions of the adoptee, and each owed the other reciprocal duties of support and maintenance."

– Francis Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, and Sons*

D. Biblical theology of adoption

"God and religion are not less than they were; the Old Testament revelation of the holiness of God, and its demand for humility in man, is presupposed throughout, but something has been added. A new factor has come in. New Testament believers deal with God as their Father."

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

"According to our Lord's own testimony in John's Gospel, God's fatherly relation to him implied four things.

- First, fatherhood implied authority. The Father commands and disposes; the initiative which he calls his Son to exercise is the initiative of resolute obedience to his Father's will... (6:38; 17:4; 5:19; 4:34).
- Second, fatherhood implied affection. 'The Father loves the Son.' 'The Father hath loved me...' (5:20; 15:9-10). [3]
- Third, fatherhood implied fellowship. 'I am not alone, for my Father is with me' 'The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone...' (16:32; 8:29).
- Fourth, fatherhood implied honor. God wills to exalt his Son. 'Father... Glorify your Son.' 'The Father... has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son...' (17:1; 5:22-23).

All this extends to his adopted children. In, through, and under Jesus Christ their Lord, they are ruled, loved, companied, and honored by their heavenly Father...
['Father... let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am...'] (17:23-24).

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Chapter 19

PART II – EXPERIENCING OUR ADOPTION

A. The status Christians have

“God sent his son... to redeem those under the law that we might receive the adoption [lit. the sonship].” Galatians 4:4-5

B. The experience Christians can have

“Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” Galatians 4:6

“You did not receive the spirit of slavery again to fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that we are children of God.” Romans 8:15-16

C. What is the experience of sonship?

“[We all have a native] inability to believe that salvation is entirely of God's grace and love... We are slow to realize the implications of that. We are sons, but we are in danger of having the mindset of hired servants. Furthermore, if there is nothing else the Devil can do to mar our joy in Christ, he will try to produce in us what our forefathers used to call a ‘bondage frame of spirit.’... That is why he sends us the Spirit of adoption. What is [that]? Paul says,

‘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’ (Rom.8:15-16)

...Paul is referring to the Holy Spirit... [which] brings us into a deep-seated persuasion that we really are the sons of God. If it is a fact that... God has adopted us into his family, then the Spirit assures us this is true, and enables us to live in the enjoyment of such a rich spiritual blessing... He sends his Spirit into our hearts, bringing us the deep spiritual and psychological security that rests on the objective fact that our sins are forgiven and we belong to the Lord.”

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

“ ‘Abba’ was the word that was used familiarly by children talking to their fathers... A child does not always address his father as ‘father;’ he uses terms such as ‘Papa,’ ‘Dad.’ That is the kind of meaning represented by this word ‘Abba.’ It was a... word lisped by a little child... But let us notice the word ‘cry’... we **cry** ‘Abba, Father.’ It is a very strong word, and clearly the Apostle has used it quite deliberately. It means a loud cry... it expresses deep emotion... What then does it imply? Obviously... real knowledge of God. God is no longer to us a distant God. He is not merely a God in whom we believe intellectually, theologically, theoretically, doctrinally only. All this is possible to one who is not a child of God at all... [Our]

worship and praying are spontaneous; it is the spontaneity of the child who sees the father... and not only spontaneity, but confidence. A little child has confidence. He does not analyze it... he **knows** that 'Abba' is his father. Grown-ups may be standing back at a distance and being very formal [with some great personage]; but the little child comes running in, rushes right in, and holds on to his father's legs. He has a right that no-one else has... It is instinctive... we **cry** 'Abba, Father.'"

– D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans 8:5-17*

D. An example of the experience ("spirit") of sonship

The problem: "Because I did not believe God loved me on the basis of Christ's life, death, and resurrection –

The result: [therefore] I could not face the risk of seeing my sins as my own responsibility. So having tried to clear my conscience by blaming others, I turned on the afterburners and made myself busy with work and duty. Or to use Luther's analogy, I was full of active righteousness. I looked to my outward activity to feel good about myself, and judged others by my own active standards...

The turning: But now I understood what Luther was talking about: 'In the righteousness of faith we work nothing, we render nothing to God, but we only receive and allow another to work in us.' This is what he called a "passive righteousness" — a righteousness that is credited to our account through faith. This was Christ's righteousness, bought with the price of his blood on the cross. This I received by faith. The reason it had been so difficult for me to have a personal faith in Christ was that I had not experienced total forgiveness. But I had now brought real sins — including my attitudes of self-dependence and blame-shifting — to a real Savior, and they had been forgiven ...How awesome it is to be loved unconditionally by a holy, righteous God.

– Rose M. Miller, *From Fear to Freedom*

PART III – LIVING OUT OUR ADOPTION

To live "by faith" is not a general "positive attitude," but a deliberate attempt to fire the heart with a knowledge of who we are in Christ and to live consistently with that knowledge.

"Sonship, [therefore] must be the controlling thought — the normative category, if you like — at every point." (J.I.Packer).

Here are all the responsibilities or duties of the Christian life recast and understood in terms of sonship:

A. Responsibilities of adopted children:

1. New motivation

"If the love of a father will not make a child delight in him, what will?"

– John Owen, *Communion with God*

"A perfect man would never act from sense of duty; he'd always want the right thing more than the wrong one. Duty is only a substitute for love (of God and of other people) like a crutch which is a substitute for a [healthy] leg. Most of us need the crutch at times; but of course it is idiotic to use the crutch when our own legs (our own loves, tastes, habits, etc.) can do the journey on their own."

– C.S. Lewis *Letters* 18 July 1957

2. Obedience

"[The Sermon on the Mount] teaches Christian conduct not by giving a full scheme of rules and a detailed casuistry, to be followed with mechanical precision, but by indicating a broad and general way the spirit, direction and objectives, the guiding principles and ideals, by which the Christian must steer his course. It is often noted that this is... quite different from the tax-consultant type of instruction which was the stock-in-trade of Jewish lawyers and scribes in our Lord's day. What is less often noticed is that it is precisely the kind of moral instruction that parents are constantly trying to give their children — concrete, imaginative, teaching general principles from particular instances, and seeking all the time to bring the children to appreciate and share the parent's own attitudes and view of life... The all-embracing principles of conduct: [1] imitating the Father... (Mt.5:44-45,48)... [2] glorifying the Father [bringing him honor and credit before others] (Mt. 5:16; 6:9)... [3] pleasing the Father... (Mt.6:1)."

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

3. Family resemblance

"'Gospel holiness'... was Puritan shorthand for authentic Christian living, springing from love and gratitude to God, in contrast with the spurious 'legal holiness' that consisted merely of forms, routines and outward appearances, maintained from self-regarding motives... [Gospel holiness] is simply a matter of a child of God being true to type, [resembling the Father]... expressing one's adoption in one's life... while it is certainly true that justification frees one forever from the need to keep the law as a means of earning life, it is equally true that adoption obliges us to keep the law as the means of pleasing one's newfound Father. Law-keeping [is transformed now, it is] **the family likeness of God's children**... [Now] the sins of God's children do not destroy their justification or nullify their adoption, but they mar the children's fellowship with [and their family likeness to] the Father..."

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

4. Trust

"All Christians are, in fact, called to a life of faith, in the sense of following God's will at whatever cost and trusting him for the consequences. But all are tempted to put status and security, in human terms, before loyalty to God; and then, if they resist that temptation, they are at once tempted to worry about the likely effect of their stand... On those thus tempted in the life of faith, Jesus brings the truth of their adoption to bear... 'Do not worry about your life... your heavenly Father knows what you need...' (Mt.6:31-33)"

5. Acceptance of discipline

"In this world, royal children have to undergo extra training and discipline which other children escape, in order to fit them for their high destiny. It is the same with the children of the King of kings. The clue to understanding all his dealings with them is to remember that throughout their lives he is training them for what awaits them, and chiseling them into the image of Christ."

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

B. Privileges of adopted children:

Here are all the privileges or blessings of the Christian life recast and understood in terms of sonship:

1. Assurance

"Social experts drum into us these days that the family unit needs to be stable and secure, and that any unsteadiness in the parent-child relationship takes its toll in strain, neurosis and arrested development in the child himself. The depressions, randomness and immaturities that mark children of broken homes are known to us all. But... in God's family... you have absolute stability and security. The very concept of adoption is itself proof and guarantee of the preservation of the saints, for only bad fathers throw their children out of the family, even under provocation..."

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

2. Prayer and intimacy

"This is what prayer really means: knowing that we have a secure relationship with God in which we can address him in the knowledge that he cares, and has the power to aid us... Jesus encourages us to pray simply. This distinguishes the child of God from the hypocrite. The hypocrite is so unsure of his relationship with God (and rightly so!) that he thinks of prayer in terms of its length and eloquence; the child of God knows he is speaking to the Father, and talks simply and directly... Jesus also encourages us to pray boldly... Boldness [which is] impudence in a neighbor is the privilege of the children of the family."

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

3. Freedom and confidence

"The parable of the prodigal son epitomizes the disposition of some Christians, even when they are restored to fellowship with God. Lurking in their hearts there often remains this sneaking suspicion: 'I am not worthy to be God's son, but perhaps I can struggle through as one of his hired servants' [see Luke 15:19]. At the root of such thinking is an inability to believe that salvation is entirely of God's grace and love. We contribute nothing to it; we can do nothing to earn it in any way. We are often slow to realize the implications of that. We are sons, but we are [always] in danger of having the mindset of hired servants....the Devil...will try to produce in us what our forefathers called 'a bondage frame of spirit'... [When Paul says in Romans 8:15 that God sends us 'a Spirit of sonship' rather than a spirit of fear, he means] God sends His Spirit into our hearts, bringing us the deep spiritual and psychological security that rests on the objective fact that... we belong to the Lord."

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

4. Fellowship and connection

"We are to learn to accept and appreciate one another, no matter what natural differences might separate us... Rich and poor alike are to be treated as brothers... [We are to never give up on one another — to both confront and forgive in proportions as great as required.] Such a mixture of discipline and forgiveness is conceivable only within a family context... No family finds failure easy to handle... [But] only when we realize that the Church is a family, that we are brothers and sisters in that family, will we have a right perspective from which to view those who fail badly, and a right motive to see them disciplined faithfully, and welcomed back with many reaffirmations of our love... These are all part of what it means to 'keep on loving each other as brothers.' (Heb.13:1)"

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

5. Inheritance

"Adoption is incomplete in this world. John says that... we are God's children, but it does "not yet appear what we shall be" in the future... (I John 3:1-3). Similarly, Paul teaches that although we have already received the Spirit of adoption... (Romans 8:15), we are still waiting for the full experience of our sonship, for 'the glorious freedom of the children of God' (Romans 8:21). The redemption of our bodies, our adoption in all its glory, takes place at the final resurrection. Then... the image [family resemblance] now under repair will be completed."

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

Discussion questions

- 1. Explain adoption in your own words.**

- 2. What are some of the ways that this truth (if grasped and lived) would change your life?**

- 3. What was the most helpful or encouraging thing you read?**

Galatians

Gospel-centered ministry

Study 8 | Galatians 4:8-20

The reason for the letter to the Galatian churches was the appearance of false teachers. Paul has been contrasting his teaching with their teaching. In this passage Paul contrasts not so much his doctrine with their doctrine, but his ministry with their ministry. As a result, we get insights about how the gospel practically affects our relationships with others.

READ Galatians 4:8-20

- 1. What kind of religion did the Greek Galatians have before they heard the gospel — a Biblical one or an idolatrous one? What kind of religion are they in danger of turning to now? What are the implications of Paul calling a prospective lapse a “turning back” to idolatry?**
- 2. In verse 9, Paul says that they know God and then seems to correct himself and says, “...or rather are known by God.” Why does Paul add this correction? What principle is he getting across? How is this an antidote for works-righteousness?**
- 3. What brought Paul to the Galatians? What does that teach us about suffering and thwarted plans (Cf. 2 Cor. 12:7-10)? Can you provide personal illustrations of this in your own life?**
- 4. How and why had the Galatians’ relationship with Paul changed (vv. 14-16)? What is Paul’s purpose in bringing up this change?**

5. (vv.16-17, 19-20) How does Paul's ministry differ from the ministry of the false teachers as to it's goal and means?

6. (vv.12-14,19-20) What other characteristics of healthy relationships can you draw from these five verses? Does this characterize your small group fellowship?

EXERCISE

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Idols of the heart

A. THE DEFINITION OF IDOLS

Romans 1:25 tells us that idols are not sinful things, but **good and basic things elevated into being ultimate things** (v.25 – *worshipped... created things rather than the Creator*) We look to them for meaning in life, for covering our sense of insignificance, for developing a “righteousness” or worth.

“An idol is anything in our lives that occupies the place that should be occupied by God alone. Anything that... is central in my life, anything that seems to me... essential... An idol is anything by which I live and on which I depend, anything that... holds such a controlling position in my life that... it moves and rouses and attracts so much of my time and attention, my energy and money.”

— D.M.Lloyd-Jones, “Idolatry” in *Life in God: Studies in 1 John*

“[Each person] acts as if God could not make him happy without the addition of something else. Thus the glutton makes a god of his dainties; the ambitious man of his honor; the incontinent man of his lust; the covetous man his wealth; and consequently esteems them as his chiefest good, and the most noble end to which he directs his thoughts... All men worship some golden calf, set up by education, custom, natural inclination and the like... When a general is taken, the army runs. [Even so] this [the main ‘idol’] is the great stream, and other sins but rivulets which bring supply... this is the strongest chain wherein the devil holds the man, the main fort...”

— Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*

“...that most basic question which God poses to each human heart: “Has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart’s functional trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight?”

Questions... bring some of people’s idol systems to the surface. ‘To who or what do you look for life-sustaining stability, security and acceptance? ...What do you really want and expect [out of life]? What would [really] make you happy? What would make you an acceptable person? Where do you look for power and success?’ These questions or similar ones tease out whether we serve God or idols, whether we look for salvation from Christ or from false saviors. [This bears] on the immediate motivation of my behavior, thoughts, feelings. In the Bible’s conceptualization, the motivation question is the lordship question: who or what “rules my behavior, the Lord or an idol?”

— David Powlison, “*Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*”

B. THE EFFECTS OF IDOLS

1. Distorted thinking

Romans 1:21 tells us each idol creates a **delusional field**, a whole set of assumptions and false definitions of success and failure which are distortions of reality brought on by the idol (v.21 - *their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened*).

“[Your] idols define good and evil in ways contrary to God's definitions. [They spin out a whole false belief system.] They establish a locus of control that is earth-bound: either in objects (e.g. lust for money), other people (e.g. ‘I need to please my father’), or myself (e.g. attainment of my personal goals). Such false gods create false laws, false definitions of success and failure, of values and stigma. Idols promise blessings and warn of curses for those who succeed or fail [their standards]. ‘If I [make enough money], I will be secure. If I can get these certain people to like and respect me, then my life will be valid.’”

— David Powlison, “*Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*”

2. Emotional bondage

Romans 1:25 tells us that each idol “darkens the heart” and enslaves us (v.25 - *worshipped and served created things*). Whatever we worship we must serve. The way the idol enslaves is that it creates **over-desires, inordinate longings**.

“Idols of the heart are graphically portrayed in Ezekiel 14:1-8... If ‘idolatry’ is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, then ‘lust’ [*inordinate* desires], **epithumiai** is the characteristic and summary New Testament word for that same drift. (See summary statements by Paul, Peter, John, and James as Gal.5:16ff; Eph.2:3, 4:22; I Pet.2:11, 4:2; I John 2:16; James 1:14ff, where **epithumiai** is the catch-all for what is wrong with us.) The tenth commandment [against ‘coveting,’ which is idolatrous, inordinate desire for something] also... makes sin ‘psychodynamic.’ It lays bare the grasping and demanding nature of the human heart, as Paul powerfully describes in Romans 7... the NT merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires... for lust, demandingness, craving and yearning are specifically termed ‘idolatry’ (Eph.5:5 and Colossians 3:5).”

— David Powlison, “*Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*”

3. The sin under every sin

The Ten Commandments begin with two commandments against idolatry. Then comes commandments three to ten. Why this order? It is because the fundamental problem is always idolatry. In other words, **we never break commandments 3-10 without first breaking 1-2**.

“A careful reading of the Old and New Testaments shows that idolatry is nothing like the crude, simplistic picture that springs to mind of an idol sculpture in some distant country. As the main category to describe unbelief, the idea is highly

sophisticated, drawing together the complexities of motivation in individual psychology, the social environment, and also the unseen world. Idols are not just on pagan altars, but in well-educated human hearts and minds (Ezekiel 14). The apostle associates the dynamics of human greed, lust, craving, and coveting with idolatry (Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5). The Bible does not allow us to marginalize idolatry to the fringes of life... it is found on center stage."

— R. Keyes, "The Idol Factory" in *No God but God*

This means then, that *idolatry is always the reason we ever do anything wrong*. Why do we ever lie, or fail to love or keep promises or live unselfishly? Of course, the general answer is "because we are weak and sinful," but the specific answer is always that there is something besides Jesus Christ that you feel you must have to be happy, something that is more important to your heart than God, something that is spinning out a delusional field and enslaving the heart through inordinate desires. So the secret to change is always to identify the idols of the heart. The Bible does not consider idolatry to be one sin among many (and thus now a very rare sin only among primitive people). Rather, *the only alternative to true, full faith in the living God is idolatry*. All our failures to trust God wholly or to live rightly are due at root to idolatry — something we make more important than God. There is always a *reason* for a sin. Under our sins are idolatrous desires.

C. IDENTIFYING OUR IDOLS

1. Every self exists in relation to values perceived as making life worth living. A value is anything good in the created order — any idea, relation, object or person in which one has an interest, from which one derives significance...

2. These values compete... In time, one is prone to choose a center of value by which other values are judged... [which] comes to exercise power or preeminence over other values.

3. When a finite value has been elevated to centrality and imagined as a final source of meaning, then one has chosen... a god... One has a god when a finite value is... viewed as that without which one cannot receive life joyfully. (To be worshipped as a god, something must be sufficiently good... Were my daughter not a source of exceptional affection and delight, she would not be a potential idolatry for me, but I am tempted to adore her in a way... disproportional.)

4. Anxiety [Idolatry and the future]

Anxiety becomes neurotically intensified to the degree that I have idolized finite values... Suppose my god is sex or my physical health or the Democratic Party. If I experience any of these under genuine threat, then I feel myself shaken to the depths.

5. Guilt/Bitterness [Idolatry and the past]

Guilt becomes neurotically intensified to the degree that I have idolized finite values... Suppose I value my ability to teach and communicate clearly... If clear communication

has become an absolute value for me, a center of value that makes all my other values valuable... then if I [fail in teaching well] I am stricken with neurotic guilt.

6. Bitterness becomes neurotically intensified when someone or something stands between me and something that is my ultimate value.]

7. Boredom/Emptiness [Idolatry and the present]

To be bored is to feel empty, [meaningless.] Boredom is an anticipatory form of being dead. To the extent to which limited values are exalted to idolatries... [when any of those values are lost], boredom becomes pathological and compulsive... My subjectively experienced boredom may then become infinitely projected toward the whole cosmos... This picture of the self is called despair [The milder forms are disappointment, disillusionment, cynicism.]”

— Thomas C. Oden, *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia* Chap. 6

Answer the following:

a. If you are angry. Ask: “Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am angry, because I am being blocked from having something I think is a necessity when it is not?” Write down what that might be:

b. If you are fearful or badly worried. Ask: “Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so scared, because something is being threatened which I think is a necessity when it is not?” Write down what that might be:

c. If you are despondent or hating yourself: Ask: “Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so ‘down,’ because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity when it is not?” Write down what that might be:

Circle the thoughts that are lodged in your heart:

Power idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I have power and influence over others."

Approval idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I am loved and respected by _____"

Comfort idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I have this kind of pleasure experience, a particular quality of life."

Image idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I have a particular kind of look or body image."

Control idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I am able to get mastery over my life in the area of _____."

Helping idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — people are dependent on me and need me."

Dependence idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — someone is there to protect me and keep me safe."

Independence idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I am completely free from obligations or responsibilities to take care of someone."

Work idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I am highly productive getting a lot done."

Achievement idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I am being recognized for my accomplishments, if I am excelling in my career."

Materialism idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom, and very nice possessions."

Religion idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I am adhering to my religion's moral codes and accomplished in it's activities."

Individual person idolatry: "Life only has meaning/ I only have worth if — this one person is in my life and happy there and/or happy with me."

Irreligion idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I feel I am totally independent of organized religion and with a self-made morality."

Racial/cultural idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — my race and culture is ascendant and recognized as superior."

Inner ring idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — a particular social grouping or professional grouping or other group lets me in."

Family idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — my children and/or my parents are happy and happy with me."

Relationship idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — Mr. or Ms. 'Right' is in love with me."

Suffering idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I am hurting, in a problem — only then do I feel noble or worthy of love or am able to deal with guilt."

Ideology idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — my political or social cause or party is making progress and ascending in influence or power."

Answer these diagnostic questions:

- a. What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about most?

- b. What, if I failed or lost it, would cause me to feel that I did not even want to live? What keeps me going?

- c. What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go bad or get difficult?
- d. What do I think most easily about? What does my mind go to when I am free? What preoccupies me?

- e. What unanswered prayer would make me seriously think about turning away from God?

- f. What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I the proudest of?

- g. What do I really want and expect out of life? What would really make me happy?

Summary:

Now that you've answered the questions above, look for common themes. Write below what you think are your functional masters? What things tend to be too important to you?

E. HEALING IDOLATRY WITH THE GOSPEL

1. Avoid the “Moralizing” Approach.

A very typical approach to personal change among orthodox and conservative Christians can best be called the “moralizing” approach. Basic analysis: **Your problem is that you are doing wrong. Repent!** This focuses on behavior but doesn't go deep enough. We must find out the why of our behavior. *Why* do I find I want to do the wrong things? What inordinate desires are drawing me to do so? What are the idols and false beliefs behind them? To simply tell an unhappy person (or yourself) to repent and change their behavior is insufficient, because the lack of self-control is coming from a belief that says, “Even if you live up to moral standards but don't have *this*, then you are still a failure.” You must replace this belief through repentance for the one sin under it all — your particular idolatry.

2. Avoid the “Psychologizing” Approach.

A very typical approach to personal change among more liberal religious groups can best be called the “psychologizing” approach. Basic analysis: **Your problem is that you don't see that God loves you as you are. Rejoice!** This focuses on feelings, which seem to be deeper than behavior but it also fails to go deep enough. We must also find out the why of our feelings. *Why* do I have such strong feelings of despair (or fear, or anger) when this or that happens? What are the inordinate desires that are being frustrated? What are the idols and false beliefs behind them? To simply tell an unhappy person (or yourself), “God loves you — rejoice!” is insufficient. The unhappiness is coming from a belief that says, “Even if God loves you, but you don't have *this*, then you are still a failure.” You must replace this belief through repentance for the one sin under it all — your particular idolatry.

3. Adopt the “Gospel” Approach.

Basic Analysis: **Your problem is that you are looking to something besides Christ for your happiness. Repent and rejoice!** This confronts a person with the real sin under the sins and behind the bad feelings. Our problem is that we have given ourselves over to idols. Every idol-system is a way of our-works-salvation, and thus it keeps us “under the law.” Paul tells us that the bondage of sin is broken when we come out from under the law — when we begin to believe the gospel of Christ's-work-salvation. Only when we realize in a new way that we are righteous in Christ will the idol's power over us be broken. *“Sin shall not be your master for you are not under law, but under grace”* (Rom.6:14). You will only be “under grace” and free from the controlling effects of idols to the degree that you have both repented for your idols and rested and rejoiced in the saving work and love of Christ instead.

“The faith that... is able to warm itself at the fire of God's love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness... It is often said today, in circles which blend popular psychology with Christianity, that we must love ourselves before we can be set free to love others... But no realistic human beings find it easy to love or forgive themselves, and hence their self-acceptance must be grounded in their awareness that God accepts them in Christ. There is a sense in which the strongest self-love that we can have... is merely the mirror image of the lively conviction we have that God loves us.

Moralism, whether it takes the form of either denunciation or “pep talks,” can ultimately only create an awareness of sin and guilt or manufactured virtues built on will power... We all automatically gravitate toward the assumption that we are justified by our level of sanctification, and when this posture is adopted, it inevitably focuses our attention not on Christ but on the adequacy of our own obedience. We start each day with our personal security not resting on the accepting love of God and the sacrifice of Christ but on our present feelings or recent achievements in the Christians life. Since these arguments will not quiet the human conscience, we are inevitably moved either to discouragement and apathy or to a self-righteousness [some form of idolatry] which falsifies the record to achieve a sense of peace...”

— Richard Lovelace, The Dynamics of Spiritual Life

Discussion questions

1. What helped you most?

2. What questions were raised?

Galatians

Grace to the barren

Study 9 | Galatians 4:21-31

Paul has taught the Galatian Christians (ex-pagans) that they were fully children of Abraham the moment they believed in Christ (3:7; 4:7). The false teachers on the other hand had taught the Galatians that they had to submit to all the Mosaic legislation, including circumcision, in order to be children of Abraham. Now he uses the illustration of Abraham's two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, to make his point in a final, dramatic way. The basic teaching is that the gospel not only makes absolutely anyone a child of God, but that the most proud and moral and religiously "able" often are the ones left out of God's family. The gospel reverses the world's values.

Read Galatians 4:21-31

1. (v.21) What does it mean to want to be "under the law?" (Compare with 4:4-5, and 5:16-20)
2. Why do you think Paul can say that those under the law don't really listen to what the law says?
3. Read the story behind this passage in Genesis 16:1-4; 18:10-14; 21:1-10. What are the differences in the births of these two sons (v.23)?

4. What does Paul say each birth mother represents (v.24-26)? Why?
5. The residents of Jerusalem would regard Sarah as their mother and Hagar as the mother of the Gentiles. Why does Paul reverse things? How does this bolster his argument in 3:7 and 4:7-9?
6. Read verse 27. What does Paul imply by quoting Isaiah 54:1? How does Sarah serve as an encouraging picture to all who consider themselves to have failed or have been disappointed?
7. Take what you've learned in this passage and answer these questions: Why do religious people need the gospel? Why do irreligious people need the gospel? Why do religious people persecute the gospel-bearers?

EXERCISE

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Gospel forgiveness

Introduction: In Galatians 4:12-20, Paul’s forgiveness of the Galatians for their betrayal of him is so automatic that we can hardly notice it. It is only because his appeal to them (as strong as it is) is so affectionate and free from resentment that we realize the strength of Paul’s forgiving spirit. Later he cautions the Galatians against a growing spirit of resentment and back-biting (Gal.5:15). The more they lose touch with the gospel, the more resentments and grudges grow.

Below is a guide to how the gospel helps us reconcile our relationships with a balance of truth and love. (At times you can see that this project has been used in seminars for married couples! But the principles are basic to all relationships.)

A. THE RESOURCES FOR FORGIVENESS

1. We need enough humility

Jesus ties our ability to forgive to our ability to repent. (“*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*” Matt.6:12.) This doesn’t mean that God forgives our sins because we forgive others. It means that in general we are as forgiven by God as we are forgiving to others because unforgiving people are unrepentant people. The more we hold grudges the less we see ourselves as having done wrong and needing forgiveness; the more we see ourselves as needing forgiveness, the more likely we are to forgive others. Why? Resentment requires a person to sit in the position of Judge (Rom.12:19-20). We can only hold grudges if we feel superior to the other person. Jesus very directly and bluntly tells us that, if we hold a grudge against another person, we are ignorant of how much we owe God. So the first thing we have to see is our own need for forgiveness. We need enough humility to forgive.

Transition: But this is not enough! Because though pride is one reason that we cannot forgive, emotional insecurity is another. So in addition:

2. We need enough “emotional wealth.”

Why is it that we can forgive some wrongs easily but not others? It is because everyone draws a sense of self-worth (a sense that we are worthy of love and respect) from certain objects. No one can validate themselves. We all look to certain people or things to convince us that we are significant. The more certain we are of this, the more “emotionally wealthy” we are — confident, poised, at peace. What are the things that we look to? Steven Covey calls them “personal centers” and Victor Frankl calls them your “meaning centers.” They may be career, possessions, appearance, romance, peer groups, achievement, good causes, moral character, religion, marriage, children, friendships or a combination of several. However, this means that these things are

things that we absolutely must have or we face emotional bankruptcy and death. And all our most powerful feelings are connected to them. We respond in deep guilt if we fail to attain them or in deep anger if someone blocks them from us, or in deep anxiety if they are threatened, or in major drivenness since we must have them, or in despair if we ever lose them completely.

For example: a husband and a wife discovered that a school teacher had been emotionally abusive to their daughter and had fairly ruined her academic year and sent her into counseling. They are both angry at the teacher but the husband has less trouble "getting past" the anger than the wife. Why? Is the husband a less angry person? No, in general he tends to be angrier temperamentally. Does he love his daughter less? No. The issue is that the wife has tied her own self-image and sense of self-worth to her daughter's progress and happiness while the husband does this with his career. As a result, her anger is far deeper, since she is going "bankrupt." She feels, "If my daughter doesn't turn out well, what good am I?" So her anger toward the teacher is powerful.

Ironically, it is both a sense of superiority and a sense of inferiority that makes it hard for forgive. Paradoxically, the two can often go together. We often deal with our own inferiority and insecurity by taking a superior, judgmental position toward someone else.

3. The Character of Forgiveness

A definition What *is* forgiveness? When someone has wronged you, it means they owe you; they have a debt with you. Forgiveness is to absorb the cost of the debt yourself. You pay the price yourself, and you refuse to exact the price out of the person in any way. Forgiveness means you free the person from penalty for a sin by paying the price yourself.

The ultimate example We are told that our forgiveness must imitate God's forgiveness in Christ. *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you* (Eph.4:32).

How did God forgive? We are told that he does not *remember* them. That cannot mean that God literally forgets what has happened. It means he "sends away" the penalty for them. He does not bring the incidents to mind, and does not let them affect the way he deals with us.

How did God forgive "*in Christ*?" We are told that Jesus pays the price for the sins. "*It is finished*" means "It has been paid in full" (John 19:30). The Father gave up his Son, and the Son gave up his life. God absorbed the cost in himself.

B. PRACTICAL STEPS FOR FORGIVENESS

1. Distinguish between granting and feeling

Realize that forgiveness is granted (often for a long time) before it is felt. Forgiveness is granted first, and felt later (Luke 17:3-10). Forgiveness is not primarily a feeling, but a set of actions and disciplines. In summary, forgiveness is a promise not to exact the price of the sin from the person who wronged you. This promise means a repeated set of "payments" in which you relinquish revenge. It is hard and (for a while) constant. If this promise is kept actively, eventually the feeling of anger subsides. It is critical to

realize at the outset, then, that forgiveness is not the forcing or denying of feelings, but a promise to make and keep despite our feelings.

2. Determine to never exact the price, but to pay the price ourselves

"[Forgiveness] is to deal with our emotions by sending them away — by denying ourselves the dark pleasures of venting them or fondling them in our minds..."

"Once upon a time, I was engaged to a young woman who changed her mind. I forgave her... but [only] in small sums over a year... [They were made] whenever I spoke to her and refrained from rehashing the past, whenever I renounced jealousy and self-pity, whenever [I saw her] with another man, whenever I praised her to others when I wanted to slice away at her reputation. Those were the payments — but she never saw them. And her own payment was unseen by me... but I do know that she forgave me... [Forgiveness] is more than a matter of refusing to hate someone. It is also a matter of choosing to demonstrate love and acceptance to the offender... Pain is the consequence of sin; there is no easy way to deal with it. Wood, nails and pain are the currency of forgiveness, the love that heals."

— Dan Hamilton, *Forgiveness*

3. Take two inventories: ways to exact the price; ways to pay the price.

This quote shows us that there are numerous ways that we can "exact" and take payment from the offender, but each time we refrain, we are absorbing the cost ourselves and "making payments." Below are the ways in which we tend to try to exact payments:

a) In our dealing with the offender:

- (1) We can make cutting remarks and drag out the past.
- (2) We can be far more demanding and controlling with the person than we are with others, all because "they owe us."
- (3) We can punish with self-righteous "mercy" which makes them feel small.
- (4) We can avoid them, be cold to them in overt and/or subtle ways.
- (5) We can actively seek and scheme to hurt or harm them, taking from them something valuable to them.

b) In our dealing with others:

- (1) We can run them down to others, under the guise of "warning" people about them.
- (2) We can run them down to others, under the guise of seeking sympathy and sharing our hurt.

c) In our dealing with ourselves:

- (1) We can replay the tapes of what they did to us, to justify our anger and hostility.
- (2) We can "root" for their failure or fall or pain.

Forgiveness is a promise, to not "bring the matter up" to the person, others, or even ourselves. At each point when we are tempted to exact payment, we refuse, and though it hurts, that is a payment:

a) With the person

In our dealings with the person we are courteous and warm as possible. If the person is repentant, we seek to restore the relationship as much as possible. Why say "as much as possible?" If the person has done grievous wrong, it may mean the trust can only be restored in degrees. If the person is continuing in a hostile manner, you must not make it easy for them to sin against you. And there are other circumstances. (E.g. If the person is a former "love interest," then to re-create the same relationship may be inappropriate.)

The speed and degree of this restoration entails the re-creation of trust, and that takes time, depending on the nature and severity of the offenses involved. Part of real repentance usually means asking: "What could I do that would make you trust me?" and being willing to accept the answer. Part of real forgiveness means being open to the possibility of lasting change in the offender and being truly unbiased and willing to offer more trust little by little.

b) With others

We must not criticize the offender to others. We should be careful, when seeking support for our "burdens" (Galatians 6:1-6) that we aren't using them as an excuse to get others to justify us by agreeing how horrible the other person is! We must be reasonable. This is not to say you can never say anything that casts a bad light on someone else, but you must watch your motives. If the person stays in a hostile and unrepentant mode, it may be necessary to "warn" someone about him or her, but again, motives must be watched.

c) With yourself

What does it mean to "not bring it up yourself?" It means not to dwell on it in the heart, and not to re-play the "videotapes" of the wrong in your imagination, in order to keep the sense of loss and hurt fresh and real to you. It means, when you are ready to do so, you should pray for the person and yourself, remind yourself of the cross (see below) and turn your mind to other things.

4. "Will the good" of the other, not only for his/her sake but also for yours!

Notice that on the cross Jesus says, "*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.*" (Luke 23:34) He doesn't actually say "I forgive you." He does forgive, of course, but by turning to the Father and praying for them, he shows us an important method of forgiveness. He admits that they are sinning (otherwise they would not need forgiveness!) but he sees them as needy and weak (*they don't know*). He seeks their enlightenment and forgiveness from God. He prays for them.

When we identify "evil" too closely with the "evildoer," we get pulled into the same cycle of hurt pride and revenge and self-absorption and then more hurt pride and more revenge.

The secret of overcoming evil is for us to see evil as something above and distinct from the evildoer. When we do that, there are two results:

1) The spread of evil is checked toward us. It's hatred and pride do not infect us. Consider this: The only way to truly beat the ill-will of the other is to forgive him/her. If you don't, you are still being controlled by the other. Even if you are reacting against them, you are still being dominated and affected by them.

2) The spread of evil may be checked in the evildoer. He or she may be softened and helped by our love. We don't know that for certain but it is almost the only way that can happen. This is, then, an act of the will. We determine to wish them good and will their growth and healing. We determine to pray for them.

Note: It needs to be said here that in general, it is not loving to let another person go about sinning and doing wrong. Forgiveness does not therefore mean you cannot criticize, oppose or contend against continued destructive behavior. Forgiveness that turns away from confrontation is not loving at all; it is self-serving.

The ordinary approach is to stay angry inside (exact payment) and say nothing on the outside. That lets evil spread in both your life and the life of the other. Instead, the right thing to do is completely forgive inside (make payment) and confront lovingly on the outside. That checks the spread of evil all around. Also, it is impossible to speak lovingly and winsomely to a person doing wrong unless you have gotten control of your anger through forgiveness steps. The model for this is Christ, of course, who spoke out enough to get crucified, but who forgave his crucifiers every step of the way. The result of his perfect conformity to this model was the triumph of grace both in his own life and in that of his crucifiers.

D. PRE-CONDITIONS FOR FORGIVENESS

1. Getting humility

The Bible is explicit in telling us to forgive as God in Christ forgave you (Eph.4:32). There is no better way to get the humility necessary for forgiveness than to accept what the gospel says about us. It tells us that we were made by God and owe him, therefore, everything. We owe it to him to put him first in our life. Even religious people ordinarily only relate to God when we need him in times of trouble. None of us love him as we owe, "with all our heart, soul, strength and mind." Jesus himself shows us vividly how to do this in Matthew 18:21-35. When Peter asks about forgiveness, Jesus tells the parable of a servant who is forgiven a debt of an infinite sum (*10,000 talents* — roughly equivalent to about \$300,000,000 dollars) but who then refuses to forgive a debt to him of a few dollars. Jesus calls the servant "*wicked*" and says, in effect, to him, "*Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?*" (18:33) This is a challenge to us. We must compare our debt to God with people's debts to us AND we are to compare his Christ's payment for our forgiveness to our payment for their forgiveness. We are to say, "Lord, you did not exact payment for my debts from me, but Jesus paid for them with his life. Now what right do I have to exact payments for their debts to me? And for me to forgive would not take a payment anything like Christ's payment!"

Paul in Romans 12 shows us another way to think of resentment and forgiveness. He says, *"Leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written: 'Vengeance is mine... says the Lord'"* v.19. What we are being reminded is that all resentment and vengeance is taking on God's role as judge. It is playing God.

- But only God is qualified to be judge (we are imperfect and deserve judgment ourselves).
- Only God knows enough to be judge (we don't know all about the offender, what he/she has faced and deserves).
- Jesus took the judgment of God.

So Paul is saying: "Think about this! Either these people you are angry at will repent some day and Jesus will take their judgment or they will not and God will deal with it. But in either process, you are not involved." "Pride won't allow forgiveness; forgiveness won't allow pride." If you cannot forgive, it is because you are sure that you are not as sinful as the person you are mad at.

2. Getting "emotional wealth"

Anger is the result of love. It is energy for defense of something you love when it is threatened. If you don't love something at all, you are not angry when it is threatened. If you love something a little, you get a little angry when it is threatened. If something you love is an "ultimate concern," if it is something that gives you meaning in life, then when it is threatened you will get uncontrollably angry.

When anything in life is an absolute requirement for your happiness and self —worth, it is essentially an "idol," something you are actually worshipping. When such a thing is threatened, your anger is absolute. Your anger is actually the way the idol keeps you in its service, in its chains. Therefore, if you find that, despite all the efforts to forgive (using 0.-4. above), your anger and bitterness cannot subside, you may need to look deeper and ask, *"What am I defending? What is so important that I cannot live without?"* It may be that, until some inordinate desire is identified and confronted, you will not be able to master your anger.

Here is a real example. A woman in her late 30's had never married. Her family and her part of the country believed that there was something radically wrong with any woman of that age who was still single. She wrestled greatly with shame and unworthiness. She also had tremendous unresolved anger against a man she had dated for many years but who had not married her. She went to a counselor. The therapist rightly told her that she had taken to heart her family's approach to personal value and worth. They taught that a woman had to have a husband and children if she was to have any value or worth. She was bitter against this man only because he had come between her and the thing she felt she needed to have to have value. The counselor then proposed that she throw off such an unenlightened view and throw herself into a career.

About this time she was going to a church where she was clearly hearing the gospel for the first time. She heard that the gospel is *not* that we live a worthy life and then give it to God and then he owes us but that in Jesus Christ he has already lived a worthy life.

He lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died. When we believe, he gives it to us. Then we are completely accepted and loved by the only One in the universe who counts. This gives us the ultimate emotional wealth, a sense of being loved so deep that we can afford to forgive anyone. She realized that the well-meaning counselor was asking her to throw off a politically incorrect system of works-righteousness for a politically correct one! She said, "Why should I leave the ranks of the many women who make family their worth and value to join the ranks of the many men who make career the same thing? Would I not be as devastated then by career setbacks as I have been by romantic ones? Yes. But instead, I will receive the righteousness of Christ and learn to rejoice in it. Then I can look at either men or a career and say, 'What makes me beautiful to God is Jesus, not these things.' Only then will I have power and freedom. And power to forgive" She found the "pre-conditions" for forgiveness.

Note: It will become clear that one of the most typical idols we can have is our spouse! We may need his or her approval and respect in idolatrous ways. We may look to the other person to be a "savior," the source of our self-worth. However, no human being can bear that pressure. Your spouse is a finite human being with limitations. He or she *cannot* love you consistently. And if you try to get from your spouse what only the Lord can give, you will be locked in a vicious cycle. You will not be able to forgive your spouse for his/her failures unless you find a Spouse whose love and forgiveness is perfect.

E. Steps for Repentance

Why wait until now to talk about repentance? And why give it so little space?

Repentance and forgiveness are really different ways of looking at the same thing. We could just as easily have spent the lion's share of this essay on repentance, and then added this note on forgiveness. Both are the same in all of these ways:

- 1) The pre-conditions are identical. Both are blocked by pride and emotional bankruptcy. Both require humility and emotional wealth.
- 2) The character is identical. Both are just ways of saying, "I am willing to absorb the payment for what I have done."
- 3) Even the steps are nearly the same. See below.

1. An honest admission of your part of the wrong.

Maybe in the disagreement you are only 10% wrong, or 30% or 80%. You just confess your part without any blame-shifting or excuses. Even if the other person believes you are guiltier than you think you are, admit the truth. Only offer to analyze and describe the part of the mess that you are responsible.

2. Make no excuses. Do not explain it away as blame-shifting.

Treat other trigger factors as occasions not causes. Your own selfishness or insensitivity etc., was the real cause, and what other people did to you only released those things out into the expressions that you did. If you don't do this, your repentance can actually be a way to not repent at all.

3. Be willing to listen to a realistic account of what your wrong cost the other.

It is possible to use repentance to say "shut up" to another person. How? a) If your repentance is very dramatic and emotional, you are saying, "Look at how bad I feel! Don't tell me anything more about how I made you feel" Or even, "Look at how bad I feel! Don't you want to take back what you said?" b) If your repentance is very quick and analytical, it may make the other person feel that she or he cannot share what he/she was feeling. It can be a way to say, "I'm not interested in hearing how you feel at all."

4. Provide fruits of repentance, rather than just an expression of sorrow.

- Offer to make changes that would restore or remunerate in some way for the damage done.
- Offer to make changes in behavior that would make it very unlikely for the incident at issue to happen again. If you can't do this, your partner has the right to think you haven't repented.

If competent repentance and competent forgiveness coincide, the experience is almost a joyful revival of your relationship each time. It is a bit like a conversion experience, with the reality and sweetness of your relationship appreciated in new ways. You see the marriage as a gift. You find new emotional wealth since the love of the other person actually points you to the forgiving Lord himself. But if your spouse is not repenting, you should still forgive since it is the only way to keep evil from spreading in the both of you. (See above.) And you *can* still forgive if you meet the pre-conditions. (See above.)

Discussion questions**1. What helped you most?****2. What questions were raised?****3. Where will you begin to start using what you've learned?**

Galatians

Gospel freedom

Study 10 | Galatians 5:1-15

In 5:1, Paul re-introduces the idea of Christian freedom that he mentioned in Gal. 2:4. The concept of Christian “freedom” is easy to misunderstand. Paul says we are free from the “supervision” of the law (3:25) and we are no longer “under” the law (5:18). But does that mean we are free to disobey or disregard it? And if not, of what does this freedom consist? Paul answers this indirectly in 5:2-6, and directly in 5:13-15.

Read Galatians 5:1-15

- 1. The thesis of Paul’s last chapters is stated in 5:1. What does Paul teach in these two sentences?**
- 2. What is Paul warning the Galatians against in verses 2-4? Is Paul saying here that the Galatians who are real Christians are going to lose their salvation (v.4)? How does v.10 shed light on v.4?**
- 3. Why do you think would Paul say we hope for righteousness (v.5) when in 3:6 and elsewhere he says we have righteousness? How can we ‘wait’ for it practically?**
- 4. What does it mean that the gospel makes both “circumcision and uncircumcision” (religion and irreligion) both equally valueless? (vv.5-6)?**

5. From verses 13-15, answer the question: "Why does a Christian obey God?"
6. Compare verses 1 and 13. What two different misuses of gospel freedom does Paul spell out? What are the errors in thinking behind each misuse?
7. Summarize: In what ways are Christians free from the law and in what ways are they not?
8. Think of one area of your life where you need a lot more love than you have in order to face something or to act rightly? How can Gal.5:5,6 help you?

EXERCISE

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Son or slave?

THE “DYNAMIC” OF CHRISTIAN GROWTH

There is a two-part dynamic to Christian growth. (It is, in a sense, a “combustion cycle”. If it is ignited and going in the heart it results in dynamic character growth.) The two parts are a negative and a positive. We see them mentioned in many places:

Colossians 3:

v.1- Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated... who is your life...

v.5 x- Put to death what belongs to your earthly nature... which is idolatry...

Hebrews 12:

v.2- Fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith... sat down at the right hand of God...

v.1- Let us throw off every-thing that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles...

Romans 8:

v.5- their minds set on what the Spirit desires... (v.14) those led of the Spirit are sons of God...

v.13 - by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body you will live...

Galatians 5:

v.25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit

v.24 - Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

The “negative” side is **repentance**, discovering the particular idolatries of the heart (Col.3:5), our besetting sins (Heb.12:1), and uprooting them at the motivational level (Rom.8:13). The “positive” side is **faith**, to see ourselves as perfect in Christ (Col.3:1), who has done from first to last all that was required for my acceptance (Heb.12:2), so that we could be adopted as children of God (Rom.8:14). This is the dynamic: we uproot the idols of the heart; and we live out of our identity as children of God.

These two elements really are flip sides of each other. As we begin with one, we find that we always pass over into doing the other as well. Each stimulates the other; if either one is de-emphasized it robs the other also of any power. How? On the one hand, without a knowledge of our extreme sin and idolatry, the payment of Christ on the cross seems trivial, and the message of it does not electrify or transform. On the other hand, without a knowledge of our complete acceptance and adoption through Christ, the message of our sin would so crush us that we would deny or repress it. But the more you know of his infallible fatherly love, the more you are able to realistically face yourself, your flaws and faults. The more you see your sin, the more precious and valuable you find his saving love and grace.

In this exercise we will look at how to live as a child of God.

Son or slave?

Galatians 4:5-9 tells us:

1) When we became Christians, we *“receive[d] the adoption [lit. the sonship].”* Galatians 4:4-5. We became sons of God.

2) Before, we were “slaves”, but that is true no longer. *“So you are no longer a slave, but a son”* Galatians 4:7

3) Nevertheless, it is possible, even if you are a Christian, to return to some degree into a state of slavery, and to lose our “sonship consciousness”. *“Formerly... you were slaves... do you wish to be enslaved... all over again?”* Galatians 4:8,9 (cf. Romans 8:15 – *“you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear.”* It is possible to fall back into fear/slavery though we are in fact children of God.

Therefore, the two fundamentally different ways to live are *not* as religious or as irreligious, but **as a slave, full of fear, or as a child of God, full of faith working through love.**

SON AND SLAVE COMPARED

Both Galatians 4:1-7 and Romans 8:15-16 contrast slavery with sonship.

Two different understandings – False vs. true definitions

Slave: “Grace” is God’s supplemental help as you try hard to live a good life (see “faith”).

Child: Grace is God’s unmerited work in your life to renew you into the likeness of Christ.

Slave: “Faith” is an effort to believe without doubting and love God so he will accept you.

Child: Faith is a discipline of remembering and living as an accepted child of God.

Slave: “Obedience” is avoiding major sin and following rules of ethical behavior.

Child: Obedience is primarily growth in the fruit of the Spirit and Christ-like character.

Two different life patterns – Fear-based life vs. faith working through love

Slave: Compulsive obedience. Obeys God and moral codes out of fear of rejection — a compulsive, driven moralism. “Driveness” in work. Unrealistic goals. Lot of self-criticism.

Child: Obeys out of joy in your Father and out of gratitude for the certainty of his love. “How can I live so ungratefully to one who will never reject me?”

Slave: Hiding. Lots of strategies to hide our inner and outer failings from ourselves and one another. Lots of gossip, blame-shifting, anger at other races/classes, defensiveness.

Child: Open and transparent. Freedom from having to put up a front. Able to appreciate people who are different and hurting. Repentance to others is more natural, done with joy.

Slave: Isolation. Feeling that no one understands, that no one cares. An unwillingness to trust or intense, idolatrous trust of someone who inevitably disappoints and lets you down.

Child: Because of openness and transparency and a lack of self-absorbed self-pity, a growing circle of friends with whom you are neither too independent or over dependent.

Slave: Controlled by people’s opinion. Expectations and approval of others become the real moral standard. When we get away from other Christians, we lapse.

Child: Integrity and courage regardless of who is watching. “The only person whose opinion counts is my Father’s! Who cares what the rest think?”

Slave: Despair in troubles. Sees troubles as “paybacks” from God. A ‘slave’ in trouble either is filled with: *Guilt* (because you feel you deserve it) or *bitterness* (because you feel you don’t!).

Child: Sees trouble as the wisdom of Father. You know God won’t give you what you deserve (so you aren’t guilty) but you deserve far worse than you will ever get (so you aren’t bitter).

Slave: Begrudging repentance. Admitting failure is destructive of one’s very self-image (one based on a sense of moral adequacy). So repentance to God is galling, a last resort.

Child: Admitting failure strengthens one’s very self-image (reminding you that you are forgiven and loved despite your flaws.) Repentance is now based not on fear of being rejected, but on grief that you have dishonored/grieved the one who spent so much so you would *never* be rejected. The grief that comes from wronging an unconditionally loving parent is sharper yet much more filled with hope than the fear that comes from wronging a God you are simply afraid of. Repentance of a slave is rare, forced, traumatic, and produces little long-term change. Repentance of a child is regular, willing, with much sweetness mixed with the grief, and leads to permanent change.

Discussion questions

- 1. What helped you most? What questions did it raise?**

- 2. Look at the list of “child” vs. “slave” characteristics. At what point do you need the most work right now?**

- 3. Share a situation — past, present, or future — where the “slave” mentality is a particular problem for you.**

Galatians

Gospel character

Study 11 | Galatians 5:16-25

In the first half of chapter 5, Paul shows that Christian freedom gives us a whole new motivation for living. Some may say, “If I thought I was accepted by God no matter what I did, I would lose all incentive to lead a holy life.” The proper answer is: “If when you lose all fear of rejection you discover that you have lost all incentive for holiness, then the only incentive you had was fear!” In normal religion, the motivation for morality is fear-based. In gospel Christianity, the motivation is a dynamic of love (5:6, 14). Now in this passage Paul spells out just *how* we grow in character through this new dynamic.

Read Galatians 5:16-25

- 1. According to this passage what are the two natures at work in every Christian? (vv.16-18)**
- 2. What is the main way they influence us? What does the Christian truly “want” and why?**
- 3. What is set in opposition to the Spirit in v.16? What is set in opposition to it in v.18? What does this tell us about how the sinful nature or flesh actually operates?**

4. In light of v.18, what does it mean to “crucify the sinful nature” with its “over-desires?” What then, does it mean to “live” or “walk” by the Spirit?
5. What common mistakes do people make about what it means to “crucify the flesh” (vv.24-25)?
6. (Vv 19-21) Break the works of the flesh into categories. What do you learn about the human heart from the list? About yourself from the list?
7. Does the following statement make sense to you? (Why, or why not?) “Joyful repentance for the residual self-righteousness under both our sins and our good deeds is the secret of change.”

EXERCISE

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Fruit of the Spirit

Part A – INTRODUCTION TO THE FRUIT

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all behold the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness, from one degree of splendor to the next, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (2 Cor.3:18)

The purpose of the Spirit

The ultimate purpose of the Spirit’s operation in the Christian is to change us into the likeness and character of Jesus Christ. (cf. Rom.8:29 – “*He predestined us to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.*” and Eph.4:13 – “*Till we reach maturity, the fullness of the stature of Christ.*”) So the ultimate goal is not some kind of general comfort, strength or power, but concrete, practical change in our character — how we think, feel, and act habitually and naturally.

The method of the Spirit

The (breathtaking) method of the Spirit is to show us the glory of Christ. The complex verb that Paul uses is *katoptrizdomenoi* which means “to behold in a mirror.” This word combines the ideas of looking long and hard at something, and resembling or reflecting something. We are called to long, contemplative gazing at the Lord Jesus and changing so as to reflect his image. What a vivid image! The more we gaze at and contemplate Jesus, the more the Spirit shows us his glory and we become transformed into the likeness of what we see. What does it mean to “see the glory” of something? It means to realize in your heart its importance, beauty and how it connects and affects you. So the way the Spirit creates character in you is by affecting the heart and life by what you see in the person and work of Christ.

The process of the Spirit

The Spirit does not enact this Christ-like character in us all at once, but we change gradually, from one degree of likeness on to the next. Therefore, our sanctification is not a crisis as much as a process. Growth does not happen evenly, but in spurts, like botanical growth. (cf. II Peter 3:20)

The experience of the Spirit

This transforming process of the Spirit is experienced by the individual Christian as “freedom.” This does not mean that effort, pain and hard discipline are not involved, but that primarily and ultimately the development of Christ-like character is liberating. Growing in love, joy, peace, self-control makes you feel you are “becoming yourself.”

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered." (1Cor.13:1-5)

The test of the Spirit

The Corinthians had miraculous gifts (*prophecy*), teaching gifts (*can fathom all mysteries and knowledge*), vision and leadership gifts (*faith that can move mountains*), social concern (*give... to the poor*), and a willingness to die for the faith. Yet they were impatient, harsh, critical, rude, jealous, ego-centric. Paul bluntly says that the *gifts* of the Spirit (skills-what we do) is far less important than *fruit* of the Spirit (character — what we are). He says that the gifts of the Spirit are talents that the Spirit uses to help others and get things done, but it is possible to have the Spirit use you this way and have little or even no grace in the heart (*I am nothing*). A gift-operation of the Spirit may or may not operate out of a grace-changed heart. Saul and Judas were used by the Spirit to prophecy, do miracles and so on. Gifts can also operate when our love, joy and self-control are very, very low. But the fruit-growth of the Spirit can only happen in a child of God. The only test that the Spirit has really indwelt you as a child of God is the growth in the fruit of the Spirit.

"Many bad men have had these gifts. Many will say on the last day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works?' [Matt.7:21] Such as these have had... gifts of the Spirit but no special and saving work of the Spirit. Gifts of the Spirit are excellent things, but... they are not things which are inherent in the nature, as true grace and holiness [the fruit] are... [G]ifts of the Spirit are, as it were, precious jewels which a man carries about him. But true grace in the heart is, as it were, the preciousness of the heart, by which... the soul itself becomes a precious jewel... The Spirit of God may produce effects on many things to which he does not communicate himself. So the Spirit of God moved on the face of the waters, but not so as to impart himself to the waters. But when the Spirit by his ordinary influences bestows saving grace, he therein imparts himself to the soul... Yea, grace is as it were the holy nature of the Spirit of God imparted to the soul."

(J.Edwards, Charity and Its Fruits. Sermon Two)

The dynamic of the Spirit

Paul's reference to gongs and cymbals probably refers to the pagan worship in Corinth at the temples of Demeter and Cybele. Pagan worship was a way of putting on a show to merit and attract the favor of the gods. Paul indicates, then, that it is possible to do Christian ministry in the same way. We can help others and do lots of Christian activities

as a way to convince ourselves and others (and God) that we are “*something*.” This is a form of works-righteousness. When gifts are used that way, there are tell-tale signs of impatience, irritability, pride, hurt feelings, jealousy. The fruit of the Spirit then grows as we remember the gospel, rejoice in our salvation, and use our gifts as a sacrifice of thanksgiving. As a result, our helping others will be done in humility, love, patience, tenderness.

Part B — THE UNITY OF THE FRUIT

“Love believes all things, hopes all things...” (1 Cor.13:7) “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” (Gal.5:22)

These two statements are remarkable. Though Paul talks of “*faith, hope, and love*” in 1 Cor.13:13, in v.7 he says that love has faith and has hope. If you have love you will have faith and hope! In Gal.5:22 he deliberately uses the singular word “fruit” to describe a whole list of character traits. From this we learn a very important point for understanding and discerning the fruit of the Spirit.

This means that the real fruit of the Spirit always grow up together. When we look at the list of traits in the “fruit lists” (1 Cor.13:4-7; Gal.5:22-23) we notice that we are naturally stronger in some rather than others. But our strengths, apart from the Holy Spirit, are due to natural temperament (we have a trait through brain chemistry and early training), or to natural self-interest (we learned a trait in order to handle some issue or condition we met). For example, some people are temperamentally gentle and diplomatic (*gentleness*). But the sign that this is not due so much to the Holy Spirit is that such people are usually not bold or courageous (*faithfulness*). Because of what Paul says about the unity of the fruit, this means that the gentleness is not real spiritual humility, but just temperamental sweetness. John says, “*If a man says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar.*” Notice that he does not say, “If a man loves God but doesn’t love his brother, he is unbalanced.” No, he says he is a liar. True love to God (*love*) goes along with love to others (*kindness*). If they are not all there, they are not there at all.

There are many, many cases of this. Some folks seem happy and bubbly (*joy*) and are good at meeting new people, but are very unreliable and cannot keep friends (*faithfulness*). This is not real joy but just extroversion. Some people seem very unflappable and unbothered — *peaceful* — but they are not *kind* or *gentle*. That is not real peace, but indifference and perhaps cynicism. It enables you to get through the difficulties of life without being always hurt, but it desensitizes you and makes you much less approachable.

Part C – THE DEFINITIONS OF THE FRUIT**1. Agape – love**

Definition – To serve a person for their good and intrinsic value, not for what the person brings you.

Opposite – Fear: self-protection and abusing people.

Counterfeit – Selfish affection. Rescuing someone but really rescuing self. Attracted not to person, but to how this person's love makes you feel about yourself.

2. Chara – joy

Definition – Delight in God and his salvation for sheer beauty and worth of who he is.

Opposite – Hopelessness, despair.

Counterfeit – Elation that comes with blessings not the Blesser! Mood swings based on circumstances.

3. Irene – peace

Definition – Confidence and rest in the wisdom and sovereignty of God more than your own

Opposite – Anxiety and worry

Counterfeit – Indifference, apathy, not caring about something. "I don't care."

4. Makrothumia – patience

Definition – Ability to take trouble (from others or life) without blowing. To suffer joyfully.

Opposite – Resentment toward God and others.

Counterfeit – Cynicism. Self-righteousness. "This is too small to be bothered about."

5. Chrestotes – kindness

Definition – Practical kindness with vulnerability out of deep inner security.

Opposite – Envy. Unable to rejoice other's joy

Counterfeit – Manipulative good deeds. "Right hand knowing what left hand is doing."

Self-congratulation and self-righteousness.

6. Agathosune – goodness (integrity)

Definition – Honesty, transparency. Being the same in one situation as another.

Opposite – Phoniness; hypocrisy.

Counterfeit – Truth without love. "Getting it off the chest" for your sake.

7. Pistis – faithfulness

Definition – Loyalty. Courage. To be principle-driven, committed, utterly reliable. True to one's word.

Opposite – Opportunist. Fair-weather friend.

Counterfeit – Love without truth. Being loyal when you should be willing to confront or challenge.

8. Prautas – gentleness (humility)

Definition – Self-forgetfulness.

Opposite – Superiority: self-absorbed self-aggrandizement.

Counterfeit – Inferiority: self-absorbed, self-consciousness.

9. Egkrateia – self-control

Definition – Ability to choose the urgent over the important thing.

Opposite – A driven, impulsive, uncontrolled person.

Counterfeit – Willpower through pride or through more “functional” idols.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this project is to show you that we are far more in need of growth in the fruit of the Spirit than we thought. In Part A, we saw that we tend to look at our gifts as a sign that we are Christ-like, but that is an error. In Part B, we saw that we tend to look at our natural strengths as a sign we are Christ-like. Though God makes the world a very good place because he gives so many people natural strengths, they are not the same as the fruit of the Spirit. When we look at the nature, unity and definitions of the fruit of the Spirit, we have a much deeper sense of how we lack these things.

Discussion questions

1. In which one or two have you been growing lately? Spend some time thanking God for the growth.

2. In which one or two do you most need to grow right now?

Galatians

Gospel relationships

Study 12 | Galatians 5:26-6:5

This is a very short passage, but it is bristling with practical principles for relating to others. The gospel creates a whole new self-image (5:26, 6:3-5) which is not based on comparisons with others. Only the gospel makes us neither self-confident nor self-disdaining, but both bold and humble. That works itself out in relationships with everyone. Rather than comparing ourselves with those “above” or “below” (cf. 5:26), we look only at our own responsibility to take what we have and are and offer it to God, as sacrifices of gratitude for what Christ has done.

Read Galatians 5:26-6:5

1. **Considering the context of 6:1-5, how would you define conceit? According to verse 26, what are the two possible effects of conceit on relationships?**
2. **How could conceit and pride lead to both superiority and inferiority complexes?**
3. **Do you have more of a tendency to “provoke” or to “envy” in relationships? How can you use the gospel to overcome your tendency whatever it is?**

4. Compare 6:2 with 5:13-14, and decide what “the law of Christ” is and what “bearing burdens” is. How does “bearing burdens” help define our relationship with others?
5. From the context of v.2 and v.5, explain why they are not contradictory. How does our view of ourselves (v.3-5) influence how we treat others (v.2)?
6. 6:1. What principles does Paul lay down in this verse? How does v.2 shed light on v.1?
7. Make a list of the reasons that Christians do so poorly at both 6:2 and 6:1 relationships. How do you think your particular small group or church community is at “restoration” of 6:1? What could you do practically to do better at 6:2? At 6:1?

EXERCISE

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Gospel relationships

A. Self-view and Others-view

The gospel creates a whole new self-image (Galatians 5:26, 6:3-5) which is not based on comparisons with others. Only the gospel makes us neither self-confident nor self-disdaining, but both bold and humble. Because of the gospel, we neither earn our worth through approval from people nor through power over people, so we are neither over-dependent on others, nor afraid of commitment and vulnerability. That works itself out in relationships with everyone.

The gospel is the only thing that addresses conceit, the vain-glory. To the degree I am still functionally earning my worth through performance (i.e. to the degree I am still functioning in works-righteousness), to that degree I will be either operating out of superiority or inferiority. Why? Because if I am saved by my works, then I can either be confident but not humble (if I am living up) or humble but not confident (if I am not living up). In other words, apart from the gospel, I will be forced to be superior or inferior or to swing back and forth or to be one way with some people and another way with others. I am continually caught between these two ways, because of the nature of my self-image.

But the gospel creates a new self-image, as we have seen previously. It humbles me before anyone, telling me I am a sinner saved only by grace. But it emboldens me before anyone, telling me I am loved and honored by the only eyes in the universe that really count. So the gospel gives a boldness and a humility that do not eat each other up, but can increase together.

B. The “two thieves” and relationships

We have seen previously that there are two equal and opposite errors that oppose the gospel: “legalism” and “antinomianism” which we can call here “moralism” and “hedonism”:

Legalism

Salvation through self-denial

Emphasis on doing duties

You are a sinner thus not acceptable

Truth more important than love

Moralism: do what is right

Antinomianism

Salvation through self-discovery

Emphasis on fulfilling needs

You are acceptable thus not a sinner

Love more important than truth

Hedonism: do what makes you happy

How does the gospel provide a “third way” in relationships?

Moralism often makes relationships into a blame-game. Why? The moralist is very consciously trying to earn salvation through performance, and that includes relationships. Moralists must maintain a self-image of being “a good person.” Now some moralists do so by laying the blame on others, by being very judgmental and by always insisting that they are in the right. There is a lack of teachability, humble admission of error or listening. But moralists can also play the blame-game by laying the blame on themselves. Moralists can “earn their salvation” and convince ourselves we are worthy persons through being very willing to help others. This kind of self-salvation superficially makes the moralist look very open to listen, very humble, very teachable. But this can be co-dependency, a form of self-salvation through severely needing people’s approval or through needing people to need you (i.e. saving yourself by saving others). So moralism works through either blaming others or blaming yourself. Either way, it makes relationships torturous.

On the other hand, hedonism reduces relationships to a negotiated partnership for mutual benefit. Hedonism says: “A relationship is fine as long as both people are helping each other reach their goals.” But as soon as a relationship entails major sacrifice, the hedonist labels it dysfunctional and bails out. (There are dysfunctional relationships but only when the sacrifice is being done out of needy selfishness and not out of fullness of love.) So, for the hedonist, you only relate to another as long as it is not costing you anything. So the choice (without the gospel) is to selfishly use others or to selfishly let yourself be used by others. But the gospel leads us to do neither. We do sacrifice and commit, but not out of a need to convince ourselves or others we are acceptable. So we can love the person enough to confront, yet stay with the person when it does not benefit us.

C. Kinds of relationships

1. The gospel and family relationships

Moralism can make you a slave to parental expectations. The two ways you become a slave under moralism is that either you are so bound to please your parents that you can’t live without continually thinking of them, or you are so mad at them for their control or neglect of your life that you cannot live without thinking of them. To be living either in action OR reaction to them all the time means that you are still a slave to their view of you. You are haunted by it either way. On the other hand, hedonism sees no need for family loyalty or the keeping of promises and covenants if they do not “meet my needs.”

The gospel frees you from making parental approval an absolute or psychological salvation, pointing out how God becomes the ultimate father. Then you will be neither too dependent or too hostile to your parents.

2. The gospel and sexual relationships

The moralist tends to see sex as dirty or at least a dangerous impulse that leads constantly to sin. There will be an approach-avoidance relationship with sex. The uneasy

conscience of the moralist will lead to either complete avoidance OR to a very driven, breathless need for sexual experience. Both come from a glory-vacuum within, which makes sex into a way to fill the emptiness. On the other hand, the hedonist sees sex as merely biological and physical appetite. Thus the hedonist may be less convoluted and troubled about sex, yet they have also given up on the deep longing of their heart to have union with someone sexually that is completely, unconditionally, and permanently true to them.

But the gospel shows us that sexuality is to reflect the self-giving of Christ. He gave himself completely without conditions. So we are not to seek intimacy sexually but then hold back control of our lives. If we give ourselves sexually we are to give ourselves legally, socially, personally — utterly. Sex is only to happen in a totally committed, permanent relationship of marriage. Through Christ's transformation of us, that ideal is somewhat realizable even between two sinners.

3. The gospel and other relationships

To other races and cultures. The liberal (hedonist) approach is to relativize all cultures. ("We can all get along because there is no truth.") The conservatives (moralists) believe there is truth for evaluation of cultures, and so they choose some culture as superior and then they idolize it, feeling superior to others in the impulse of self-justifying pride. The gospel leads us to be, on the one hand, somewhat critical of all cultures, including our own (since there is truth), but on the other hand, we are morally superior to no one. After all, we are saved by grace alone. Christians will exhibit both moral conviction yet humility and cultural flexibility.

To non-Christians. The liberal/hedonist approach is to deny the legitimacy of evangelism altogether. The conservative/moralist person does believe in proselytizing, because "we are right and they are wrong." Such proselytizing is almost always offensive. But the gospel produces a constellation of traits in us.

- We are compelled to share the gospel out of generosity and love, not guilt.
- We are freed from fear of being ridiculed or hurt by others, since we already have the favor of God by grace.
- There is humility in our dealings with others, because we know we are saved by grace alone, not because of our superior insight or character.
- We are hopeful about anyone, even the "hard cases," because we were saved only because of grace, not because we were likely people to be Christians.
- We are courteous and careful with people. We don't have to push or coerce them, for it is only God's grace that opens hearts, not our eloquence or persistence or even their openness.

All these traits not only create a winsome evangelist but an excellent neighbor in a multi-cultural society.

To human authority. Moralists will tend to obey human authorities (family, tribe, government, cultural customs) too much, since they rely so heavily on their self-image of being moral and decent. Hedonists will either obey human authority too much (since they have no higher authority by which they can judge their culture) or else too little (since they may only obey when they know they won't get caught). That means either authoritarianism or anarchy. But the gospel gives you both a standard by which to oppose human authority (if it contradicts the gospel), and it gives you incentive to obey the civil authorities from the heart, even when you could get away with disobedience.

Conclusion

Outside the gospel we are either confident (if achieving) or humble (if failing), but in the gospel our new self-image produces a bold humility that changes all relationships.

Without the gospel, your self-image is based upon living up to some standards — whether yours or someone's imposed upon you. If you live up to those standards, you will be confident but not humble. If you don't live up to them, you will be humble but not confident. Only in the gospel can you be both enormously bold and utterly sensitive and humble, for you are both perfect and a sinner! Paul shows us that this new, unique self-image changes all relationships. *"Don't be conceited — provoking or envying each other."* (Gal.5:26). Because we are humbled by the gospel, we don't "provoke" or approach anyone with a sense of superiority. Because we are powerfully loved in the gospel, we don't "envy" or approach anyone with a sense of inferiority. The gospel keeps us from being either codependent on, or independent of, people. Both approaches are essentially selfish ways to earn our value through relationships. Now we do not need to have people serve our needs nor to serve theirs. So we are free to sacrifice and commit, but also to love the person enough to confront.

Luther writes about this new self-image:

"So now we may certainly think: 'Although I still sin, I don't despair, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my eternal life.' In that righteousness I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life or mine and in my own righteousness, but I have another life, another righteousness above this life, which is in Christ, the Son of God, who knows no sin or death, but is eternal righteousness and eternal life." (Preface to the Galatians)

Discussion questions:

1. What was most helpful to you personally?

2. What questions did it raise?

Galatians

Sowing and reaping

Study 13 | Galatians 6:6-18

These final words of Paul may at first sight seem like a series of disconnected statements, but Paul is actually making a final warning (verses 6-10) and a final invitation (verses 11-18) to the Galatians to live by the gospel.

Read Galatians 6:6-18

- 1. Based on the context of vv.4-7, why do you think Paul included v.6? Why did v.6 lead Paul to write, “Do not be deceived?”**
- 2. What is this principle in vv.7-8? How would you put the principle into your own words? How can we observe it practically?**
- 3. Based on the context, what do you think Paul meant by “doing good” (v.9)? Based on your own experience and observations, how do we “reap” from doing good?**
- 4. What do vv. 12-13 reveal about the motives of Paul’s opponents? How does Paul use this to contrast the true gospel from “religion?”**

5. Would you agree that vv.14-15 summarize everything Paul has been saying in the letter? Why or why not?
6. What is the relationship of the “rule” to peace, mercy and grace (v.16)? What do you think are the “marks of Jesus”? Do you have any?

READING AND REFLECTION

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Luther re-visited

(1) Thesis – The gospel offers not just forgiveness for our bad record, but also complete acceptance through Christ’s perfect record.

CHRIST DID NOT ONLY DIE IN OUR PLACE BUT LIVED A PERFECT LIFE IN OUR PLACE. THEREFORE, WE DO NOT SIMPLY GET FORGIVENESS FOR SINS FROM CHRIST, BUT ALSO COMPLETE ACCEPTANCE. HIS PERFECT PAST AND RECORD NOW (IN GOD’S SIGHT) BECOMES OURS.

Luther: *“It is an absolutely unique teaching in the world”* (See section 4a) and again: *“So now we may certainly think: ‘Although I still sin, I don’t despair, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my eternal life.’ In that righteousness I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life of mine and in my own righteousness, but I have another life, another righteousness above this life, which is in Christ, the Son of God, who knows no sin or death, but is eternal righteousness and eternal life.”* (See section 4e) Some other religions teach that God will forgive your failure to produce a good moral record. But no other religion claims that God actually provides an absolutely perfect record for you, whereby he regards you as absolutely holy and acceptable and flawless. Other religions say: “You give God a righteous record, then he will owe you.” But the gospel says: “God (through Jesus Christ) gives you a perfect record, and then you owe him.”

(2) Thesis – There is no alternative to the gospel but works-righteousness. Both religion and irreligion are forms of it.

UN-RELIGIOUS PERSONS ARE STRUGGLING TO ACHIEVE A “RIGHTEOUSNESS” THROUGH THEIR OWN EFFORTS, AND RELIGIOUS PERSONS ARE STRUGGLING TO ACHIEVE A “RIGHTEOUSNESS” THROUGH THEIR OWN EFFORTS. SO FUNDAMENTALLY, THEY ARE NO DIFFERENT.

Luther, Preface to the Galatians: *“Satan in paradise... persuaded our first parents that they might by their own wisdom and power become like God... Thereafter... everyone went his own way... hoping without the aid of Christ and by his own works to redeem himself from evils and sins.”* (Section 1a). Every person is seeking

to achieve a sense of worth and value — a “righteousness” (though seldom called that) — through their striving and efforts, because they have an innate sense of shame and guilt inherited from their sin and the Fall. Also: *“For there is no middle ground between Christian righteousness and works-righteousness. There is no other alternative to Christian righteousness but works-righteousness; if you do not build your confidence on the work of Christ you must build your confidence on your own work.”* (Section 5a) Anyone who does not fully trust Christ’s righteousness for his or her sense of worth (your “confidence”) and standing before God is necessarily seeking to achieve it through works-righteousness, whether that work is religious or not.

(3) Thesis – All sin is ultimately rooted in idolatry caused by works-righteousness.

THE ULTIMATE REASON FOR ANY SIN IS THAT SOMETHING BESIDES CHRIST IS FUNCTIONING AS AN ALTERNATIVE “RIGHTEOUSNESS” OR SOURCE OF CONFIDENCE — AND IS THUS AN “IDOL,” A PSEUDO-SAVIOR, WHICH CREATES INORDINATE DESIRES.

Luther, Preface to the Galatians: *“This rock... the doctrine of justification... was shaken by Satan in paradise, when he persuaded our first parents that they might by their own wisdom and power become like God... Thereafter the whole world acted like a madman against this faith, inventing innumerable idols and religions with which everyone went his own way, hoping to placate a god or goddess, by his own works; that is, hoping without the aid of Christ and by his own works to redeem himself from evils and sins. All this is sufficiently seen in the practices and records of every culture and nation...”* (Section 1a). Also, Luther A Treatise Concerning Good Works: *“Those who do not... trust in His favor, grace, and goodwill, but seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep this [First] Commandment [to have no other gods before Him], and practice real idolatry, even if they do the works of all the other Commandments...”* (Part X.) Any effort to earn our own salvation creates “idols” of necessity. For if we make our career or our morality or our marriage our fundamental “confidence” in life — our “wisdom” and “power” — then those things become idols which we look to instead of Christ for our “salvation.” Thus, those “keeping” the other 9 commandments as a way to earn their own salvation are really breaking the 1st commandment *by* and *in* their morality! Therefore, their good works are all done in service to an idol as a way of avoiding Christ as Savior.

(4) Thesis – All of life requires repentance — not primarily for sins, but for our “righteousness.”

ANY FAILURE OF ACTUAL RIGHTEOUSNESS IS ALWAYS A FAILURE TO LIVE IN ACCORDANCE WITH OUR IMPUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS. WE MAKE SOMETHING BESIDES

JESUS OUR REAL HOPE AND LIFE. SO BELIEVING THE GOSPEL MEANS TO REPENT, NOT JUST OF OUR SINS, BUT OF THE PARTICULAR (SELF) RIGHTEOUSNESS UNDERLYING OUR BEHAVIOR. THAT IS THE SECRET OF CHANGE.

Luther in Preface to Galatians: *"So learn to speak to one's heart... When the law creeps into your conscience... learn to use arguments of the gospel against it. Say: 'O law!... trouble me not! For I will not allow you... to reign in my heart and conscience — for they are the seat and temple of Christ the Son of God, who is the king of righteousness and peace, and my most sweet savior and mediator.' [Then] he shall keep my conscience joyful and quiet in the sound and pure doctrine of the Gospel through the knowledge of this passive and heavenly righteousness."* (See section 5c). He calls this an effort to keep *"this Christian righteousness reigning in my heart."* (See section 5d). Irreligious people don't repent at all, and religious people repent only for their sins. But Christians "repent of their righteousness." That is what makes them become Christians — when they repent not just for being bad, but for having tried in so many ways to be good in order to avoid relying on Christ alone for their hope, worth, and salvation. But this is also what grows them into the likeness of Christ. Every failure to live as we should — all temptation, fear, anger, or despondency — means something besides Christ continues to be too important, to function as an idol, a means of "righteousness." Thus all growth takes place the way initial conversion did — through repentance for avoiding Christ as Savior.

(5) Thesis – Gospel repentance creates a whole new motivation in our relationship to God, others, ourselves and to our life in the world.

ONLY THROUGH THE GOSPEL IS THERE A NEW SENSE OF DELIGHT IN AND SERVICE TO GOD FOR THE BEAUTY OF WHO HE IS IN HIMSELF, NOT FOR WHAT HE GIVES YOU. THAT FREES US TO LOVE OTHERS AND DO GOOD DEEDS FOR THEIR OWN SAKE, AND NOT FOR HOW THEY PROFIT US.

Luther, Preface to Galatians: *"Whoever he be that is assuredly persuaded that Christ is his righteousness, does not only cheerfully and gladly work well in his vocation... but submits to all manner of burdens and dangers in his present life, because he knows that this is the will of God, and that this obedience pleases him."* (See section 5d) First, our work is transformed by the gospel — it is done in *"gladness"* — because our work and career is no longer the way we get our "confidence" and "power." When we relied on our work for a sense of importance and worth, the work was really only about *us*. We didn't do it for the joy of doing it. Second, our relationship to God is now not conditioned by how well our lives go. If we only obey God in order to get a good life from him, then our relationship to him goes up and down depending on our success, prosperity and comfort. If things go

wrong, we rejected God, which showed we were only using him to get our real gods. Now the gospel brings stability and an unconditional desire to please him for his own sake. Also Luther writes: *"No one should think we reject the importance of good works or of obeying the Law. When we receive the Christian righteousness, we consequently can live a good life, naturally, out of gratitude. If we try to earn our righteousness by doing many good deeds, we actually do nothing. We neither please God through our works-righteousness nor do we honor the purpose for which the law was given."* (See section 4d.) "Good" works done in order to get leverage over God are not "good" at all — they are not done for him or for others, but for ourselves. They are ways of controlling God and saving ourselves. Only when we admit our good works were not good, can they become actually good and pleasing to God!

(6) Thesis – The gospel is not only the way to enter the kingdom, but it is also the way to solve every problem, face every challenge and grow up into Christ.

Luther, Preface to Galatians: *"All kinds of temptations vex and oppress us on every side, so that this doctrine can never be taught, urged, and repeated enough. If this doctrine is lost, then is also the whole knowledge of truth, life and salvation lost; if this doctrine flourish, then all good things flourish..."* (See section 1b.) He also says that the gospel is the way to face every trial and difficulty: *"This distinction is easy to utter in words, but in use and experience it is very hard. So you who would be teachers and counselors of others I admonish to exercise yourselves continually in these matters through study, reading, meditation on the Word and prayer — that in the time of trial you will be able to both **inform** and **comfort** both your consciences and others, to bring them from law to grace, for active/works-righteousness to passive/Christ's righteousness."* Many people think the gospel is the way to "get saved" and that then we grow through trying very hard to live according to Biblical principles. But Luther shows us not only that initial salvation happens through the gospel, but that all growth and sanctification happens only with constant re-visitation and re-orientation to the gospel.

Discussion questions

What did you notice this time that you didn't notice before?

What is the most helpful thing you read this time?



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