

This morning I am continuing in a series I've entitled "Practical Christianity." My goal for this series is to examine what the implications are of the gospel for various areas of our life. In this way I am essentially trying to put into practice what Paul said in *Philippians 2:12-13*, where he told the Philippians to "*Therefore my dear friends, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*" Now that you have been saved, now that you have believed the gospel, work out the implications of the gospel into every area of your life as God works in you. Not "work for your salvation" but "work out the implications of your salvation."

Here is the gospel summary statement I will be using this series: "We are sinners who have been saved and justified by grace, learning to live as new creations according to God's will, trusting in a certain and glorious eternal hope and future."

If you read that statement closely, you will recognize that it has a past, present, and future dimension. Let me unpack those three aspects and examine what the implications are for community – your friends and church.

We are sinners who have been saved and justified by grace.

We are sinners means that we are separated from a holy God, so full of wickedness that we can not save ourselves by our own good deeds. But we have been saved and justified by grace. The second part means that God loves us so much that His Son, Jesus, died for us, to rescue us from our sins. **This humbles us into realizing we are no better than anyone else, and it lifts us up to realize just how loved we are.** We are justified, declared not guilty, perfect in the sight of God, not because of anything we did, but because of what Jesus did for us. There is no condemnation and nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Ephesians 2:8-9 - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

The more the gospel shapes our identity, how does this affect our friendships and community?

- 1) **We are careful about the friends we choose and the influence we allow them to have over us**

Justification by grace allows us to face the truth about ourselves. We are so full of wickedness and so capable of self-deception that nothing less than the death of the

Son of God could save us. And so we are cautious about the friends we choose and the influence we allow them to have over us, knowing that we can easily be led astray.

Consider **Proverbs 12:26** - *A righteous man is cautious in friendship, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.* Think back over the years and the friends you have had. Think about the ones who helped you become the person God has called you to be, and think about the ones who led you astray.

When you become a follower of Jesus, your friendships can't help but change, because the things you desire and the direction you are going may no longer match up with friends who do not know Jesus. This is why Paul says in **2 Corinthians 6:14** - *Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?*

Some of you need to carefully examine your friendships and who is influencing whom. Evaluate your friendships and be careful that your friends are not influencing you away from God.

2) We can be honest with each other, knowing that our self-worth doesn't come from our performance or the evaluation of others.

The gospel frees us up to be honest, because we know that our self-worth is not tied to our performance but has been established by Jesus' death for our sins. And so, we don't need to pretend to be someone we are not. We can be honest about our sins and shortcomings. Think of what John said:

1 John 1:6-10 - *If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. ⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.*

In the gospel-centered community, confession and repentance are ongoing practices. Our message is a gospel of salvation by grace, so when we confess our failures and our need for His grace, it just magnifies his salvation.

As the singer-songwriter Andrew Peterson said:

“It’s the great, confounding reversal of the Gospel of Jesus. If the word we preach is one of attainable perfection, of law, of justification by works, then when we fail, our testimony fails with it. But if we preach our deep brokenness and Christ’s deeper healing, if we preach our inability to take a single breath but for God’s grace, then our weakness exalts him and we’re functioning as we were meant to since the foundation of the world.”

My bio on our website reads:

Eric Stillman began in August of 2006 as the third pastor in the history of NewLife. He is a graduate of the University of Connecticut (B.A. Psychology) and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (Master of Divinity). Eric is a lifelong resident of the area, having grown up in South Windsor and having previously lived in Manchester for many years. He and his wife Michele are the proud parents of four boys: Ryan, Will, Nate, and Jordan. Eric previously worked as the youth pastor of NewLife from 1998-2002, and was an Associate Pastor at Wintonbury Baptist Church in Bloomfield, CT from 2004-2005. He was also a long-time staff member of Musicon Ministries.

Those are the facts, and they are meant to let you know that I have credentials. But I at one point I had changed my bio to this:

Eric has been the pastor of NewLife since August 2006. He has a hard time planning ahead, hates confrontation, struggles in his prayer life, enjoys doing nothing, tends to be self-centered, coasts on talent, avoids difficult people, rarely takes initiative, and is often irresponsible. He has a hard time finishing things, remembering things, or staying on task. He is also a fan of the Chicago Cubs.

But in spite of all of this, God has never rejected Eric, but instead has called him to be the pastor of NewLife, in order to magnify the amazing grace of God and to demonstrate to all that Jesus alone deserves the glory.

I am no better than anyone else. Just like you, I am a sinner saved by grace. In the community of Jesus Christ, we are all sinners saved by grace, and so we can be honest with each other.

3) We are patient with our friends’ imperfections, knowing that we are sinners in need of grace as well

Listen to Paul's words at the beginning of Ephesians 4 - *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.* ³ *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*

We are all people in process, in need of patience. If I am a sinner saved by grace, then how can I not extend grace and patience to others? Friendship is a place where we learn to forgive and to bear with one another in love. We know we are imperfect. Only Christ is perfect.

We are learning to live as new creations according to God's will.

When we repent and come to faith in Jesus, God adopts us into His family and gives us His Holy Spirit. We have a new heart, a new spirit, a new hope, a new family, a new future. We have new desires. We are being renewed in our minds. We begin to learn how to live according to God's will, according to the values of the kingdom. What are the implications of this for our church?

1) We serve and love each other as members of God's family

We're not just a collection of people sharing beliefs, or like-minded people who want to do good in the world. We are one big adopted family, learning to love and serve each other as brothers and sisters.

1 John 4:9-12 - This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* ¹¹ *Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* ¹² *No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

What if we were just known for our love?

Matthew 20:25-28 - Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ *Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,* ²⁷ *and whoever wants to be first must be your slave--* ²⁸ *just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

We are family. Love and serve each other as Christ loved and served us. How can you use the time, the gifts that God has given you to serve others?

2) We cultivate friendships that will challenge each other to be like Jesus

God's goal is to make us like Christ. He loves us just as we are, but loves us too much to let us stay the way we are. In the same way, we love you as you are, but love you too much to let you stay the way you are. Think of how Jesus spoke to the woman caught in the act of adultery:

***John 8:10-11** - Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."*

Think of the alternatives:

I love you just as you are and you don't need to change.
I don't love you unless you change.

In humility, as brothers and sisters who love each other, we can speak the truth in love until we all grow up into Christlikeness.

Ephesians 4:15 - *Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.*

What a great phrase – “speaking the truth in love.” We need friends who encourage us, and those who challenge us by speaking the truth in love. Listen to **Hebrews 10:24** - *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. ²⁵ Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

You need friends who encourage you, for life is hard. You need friends who remind you of the promises of God, of who He is, of who you are in His sight. You also need people who will challenge you. We need to consider – think about, pray about – how we can speak the truth in love to our friends, and we need friends who will confront us and challenge us. We all have blind spots, things we do not see about ourselves, and so we eagerly seek out those who speak the truth in love.

Proverbs 27:5-6,17 - Better is open rebuke than hidden love. ⁶ Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses... ¹⁷ As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.

We need friends who will challenge us to be more like Jesus.

Listen to this incredible quote from C.S. Lewis' book *The Four Loves*:

*In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Caroline joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him 'to myself' now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald. Hence true Friendship is the least jealous of loves. Two friends delight to be joined by a third, and three by a fourth, if only the newcomer is qualified to become a real friend. They can then say, as the blessed souls say in Dante, 'Here comes one who will augment our loves' ... In this, Friendship exhibits a glorious 'nearness by resemblance' to Heaven itself where the very multitude of the blessed (which no man can number) increases the fruition which each has of God. For every soul, seeing Him in her own way, doubtless communicates that unique vision to all the rest. That, says an old author, is why the Seraphim in Isaiah's vision are crying 'Holy, Holy, Holy' to one another (**Isaiah 6:3**). The more we thus share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we all have.*

Lewis is talking about what it was like when one of his close friends died, and how instead of having more of the other friend, he now had less of him, because there were certain things about that friend that were only brought out by the deceased friend. We all need friends of different backgrounds and approaches in order to bring out unique aspects of our character and challenge us in different ways.

Consider how you can encourage and spur one another on. If you have friends you trust, give them permission to speak the truth in love to you, because they may be afraid of hurting your feelings or of making you angry.

We trust in a certain and glorious eternal hope and future.

We know that this life is not all that there is. We will live forever with God. Love will never end, death will be conquered. And all that our heart truly desires will one day be ours. We will spend eternity with God, in a place beyond comprehension. What does this mean for us when it comes to our community?

- 1) We know that the only perfect church will be in heaven, so we love and serve our imperfect church to the glory of God.

Revelation 7:9-10 - *After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."*

Every church has flaws. Serve where God has called you to be. Bear with one another. Speak the truth in love to each other in your imperfect church family, helping each other to grow in Christlikeness. And one day you will be a part of the perfect church forever.

- 2) We put our hope in the ultimate friend, Jesus.

Our identity is not based on how many friends we have, or whether or not we have a soul friend. Many of us do not have friends who know us and love us and stick by us. But we all have access to the ultimate friend, Jesus.

John 15:12-17 - *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit-- fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other.*

It's incredible that the God of the universe calls us His friend. When you know Him and get to know Him better, you learn what friendship really is and are able to be that friend to others.

- 3) We share the gospel with our friends in hopes that they will be with us for eternity.

Pray for those who don't know Christ.

The gospel causes us to evaluate our friendships in the light of whether or not they are helping us grow in Christlikeness. It causes us to encourage and spur on each other, and to allow others to speak into our lives. And it causes us to lean on the ultimate friend, Jesus. Jesus is the friend that we need, and He teaches us how to be the friend that the people in this world need.