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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT WORLD HARVEST MISSION

World Harvest never set out to write and publish curriculum. We are a missions agency that has always believed the power and motive for mission is the gospel of grace at work in the life of a believer. However, along the way, we've also discovered that it's a lot harder to do cross-cultural, team-oriented ministry than we thought. Eventually, we started writing material to keep the gospel front and center in our own lives and relationships. Before long we had pastors and ministry leaders requesting gospel-centered materials for use in their churches and ministries.

Over the years, it's been our privilege to partner with friends who share our passion for the way the gospel transforms both believers and unbelievers alike. This study is the result of one such partnership. Bob Thune and Will Walker wrote *The Gospel-Centered Life* to help their church grow in the gospel. We're partnering with them to publish it because we think it may do the same for you.

Some of the content has been adapted from earlier World Harvest materials. If you are familiar with *Sonship* or *Gospel Transformation* you may recognize a few key themes and concepts. If you haven't heard them presented before, Bob and Will have done a great job of articulating the gospel in simple, deep and transformative ways here. One of the strengths of this curriculum is the way that their experience of church-planting influenced the development of *The Gospel-Centered Life*, which is just one of the reasons that we're so pleased to make it available.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

The Gospel-Centered Life is a 9-lesson small group study intended to you understand how the gospel shapes every aspect of life. Developed by experienced church-planting pastors, the material is designed to promote transformational conversations among groups of mature Christians, new Christians, and non-Christians. Each lesson is self-contained, featuring clear teaching from scripture, and requires no extra work outside of the group setting.

THROUGH THE COURSE WE HOPE YOU WILL:

- » Deepen your grasp of the gospel as you see your need for continual renewal.
- » Grow as your experience transformation from the inside out.
- » Be challenged to develop authentic relationships as the gospel moves you to love and serve others.



HOW THIS STUDY IS ORGANIZED

The Gospel-Centered Life contains nine lessons that are grouped around three themes:

What is the gospel?

LESSON 1: THE GOSPEL GRID

If the gospel is constantly “bearing fruit and growing” (Col. 1:6), then everything has to do with the gospel—God, humanity, salvation, worship, relationships, shopping, recreation, work, personality...everything! The objective in this lesson is to establish a framework for talking about the gospel. This framework will get worked out in greater detail over the next two sessions.

LESSON 2: PRETENDING AND PERFORMING

Each of us tends to “shrink the cross,” which is to say that something is lacking in our understanding, appreciation, or application of Jesus’ sacrifice for our sin. This manifests itself in two main ways: pretending and performing. Pretending minimizes sin by making ourselves out to be something we are not. Performing minimizes God’s holiness by reducing his standard to something we can meet, thereby meriting his favor. Both are rooted in an inadequate view of God’s holiness and our identity.

LESSON 3: BELIEVING THE GOSPEL

We have been focusing on the ways we minimize the gospel—the negative. This lesson turns our attention to the positive: What remedies has God given in the gospel to keep us from shrinking the cross and depending on our own effort?

What does the gospel do in us?

LESSON 4: LAW AND GOSPEL

Continuing to think about how the gospel interacts with our lives, but now we now turn to consider the gospel’s relationship to the law. What is the law? Does God expect me to obey it? What is the purpose of the law? How does the law help me to believe the gospel? How does the gospel help me to obey the law?

LESSON 5: REPENTANCE

This lesson deals with repentance. In our culture, this usually sounds like a bad thing, but repentance is the norm for gospel-centered living. Becoming more aware of God’s holiness and our sinfulness leads us to repent and believe the gospel of Jesus. Biblical repentance frees us from our own devices and makes a way for the power of the gospel to bear fruit in our lives.

LESSON 6: HEART IDOLATRY

The Christian walk consists of two repeated steps: repentance and faith. Turning our attention to the topic of faith, we focus on how we grow through believing the gospel. This week's goal is to take "believing the gospel" out of the abstract and make it concrete.

How does the gospel work through us?

LESSON 7: MISSION

The gospel is simultaneously at work in us and through us. Inwardly, our desires and motives are being changed as we repent and believe the gospel. As we experience Christ's love in this way, we are compelled to engage those around us with the same kind of redemptive love. God's grace brings renewal everywhere, in us and through us.

LESSON 8: FORGIVENESS

The gospel that works in us always works through us. It shows its power in our relationships and actions. One key way this happens is when we forgive others biblically.

LESSON 9: CONFLICT

Conflict is something we all experience (regularly), but often handle in very fleshly ways. The gospel gives us a pattern and a means to healthy conflict resolution.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

The Gospel-Centered Life is designed for small group study, although it is possible to work through the study independently or in a larger group. The tone of the material assumes a small-group format, because this is the setting we've found to be the most effective.

Each of these lessons follows a similar format including these elements...

BIBLE CONVERSATION

We want to start by talking about the Bible together. As the name suggests, this section is designed to stimulate your thinking and prepare you and your group for the ideas that will be presented in each lesson.

ARTICLE

The written articles are the primary source of the teaching content for each lesson. They are short, clear teachings of the concepts being presented in the lesson. Each week, your group will take a few minutes and read the Article out loud together.

DISCUSSION

This section is where we communally process the concepts being taught in the Article. Often the Discussion will work in conjunction with the next section (Exercise) to help flesh out the teaching and apply it to our lives in concrete ways.

EXERCISE

Each of the exercises in this study are designed to help you make practical applications of the concepts being taught, or help you understand the content at a deeper heart level. Be sure allow enough time for your group to adequately work through and discuss the exercises as directed.

WRAP-UP

The Wrap-Up gives the leader the chance to answer any last minute questions, reinforce ideas, and most importantly spend a few minutes praying as group.

WHAT TO EXPECT

EXPECT TO BE CHALLENGED...

most of us have reduced the gospel to something much less than it is. As you work through each lesson, expect your thinking about the gospel to be challenged and expanded.

EXPECT THE HOLY SPIRIT ...

to be the one ultimately responsible for the growth of your group, and for the change in each person's life—including your own. Relax and trust him.

EXPECT YOUR GROUP'S AGENDA TO INCLUDE...

an open, give-and-take discussion of the article, the questions, and the exercises. Also expect times of prayer at each meeting.

EXPECT STRUGGLE...

and don't be surprised to find that your group is a mixture of enthusiasm, hope, and honesty, along with indifference, anxiety, skepticism, guilt, and covering up. We are all people who really need Jesus every day. So expect your group to be made up of people who wrestle with sin and have problems—people just like yourself!

EXPECT A GROUP LEADER...

who desires to serve you, but who also needs Jesus as much as you do. No leader should be put on a pedestal, so expect that your group leader will have the freedom to share openly about his or her own weaknesses, struggles, and sins.

1

THE GOSPEL GRID

BIG IDEA

If the gospel is constantly “bearing fruit and growing” (Col. 1:6), then everything has to do with the gospel—God, humanity, salvation, worship, relationships, shopping, recreation, work, personality...everything! The objective in this lesson is to establish a framework for talking about the gospel. This framework will get worked out in greater detail over the next two sessions, so this lesson is designed to help us understand the concepts and begin exploring how they relate to actual life.

NOTES:



1

ARTICLE

THE GOSPEL GRID

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE

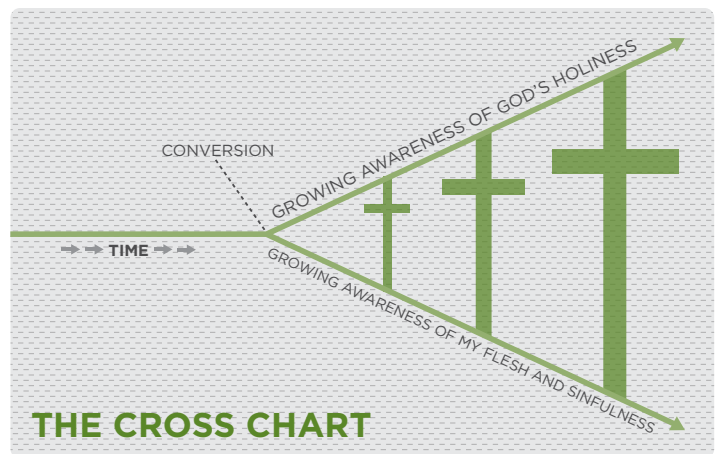
“The gospel” is a phrase that Christians often use without fully understanding its significance. We speak the language of the gospel, but we rarely apply the gospel to every aspect of our lives. Yet this is exactly what God wants for us. The gospel is nothing less than “the power of God” (Rom. 1:16). In Colossians 1:6, the apostle Paul commends the Colossian church because the gospel has been “bearing fruit and growing . . . among [them] since the day [they] heard it.” The apostle Peter teaches that a lack of ongoing transformation in our lives comes from forgetting what God has done for us in the gospel (2 Peter 1:3–9). If we are to grow into maturity in Christ, we must deepen and enlarge our understanding of the gospel as God’s appointed means for personal and communal transformation.

Many Christians live with a truncated view of the gospel. We see the gospel as the “door,” the way in, the entrance point into God’s kingdom. But the gospel is so much more! It is not just the door, but the path we are to walk every day of the Christian life. It is not just the means of our salvation, but the means of our transformation. It is not simply deliverance from sin’s penalty, but release from sin’s power. The gospel is what makes us right with God (justification) and it is also what frees us to delight in God (sanctification). The gospel changes everything!

The following model has been helpful to many people in thinking about the gospel and its implications. This diagram does not say everything that could be said about the gospel, but it does serve as a helpful visual illustration of how the gospel works.

The starting point of the Christian life (conversion) comes when I first become aware of the gap between God’s holiness and my sinfulness. When I am converted, I trust and hope in Jesus, who has done what I could never do: he has bridged the gap between my sinfulness and God’s holiness. He has taken God’s holy wrath toward my sin upon himself.

At the point of conversion, however, I have a very limited view of God’s holiness and of my sin. The more I grow in my Christian life, the more I grow in my awareness of God’s holiness and of my flesh and sinfulness. As I read the Bible, experience the Holy Spirit’s conviction, and live in community with other people, the extent of God’s greatness and the extent of my sin become increasingly clear and vivid. It is not that God is becoming more holy or that I am becoming

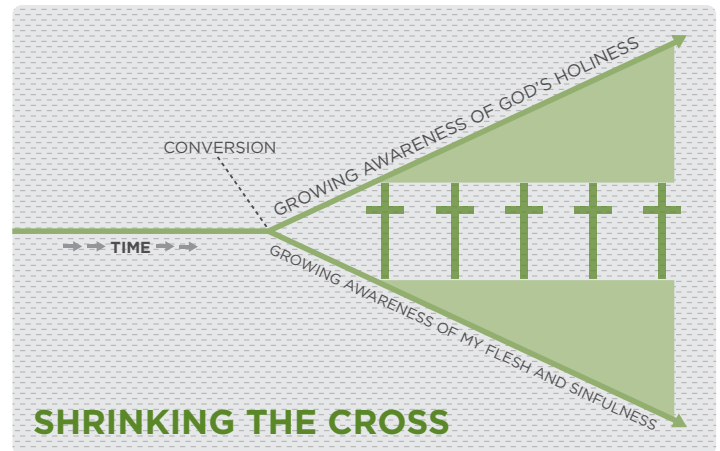


more sinful. But my *awareness* of both is growing. I am increasingly seeing God as he actually is (Isa. 55:8–9) and myself as I actually am (Jer. 17:9–10v).

As my understanding of my sin and of God’s holiness grows, something else also grows: my appreciation and love for Jesus. His mediation, his sacrifice, his righteousness, and his gracious work on my behalf become increasingly sweet and powerful to me. The cross looms larger and more central in my life as I rejoice in the Savior who died upon it.

Unfortunately, sanctification (growth in holiness) doesn’t work quite as neatly as we’d like. Because of the indwelling sin that remains in me, I have an ongoing tendency to minimize the gospel or “shrink the cross.” This happens when I either (a) minimize God’s perfect holiness, thinking of him as something less than his Word declares him to be, or (b) elevate my own righteousness, thinking of myself as someone better than I actually am. The cross becomes smaller and Christ’s importance in my life is diminished.

We’ll talk more about the specific ways we minimize the gospel in weeks to come. To counteract our sinful tendency to shrink the gospel, we must constantly nourish our minds on biblical truth. We need to know, see, and savor the holy, righteous character of God. And we need to identify, admit, and feel the depth of our brokenness and sinfulness. We don’t need to do these things because “that’s what Christians are supposed to do.” Rather, we make this our aim because it is the life God wants for us—a life marked by transforming joy, hope, and love.



Growing in the gospel means seeing more of God’s holiness and more of my sin. And because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, we need not fear seeing God as he really is or admitting how broken we really are. Our hope is not in our own goodness, nor in the vain expectation that God will compromise his standards and “grade on a curve.” Rather, we rest in Jesus as our perfect Redeemer—the One who is “our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

1 SUPPLEMENT

SIX WAYS OF MINIMIZING SIN

DEFENDING

I find it difficult to receive feedback about weaknesses or sin. When confronted, my tendency is to explain things away, talk about my successes, or justify my decisions. As a result, people are hesitant to approach me and I rarely have conversations about difficult things in my life.

FAKING

I strive to keep up appearances and maintain a respectable image. My behavior, to some degree, is driven by what I think others think of me. I also do not like to think reflectively about my life. As a result, not many people know the real me. (I may not even know the real me.)

HIDING

I tend to conceal as much as I can about my life, especially the “bad stuff.” This is different from faking, in that faking is about impressing. Hiding is more about shame. I don’t think people will accept or love the real me.

EXAGGERATING

I tend to think (and talk) more highly of myself than I ought. I make things (good and bad) out to be much bigger than they are (usually to get attention). As a result, things often get more attention than they deserve and have a way of making me stressed or anxious.

BLAMING

I am quick to blame others for sin or circumstances. I have a difficult time “owning” my contributions to sin or conflict. There is an element of pride that assumes it’s not my fault and/or an element of fear of rejection if it is my fault.

DOWNPLAYING

I tend to give little weight to sin or circumstances in my life, as if they are “normal” or “not that bad.” As a result, things often don’t get the attention they deserve. They have a way of mounting up to the point of being overwhelming.



1

EXERCISE

JUDGING OTHERS

One way to see the value of the Cross Chart is to apply it to a specific area where people commonly struggle. Judging others is something we all do in big and small ways. As a group, brainstorm about some of the specific ways we judge people. The questions below will help you see the connection between judging others and your view of the gospel.

1. What are the specific ways we judge others?
2. Why do we judge others? What reasons do we give for doing this?
3. How do these reasons reflect a small view of God's holiness?
4. How do these reasons reflect a small view of our own sin?
5. Think of a specific person in your life that you are often judgmental toward.
 - a. How would a bigger view of God's holiness affect that relationship?
 - b. How would a bigger view of your sin affect that relationship?



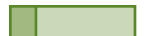
2

PRETENDING & PERFORMING

BIG IDEA

This lesson deals with how we “shrink the cross,” which is to say that something is lacking in our understanding, appreciation, or application of Jesus’ sacrifice for our sin. This manifests itself in two main ways: **pretending** and **performing**. Pretending minimizes sin by making ourselves out to be something we are not. Performing minimizes God’s holiness by reducing his standard to something we can meet, thereby meriting his favor. Both are rooted in an inadequate view of God’s holiness and our identity.

NOTES:



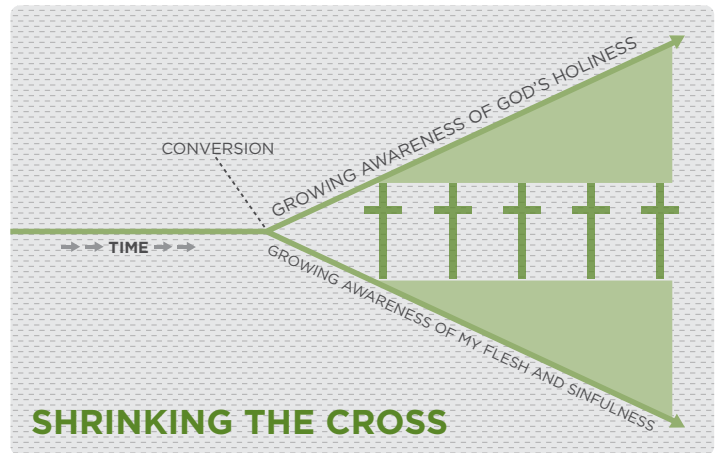
ARTICLE 2

SHRINKING THE CROSS: PRETENDING & PERFORMING

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE

Last week we looked at a model that illustrates what it means to live in light of the gospel. This week we want to look more closely at the ways we minimize the gospel and reduce its impact in our lives.

Notice that the top line of the chart is labeled “Growing Awareness of God’s Holiness.” As we stated last time, this does not mean that God’s holiness *itself* is increasing, for God is unchangeable in his character. He has always been infinitely holy. Rather, this line shows that when the gospel is functioning correctly in our lives, our *awareness* of God’s holy character is constantly growing. We realize in fuller and deeper ways the weight of God’s glorious perfections.



Likewise, the bottom line shows that when the gospel is functioning correctly in our lives, our *awareness* of our own sinfulness is consistently growing. This does not mean that we are becoming more sinful. (In fact, if we’re growing in Christ, we’ll be starting to see victory over sin.) But we are realizing more and more “how deep the rabbit hole goes” in our character and behavior. We are seeing that we are more profoundly sinful than we first imagined.

As these two lines diverge, the cross becomes larger in our experience, producing a deeper love for Jesus and a fuller understanding of his goodness. At least that’s the ideal. But, in reality, because of indwelling sin, we are prone to forget the gospel—to drift away from it like a boat loosed from its moorings. That’s why the Bible urges us not to be “moved [away] from the hope held out in the gospel” (Col. 1:23) and to “let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly” (Col. 3:16). When we are not anchored in the truth of the gospel, our love for Jesus and our experience of his goodness become very small. We end up “shrinking the cross” by either **pretending** or **performing**.

Look again at the bottom line of the chart. Growing in our awareness of our sinfulness is not fun! It means admitting—to ourselves and others—that we are not as good as we think we are. It means confronting what Richard Lovelace called the complex web of “compulsive attitudes, beliefs, and behavior” that sin has created in us. If we are not resting in Jesus’ righteousness, this growing awareness of our sin becomes a crushing weight. We buckle under its load and

* Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 88.



compensate by **pretending** that we're better than we really are. Pretending can take many forms: dishonesty ("I'm not *that* bad"), comparison ("I'm not as bad as *those* people"), excuse making ("I'm not *really* that way") and false righteousness ("Here are all the *good* things I've done"). Because we don't want to admit how sinful we really are, we spin the truth in our favor.

Growing in our awareness of God's holiness is also challenging. It means coming face to face with God's righteous commands and the glorious perfections of his character. It means realizing how dramatically we fall short of his standards. It means reflecting on his holy displeasure toward sin. If we are not rooted in God's acceptance of us through Jesus, we compensate by trying to earn God's approval through our **performance**. We live life on a treadmill, trying to gain God's favor by living up to his expectations (or our mistaken view of them).

It's easy to talk about pretending and performing in the abstract. But let's consider how these tendencies find practical expression in our lives.

To discern your subtle tendencies toward pretending, ask yourself this question: *What do you count on to give you a sense of "personal credibility" (validity, acceptance, good standing)?* Your answer to that question will often reveal something (besides Jesus) in which you find righteousness. When we are not firmly rooted in the gospel, we rely on these false sources of righteousness to build our reputation and give us a sense of worth and value. Here are some examples.

JOB RIGHTEOUSNESS: I'm a hard worker, so God will reward me.

FAMILY RIGHTEOUSNESS: Because I "do things right" as a parent, I'm more godly than parents who can't control their kids.

THEOLOGICAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: I have good theology. God prefers me over those who have bad theology.

INTELLECTUAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: I am better read, more articulate, and more culturally savvy than others, which obviously makes me superior.

SCHEDULE RIGHTEOUSNESS: I am self-disciplined and rigorous in my time management, which makes me more mature than others.

FLEXIBILITY RIGHTEOUSNESS: In a world that's busy, I'm flexible and relaxed. I always make time for others. Shame on those who don't!

MERCY RIGHTEOUSNESS: I care about the poor and disadvantaged the way everyone else should.

LEGALISTIC RIGHTEOUSNESS: I don't drink, smoke, or chew, or date girls who do. Too many Christians just aren't concerned about holiness these days.

FINANCIAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: I manage money wisely and stay out of debt. I'm not like those materialistic Christians who can't control their spending.

POLITICAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: If you really love God, you'll vote for my candidate.

TOLERANCE RIGHTEOUSNESS: I am open-minded and charitable toward those who don't agree with me. In fact, I'm a lot like Jesus that way!

These are just a few examples. Perhaps you can think of many more. (Think of anything that gives you a sense of being “good enough” or better than others.) These sources of functional righteousness disconnect us from the power of the gospel. They allow us to find righteousness in what we do instead of honestly confronting the depth of our sin and brokenness. Furthermore, each of these sources of righteousness is also a way of judging and excluding others! We use them to elevate ourselves and condemn those who aren't as “righteous” as we are. In other words, finding righteousness in these things leads us into more sin, not less.

Now, to reveal your tendency toward **performance**, pause and answer this question: *As God thinks of you right now, what is the look on his face?*

Do you picture God as disappointed? Angry? Indifferent? Does his face say “Get your act together!” or “If only you could do a little more for me!” If you imagined God as anything but overjoyed with you, you have fallen into a performance mindset. Because the gospel truth is: In Christ, God is deeply satisfied with you. In fact, based on Jesus' work, God has adopted you as his own son or daughter (Gal. 4:7)! But when we fail to root our identity in what Jesus has done for us, we slip into performance-driven Christianity. We imagine that if we were “better Christians,” God would approve of us more fully. Living this way saps the joy and delight out of following Jesus, leaving us to wallow in a joyless, dutiful obedience. Our gospel becomes very small.

Performance-driven Christianity is actually a minimizing of God's holiness. Thinking we can impress God with our “right living” shows that we've reduced his standards far below what they actually are. Rather than being awed by the infinite measure of his holy perfection, we have convinced ourselves that if we just try hard enough, we can merit God's love and approval.

Our subtle tendencies toward pretending and performing show that failing to believe the gospel is the root of all our more observable sins. As we learn to apply the gospel to our unbelief—to “preach the gospel to ourselves”—we will find ourselves freed from the false security of pretending and performing. Instead we will live in the true joy and freedom promised to us by Jesus. We'll think more about that next time.

2

EXERCISE

RIGHT AND WRONG

We have all constructed certain rules or laws that we live by, believing that if we keep them, we are more “right” before God. It is then only a small step before we start judging other people based on their performance regarding these rules or laws. The rules we make for ourselves are usually good things. However, we often abuse them. For example, as we struggle with the desire to be in control of our lives, we erect laws that try to maintain that control. These laws could be as simple as “Don’t cut me off the road,” or “The house must be kept tidy.” When people break these laws, we feel that we are losing control and that people do not respect us. Moreover, we feel that we are right and they are wrong. The usual result is anger, as we try to regain control of the situation and show just how right we are. Thus, instead of the law being used to tell us how we ought to love other people, we use it against other people.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. Give an example of a rule you have made for yourself and others that makes you feel good when it is kept, but irritated or depressed when it is broken.
2. How has your rule-keeping given you a sense of self-righteousness?
3. How does being mastered by this rule keep you from genuinely loving other people? Be specific.



3

BELIEVING THE GOSPEL

BIG IDEA

We have been focusing on the ways we minimize the gospel—the negative. This lesson turns our attention to the positive: What remedies has God given in the gospel to keep us from shrinking the cross and depending on our own effort?

NOTES:



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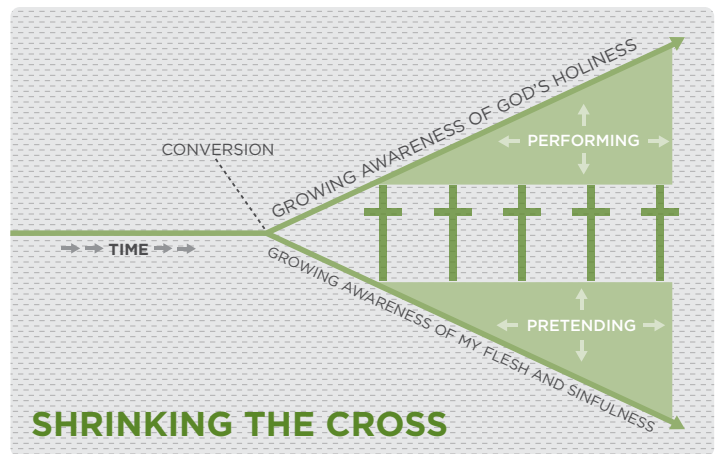
ARTICLE

BELIEVING THE GOSPEL

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE

In the last two lessons we used a visual illustration to better understand the gospel and the way it functions in our lives. Last time, we considered our propensity to “shrink the cross” by pretending and performing. In this session we want to see how a strong and vibrant belief in the gospel frees us from ourselves and produces true and lasting spiritual transformation.

At the root of the human condition is a struggle for righteousness and identity. We long for a sense of acceptance, approval, security, and significance—because we were designed by God to find these things in him. But sin has separated us from God and created in us a deep sense of alienation. Speaking of the Jewish people in his own day, Paul writes, “[T]hey did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own” (Rom. 10:3). We do the same thing. Theologically speaking, pretending and performing are just two sophisticated ways of establishing our own righteousness. When we pretend, we are making ourselves out to be better than we are. When we perform, we are trying to please God by what we do. Pretending and performing reflect our sinful attempts to secure our own righteousness and identity apart from Jesus.



To really experience the deep transformation God promises us in the gospel, we must continually repent of these sinful patterns. Our souls must become deeply rooted in the truth of the gospel so that we anchor our righteousness and identity in Jesus and not in ourselves. Specifically, the gospel promises of passive righteousness and adoption must become central to our thinking and living.

Passive righteousness is the biblical truth that God has not only forgiven our sin, but also credited to us Jesus’ positive righteousness. Romans 3 speaks of a righteousness from God that comes to us through faith: “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Rom. 3:21–22). Of this passive righteousness, Martin Luther writes:

It is called “passive righteousness” because we do not have to labor for it.... It is not righteousness that we work for, but righteousness we



receive by faith. This passive righteousness is a mystery that someone who does not know Jesus cannot understand. In fact, Christians do not completely understand it and rarely take advantage of it in their daily lives When there is any fear or our conscience is bothered, it is a sign that our “passive” righteousness is out of sight and Christ is hidden.

*The person who wanders away from “passive” righteousness has no other choice but to live by “works” righteousness. If he does not depend on the work of Christ, he must depend on his own work. So we must teach and continually repeat the truth of this “passive” or “Christian” righteousness so that Christians continue to hold to it and never confuse it with “works” righteousness. **

Luther reminds us that if we “wander away from passive righteousness,” our hearts will naturally tend toward self- or works-righteousness. To fight against our tendency to shrink the gospel in this way, we must consistently repent of false sources of righteousness and preach the gospel to ourselves, especially the truth of passive righteousness. We must cling to the gospel promise that God is pleased with us because he is pleased with Jesus. When we embrace the gospel in this way, seeing our sin is not scary or embarrassing. It actually leads to worship because Jesus has died for all of it, and liberating because we are no longer defined by it! Our righteousness is in Christ. The good news of the gospel is not that God makes much of us, but that God frees us to make much of Jesus.

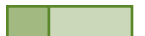
Adoption is the biblical truth that God has welcomed us into his family as his own sons and daughters by virtue of our union with Jesus. Part of the work of the Holy Spirit is to confirm this adoption within us: “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom. 8:15–16). Galatians 4:7 says the same thing in different words: “So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.”

But just like we wander away from passive righteousness, we are also prone to forget our identity as God’s children. We live like orphans instead of sons and daughters. Rather than resting in God’s fatherly love, we try to gain his favor by living up to his expectations (or our mistaken view of them). We live life on a treadmill, trying to be “good Christians” so God will approve of us. To fight back against our tendency to shrink the gospel in this way, we must continually repent of our orphan-like mentality and dwell on our true identity as God’s sons and daughters. By faith, we must cling to the gospel promise that we are adopted as God’s children. Jesus’ righteousness has been credited to us apart from works (Rom. 4:4–8). We don’t need to do anything to secure

* Martin Luther, preface to his *Commentary on Galatians*, as quoted in *Sonship* (World Harvest Mission, 2002).

God's love and acceptance; Jesus has secured it for us. When we embrace the gospel in this way, the infinite standard of God's holiness is no longer fearful or intimidating. It leads to worship, because Jesus has met it for us. Our identity is in him. The good news of the gospel is not that God favors us because of who we are, but that he favors us in spite of who we are.

At the root of all our visible sins lies the invisible struggle for righteousness and identity. In other words, we never outgrow the gospel. As Martin Luther wrote, "Most necessary is it that we know [the gospel] well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually." As we realize our tendencies toward pretending and performing—our attempts to build our own righteousness and identity—we must repent of sin and believe anew in the promises of the gospel. This is the consistent pattern of the Christian life: repentance and faith, repentance and faith, repentance and faith. As we walk this way, the gospel will take root more deeply in our souls and Jesus and his cross will become "bigger" in the day-to-day reality of our lives.



3

EXERCISE

SELF-ASSESSMENT: ORPHANS VS. CHILDREN

This is a practical exercise to reveal our sinful tendencies to manipulate life and our daily need to return to Christ. This exercise will humble you, which is one of the first steps in serving Christ and others. Read through each bulleted description from left to right. Under “The Orphan,” check the box if you see that tendency in yourself. Underline the words that most apply. Under “The Son/Daughter,” check the boxes that describe where you most want to grow, underlining the key words.

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE

THE ORPHAN

- Lacks a vital daily intimacy with God
- Anxious about friends, money, school, grades, etc.
- Feels as if no one cares about you
- Lives on a success/fail basis
- Needs to look good
- Feels guilty and condemned
- Struggles to trust things to God
- Has to fix your problems
- Not very teachable
- Is defensive when accused of error or weakness
- Needs to be right
- Lacks confidence
- Feels discouraged and defeated
- Strong-willed with ideas, agendas, and opinions
- Solution to failure: “Try harder”
- Has a critical spirit (complaining and bitterness)
- Tears others down
- A “competent analyst” of others’ weaknesses
- Tends to compare yourself with others
- Feels powerless to defeat the flesh
- Needs to be in control of situations and others
- Looks for satisfaction in “positions”
- Looks for satisfaction in “possessions”
- Tends to be motivated by obligation and duty, not love

THE SON/DAUGHTER

- Feels freed from worry because of God’s love for you
- Learning to live in a daily partnership with God
- Not fearful of God
- Feels forgiven and totally accepted
- A daily trust in God’s sovereign plan for your life
- Prayer is a first resort
- Content in relationships b/c you are accepted by God
- Freedom from making a name for yourself
- Is teachable by others
- Open to criticism b/c you rest on Christ’s perfection
- Able to examine your deeper motives
- Able to takes risks—even to fail
- Encouraged by the Spirit working in you
- Able to see God’s goodness in dark times
- Content with what Christ has provided
- Trusting less in self and more in the Holy Spirit
- Aware of inability to fix life, people, and problems
- Is able to freely confess your faults to others
- Doesn’t always have to be right
- Does not gain value from man-made “props”
- Experiences more and more victory over the flesh
- Prayer is a vital, ongoing part of the day
- Jesus is more and more the subject of conversation
- God truly satisfies your soul



4

LAW & GOSPEL

BIG IDEA

We are still thinking about how the gospel interacts with our lives, but now we are doing it by considering the gospel's relationship to the law. What is the law? Does God expect me to obey it? What is the purpose of the law? How does the law help me to believe the gospel? How does the gospel help me to obey the law? These are the questions before us in this lesson.

NOTES:



4

ARTICLE

THE LAW & THE GOSPEL

Even a casual reader can see that the Bible is full of commands, prohibitions, and expectations. It tells us what to do and what not to do. These rules or laws often present an obstacle to faith. Non-Christians object to Christianity because it seems like “just a bunch of rules and regulations.” And even faithful Christians struggle to understand how the law of God and the gospel of God relate to each other. After all, if we are reconciled to God by grace and not by works, does it really matter whether we obey or not?

When we misunderstand the relationship between law and gospel, it leads to two opposite but equally destructive errors: **legalism** and **license**. Legalists continue to live under the law, believing that God’s approval is somehow dependent on their right conduct. Licentious people dismiss the law, believing that since they are “under grace,” God’s rules don’t matter much. These two errors have been around since the days of the apostles. The book of Galatians is written to combat the error of legalism: “Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” (Gal. 3:3). The book of Romans addresses the error of license: “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” (Rom. 6:15).

Both legalism and license are destructive to the gospel. To avoid these pitfalls, we must understand the biblical relationship between law and gospel. In a nutshell, here’s how God designed it to work: the law drives us to the gospel and the gospel frees us to obey the law. Realizing all that God expects of us should drive us in despair to Christ. And once we are united with Christ, the indwelling Holy Spirit causes us to delight in God’s law and gives us power to obey it. In his commentary on Romans, Martin Luther summarized it this way: “The law, rightly understood and thoroughly comprehended, does nothing more than remind us of our sin and slay us by it, and make us liable to eternal wrath The law is not kept by man’s own power, but solely through Christ who pours the Holy Spirit into our hearts. To fulfill the law ... is to do its works with pleasure and love...[which are] put into the heart by the Holy Ghost.”

Read that last sentence again: “To fulfill the law... is to do its works with *pleasure* and *love*.” Just knowing what God requires is not enough. Obeying him “because it’s what we’re supposed to do” is not sufficient. Truly fulfilling the law means obeying God out of pleasure and love: “I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart” (Ps. 40:8).

How do we become the kind of people who love God and delight in his law? Answer: through the gospel.

* Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, J. Theodore Mueller, trans. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2003), pp. xxiii, xv, 110.



First, it is through the gospel that we become aware of our disobedience to God's law. The first step of the gospel journey is to become aware that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), and that our disobedience to God's law places us under his curse: "For it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law'" (Gal. 3:10).

Second, it is through the gospel that we are freed from the curse of the law. The gospel is the good news that God is willing to forgive us if we turn to Jesus and are justified—declared "not guilty" in God's sight—by faith in him. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.' He redeemed us in order that...through Christ Jesus...by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit" (Gal. 3:13–14). Jesus has both atoned for our imperfection and attained our perfection through his work on the cross. The law no longer stands in judgment over us. In biblical language, we are no longer "under the law" (Rom. 6:14).

Third, it is through the gospel that God sends his indwelling Holy Spirit into us, transforming our hearts and enabling us to truly love God and others. As a result of our justification by faith, "God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us" (Rom. 5:5). We commonly read the phrase "the love of God" in this verse as God's love for us. But contextually and linguistically this phrase also has the sense of "love from God" or "love for God." Because God loves us, he has poured into our hearts his own capacity to love and delight in himself. Jesus prayed that the very love that God the Father has for his Son would be in us: "I have made you known to them...*in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them*" (John 17:26).

A true Christian obeys God's law, then, not out of obligation or duty, but out of love, for "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10). Both legalism and license are fundamentally self-centered. They are not concerned with delight in God or in his law, but with self: "I keep the rules" or "I break the rules." But the gospel frees us from our self-concern and turns us outward. We see that God's law is not constraining but freeing: it is a "law of liberty" (James 1:25 ESV). It is a law that points us to Jesus.

Romans 10:4 says, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (ESV). In other words, the end, the goal, the point of the law is to drive us to Jesus. When we really "get" what this verse is saying, we begin to see that every command in Scripture points us in some way to Jesus, who fulfills that command for us and in us. He is our righteousness. We no longer need to construct our own.

We are unable to do what the law commands us to do, but Jesus did it for us. And because he lives in us by his Spirit, we are enabled to do it, not from obligation, but from delight. So every command in Scripture points us to our own inadequacy (the bottom line of the Cross Chart), magnifies the good and holy nature of God (the top line of the Cross Chart), and causes us to look to Jesus as the One who forgives our disobedience and enables our obedience. In other words, the law drives us to Jesus and Jesus frees us to obey the law.

4

EXERCISE

THE GOSPEL GRID & THE LAW

A “grid” is a pattern for thinking, a filter to run things through, a particular way of looking at something. Understanding the Bible and articulating the gospel in creative, relevant ways involves applying various grids to make sense of truth. In Lesson One we gave you what we call the “gospel grid,” illustrated by the Cross Chart. This week we are going to learn how to understand the law of God through that grid.

Every Scripture passage asserts a moral imperative, either explicitly or implicitly. For instance, a verse may tell you not to lie. You can respond to this imperative in three different ways.

LEGALISM: You can try your very best not to lie. This is what it means to live under the law. You will inevitably discover that you cannot not lie, even when you lower your standards about what that means.

LICENSE: You can admit from the start that you cannot obey this command and simply dismiss it as a biblical ideal you are not actually expected to obey. This is what it means to abuse God’s grace and give in to sin.

GOSPEL: This is the grid we want to learn. It goes like this:

1. **God says**, “Do not lie.” (Top line of the Cross Chart: God’s holiness)
2. **I cannot obey** this command because I am a sinner. (Bottom line of the Chart: my sinfulness)
3. **Jesus did obey** this perfectly. (I can point to countless examples in his earthly life as recorded in the Gospels.) Jesus did what I should do (but can’t) as my substitute so that God can accept me (2 Cor. 5:17).
4. **Because Jesus obeyed** the law perfectly and now lives in me, and because I am accepted by God, I am now free to obey this command by his grace and power at work in me.

Applying this grid to your study of the Bible will help you believe the gospel and obey the law without falling into legalism or license. This empowers you to experience the reality that the gospel changes everything.



PRACTICE

Read a passage together and apply this grid. (Pick from James 2:1-7, Phil 4:4-7, 1 Peter 3:9)

What is the command?

Why can't you do it? (Be specific about your particular struggles to obey this command.)

How did Jesus do this perfectly? (Note specific examples in the Gospels.)

How can God's Spirit in you empower you to obey this command (in specific situations)?

