

FBC Biblical Counseling Lab
Biblical Counseling and a Clear Gospel
John Morrison - February 3, 2022

I. *Why must biblical counselors be clear on the gospel?*

A. Some counselees do not know Christ

People who request counseling from a church sometimes do not know Christ and stand condemned (John 3:18). Since Jesus is “*the propitiation for our sins and not for ours only, but also for the whole world*” (1 John 2:2), biblical counselors want to help every counselee come to know Him if they don’t. This is difficult when people don’t even know they lack a relationship with God. Some do not know that we all are sinners under the eternal judgment of a holy God. Some think that if they used to go to church or because they are not Jewish or Muslim, they must be Christians. Others think they are pretty good people and assume that puts them in good standing with God.

So, the first reason biblical counselors need to be clear on the gospel is that the Bible says those without Christ go to hell, and we are in a position of offering them the good news of the gospel.

B. Some counselees do know Christ, but do not know how the gospel helps them grow.

Other people come to biblical counseling and are saved, but their gospel grasp is like that of the Galatians or Colossians. If they’re like the Galatians, *they feel pressure to obey God as if that verifies that they are saved*. Such people may think that **justification** was Christ’s work, but **sanctification** is up to them. Kind of like, “I was saved by faith in Christ, but I better do right if I **really** want to be accepted by God.” If they are like the Colossians, they feel like they *need some deeper truth, insights, visions, and angelic visits more than just Jesus dying for their sins* to give them favor and acceptance with God. For them it’s kind of like, “I know Jesus died for my sins to give me eternal life, but some teachers, I need something more supernatural than that if I am going to really be good with God.”

But in Colossians 1:21-2:23, Paul says he wants to present them holy, blameless and beyond reproach. He writes in **Colossians 2:6**, “***As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.***” That means our walk (growth in maturity) is somehow connected to how we came to know Christ.

So, the second reason biblical counselors need to be clear on the gospel is that their primary job will be helping believers in Christ pursue maturity, and grasping the gospel is the power for that.

C. Regarding Maturity

But **Colossians 2:6** raises a question. ***How did you receive Christ?***

If you received Christ with conditions attached involving what you had to do to be sure you are the Lord’s, then you will naturally think that your sanctification (your growth in Christlikeness) rests on things you must do. And you might fear if you do not do them adequately, you might not be saved.

But if you received Christ **by grace through faith**, then the way that we are to walk – i.e., the way we are to grow in Christlikeness (sanctification) – is also by grace through faith.

If that is so, it doesn’t mean you do not care about God’s commands (see Romans 6:1). It means that you have reassurance that as the Lord supplied all you needed to be justified, you can trust He will provide all you need to grow in Him. In fact, if you were saved by grace through faith, you have an easier time grasping the wonderful truth that not only did you receive eternal life as a gift, but you became a new person with a new identity – as a gift because of your faith. Your growth is more learning how to appropriate what God already has done in you than you pressing hard to be a different person. It also doesn’t mean that if you don’t follow through, that you are not saved. After all, you were saved by grace through faith, not by works. So, you can’t be “kept” by works.

However, if you don’t apply yourself to grow, God has plenty of biblical warnings and consequences on earth and in eternity which He has already made plain for disobedient believers. We can teach those rather than threaten people who have believed on Christ that they are not saved.

II. Issue Defined

- A. The issue, then, is **what is the gospel?**
- B. For our purposes in this class, we are going to contrast two conflicting messages that are expressed by people who love Christ, revere the scriptures, love the church, walk with God, and take seriously the commands of God. These two messages agree with one another on some central facts of the gospel but contradict each other in what constitutes faith.
- C. Group One (“Free Grace” / “Cheap Grace”)
The first group (including FBC elders and pastors) say that the Gospel is, “Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for the sins of the world, was raised from the dead and offers eternal life to all who believe on Him for it.” If pushed to do so, these might describe themselves as “free grace.” Those from the other perspective sometimes disparagingly call this position “cheap grace” or “easy believism.” Group One points to verses like John 1:11-13, 3:14-18, 3:36, 4:41-42, 4:53, 5:24, 5:40, 5:47, 6:28-29, 6:35, 6:40, 6:47, 8:24, 11:25-27, 20:30-31; Acts 10:43, 13:38-39, 16:31; Romans 1:16, 3:22-26, 4:4-5, 5:1, 10:4; Galatians 2:16, 3:22; Eph. 1:13-14, 2:8-9; 1 Tim. 1:16; 1 John 5:11-13.
- D. Group Two (“Lordship”)
This group (including John MacArthur, John Piper, RC Sproul, et al) says believing the Gospel involves repenting of sin, believing that Jesus died for their sins and was raised from the dead, and continuing in faithful perseverance and surrender to the Lordship of Christ until the end of life. Adherents to this position say that repentance (which they define as turning from willful participation in known sin) and persevering in obedient surrender are not additional components to faith but necessary components of “true faith.” Some people refer to this group’s message as “Lordship Salvation.” This group points to passages like Matthew 7:13-14, 7:24-27, 10:22, 10:32-33, 10:37-39, 12:50, 13:1-23; Mark 9:43-49; Luke 9:23-24, Luke 9:62; John 3:36; 2 Cor. 13:5; Hebrews 12:14; James 2:14, 2:19-24; 1 John 2:3-4, 2:15, 2:17b, 2:29, 3:6, 3:8a, 3:10, 3:14-15.
- E. The central thing they **agree** on is the main gospel fact: *Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for the sins of the world, was raised from the dead and offers eternal life to all who believe on Him for it.*
1 Corinthians 15:1-5 – The foundation of the Gospel is made up of historical facts
 1. I make known to you brethren the gospel which I preached and by which you were saved.
 2. Jesus is the Christ (the Messiah prophesied by the Scriptures)
 3. He died for our sins (in accordance with the Scriptures).
 4. He was buried (in accordance with the Scriptures).
 5. He was raised on the third day (in accordance with the Scriptures).
 6. He appeared to Peter, to “the Twelve” and then to 500 more.
- F. The central thing they **disagree** on is what God requires for a person to be saved. Or more to the point, since they both say they agree one must believe, what does it mean to “believe the gospel”?
 1. Group one believes the word means, **“to believe.”**
 2. Group two believes Group one’s definition is “mere intellectual assent.” They teach that the word *pisteuo* (“to believe”) and the word *pistis* (“faith”) means, **“to commit, as evidenced by willingly leaving behind sinful ways and by living obediently in the future.”**

- G. Practically speaking, what's the real difference?
1. Group One thinks that Group Two is frontloading (repentance) and rear-loading (perseverance) the gospel by adding something before and after believing the gospel as "necessities of faith" that **believing the Gospel** does not require, but which – they agree – believing the gospel helps bring about for those who walk obediently. Group One believes that adding to the gospel causes people to put confidence in their obedience rather than God's promise. Results of that include pressuring others to conform to God's standards, robbing God of the glory of His grace, robbing man of assurance of his relationship with God, and failing to teach believers how their maturity is an extension of God's grace. They also believe that Group Two misinterprets many scriptures, confusing eternal life ("gift of God") with discipleship ("learning an obedient walk"), resulting in believers not learning from warning passages and reward passages.
 2. Group Two thinks that Group One is offering a form of cheap grace that doesn't require anything of the believer but "saying you believe" and not backing it up by a changed lifestyle. As a result, they think that Group One is offering people who never "truly" have been born again "a false assurance of heaven," and that many will end up in hell because they were taught an incomplete gospel. They also think it weakens the church's witness to unbelievers because they believe that Group One's "so-called gospel" encourages people to act any way they want, without fear of consequences when they meet the Lord.

III. The Gospel

- A. Group One says that the Gospel is, "Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for the sins of the world, was raised from the dead and offers eternal life to all who believe on Him for it."
1. *The offense of calling this "cheap grace" is that no one who believes this gospel thinks that Jesus' death was cheap. But if they mean that it is cheap to the recipient, we have two replies: One, it is far more than cheap; it is actually free. (Romans 6:23) Two, how would turning from sin and submitting to His Lordship make it not cheap just because it "cost me my life"? My life scarcely increases the cost of a grace that already cost the life of Christ. John Morrison*
 2. *"Justification is God's legal act by which an unrighteous sinner who believes in Jesus Christ as Savior is declared righteous before God, because Christ's righteousness is imputed to him." Grace Notes #74 (Justification), Charlie Bing*
 3. *"As sinners, we are "justified freely by grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). The word redemption speaks of the price paid when Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again.... We obtain this grace "through faith in Jesus Christ" (Romans 3:22; cf., Gal. 2:16 and Eph. 2:8). That faith is our conviction that what God said about our eternal salvation through Christ as Savior is true." Ibid*
 4. *"There are many reasons why a correct view of justification is central to biblical Christianity. First, it maintains a clear gospel of grace without the addition of works at any time. Second, it helps us understand our new position before God as a basis and motivation for growing in godliness (sanctification). Third, it gives the believer in Christ assurance of salvation based on the sure promise of God that those who believe are justified and possess eternal life (John 5:24; Romans 5:1). Fourth, the believer need never fear condemnation (Romans 8:1, 33-34). Fifth, it helps us understand the distinction between justification and sanctification, which is so often confused when interpreting Bible texts." Ibid*
 5. *John 20:30-31 says the reason for presenting the seven miracles that John included is so people would believe on Christ, and by believing, they would have life in his name. Bing explains what that verse teaches as well as what the rest of the book repeatedly teaches:*

- a. *The purpose statement of John says **if we believe, we have eternal life.***
 - b. *The verb believe is used 98 times in John as **the condition for salvation.***
 - c. *The consistent result of believing in John is salvation. When one believes, one can know that he/she has eternal life as a present possession (John 5:24; 9:38).*
 - d. *The figures of speech used to picture belief in John (receive, look, hear, enter, feed, come) denote receptivity, agreement, or trust. All are essentially simple or passive activities. None communicates the idea of merit, work, effort, or achievement.*
Grace Notes #1 (**Condition for Salvation** in John), Charlie Bing
6. *The New Testament grounds our assurance of salvation on the promises God makes to the believer in His Word and not on the transforming work of God's Spirit in our lives.*
Zane Hodges, **Absolutely Free**, pg. 18 (under footnote #2).
 7. *Instead of promoting holiness, the doctrine of "Lordship Salvation" destroys the very foundation upon which true holiness must be built. By returning to the principles of the Law, it has forfeited the spiritual power of grace. Ibid. p. 18.*
 8. *To be sure... there are multitudes of people in the church who have never been saved, but this is due to their failure to understand the offer or to accept it. Ibid, p. 19*
 9. *What faith really is, in biblical language, is receiving the testimony of God. It is the inward conviction that what God says in the gospel is true. That alone is saving faith. Ibid, p. 30.*
- B. Group #2 teaches that **believing the gospel** includes "repenting of sin" (which they explain as turning away from willful participation in known sin), "believing that Jesus died for them and was raised from the dead," and "pressing on in faithful, obedient, surrender to the Lordship of Christ until the end of life." Adherents to this position say that turning from known sin and persevering in obedient surrender are not additional components to faith but necessary components of "true faith." Some people refer to this group's message as "Lordship Salvation." Here are some examples of what they say.
1. *"Salvation is defined not by what one does to get it but by what it produces." John McArthur, The Gospel According to Jesus, © Academie Books, 1988, book jacket*
 2. *"God's work of salvation includes a change of intent, will, desire, and attitude that inevitably produces the fruit of the Spirit." Op cit, p. xiii*
 3. *"I am certain that no one can be saved who is either unwilling to obey Christ or consciously rebellious against the lordship of Christ." Op cit, p. xiv*
 4. *"Christians of this age have been told that the only criterion for salvation is knowing and believing some facts about Christ." Op cit, p. 17*
 5. *"They hear... one-time profession of faith is more valid than the ongoing testimony of his lifestyle in determining whether to embrace him as a true believer." Ibid*
 6. *"Those who hold this view of the gospel teach that Scripture promises salvation to anyone who simply believes the facts about Christ and claims eternal life." p. 22*
 7. *"Genuine assurance comes from seeing the Holy Spirit's transforming work in one's life, not from clinging to the memory of some experience." Op cit, p. 23*
 8. *"Those who reject lordship salvation... stumble over the twin truths that salvation is a gift, yet it costs everything." Op cit, p. 31*
 9. *"What does it mean to believe in Christ? It means more than accepting and affirming the truth of who He is and believing what He says." Op cit, p. 47*
 10. *"They have been deceived by a corrupted gospel. They have been told that faith alone will save them, but they neither understand nor possess real faith. The 'faith' they rely on is only intellectual acquiescence to a set of facts. It will not save." Op cit, p. 170*
 11. *"The desire to do the will of God will be ever present in true believers." Op cit, p. 174*
 12. *"Obedience is the inevitable manifestation of true faith." Op cit, p. 175*

13. *“Scripture (Romans 4:4-5) says, ‘Now to the one who works [this is the one who submits to a religion of human achievement], his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly [this is the one who submits to the religion of divine accomplishment], his faith is reckoned as righteousness.” Op cit, p. 181 (Here he defines “believes” as “submits to the religion of divine accomplishment,” which he has described throughout the book as = repenting + believing + obedience.)*
14. *“Many approach the gate turn away upon finding the cost.” Op cit, p. 184*
15. *“Perfection is the standard; direction is the test.” Op cit, p. 192*
16. *“Repentance is an appropriate summary for the offer of the gospel today.” “A Theology of Luke-Acts” (Darrell Bock, DTS Professor and renown scholar), p. 131*
17. *“True obedience is one of the toughest requirements of the Christian life. Apart from obedience, there can be no salvation, for salvation without obedience is a self-contradictory impossibility.... We need to preach again... a Christ who will be Lord of all or else He is not Lord at all.” (From I Call it Heresy! by A.W. Tozer)*

IV. Why Do Each of These Two Groups Adhere to Their Doctrine

- A. They believe it is the best explanation of what the Bible says.
- B. For example, **Group Two** cites the following passages.
 1. Matthew 10:22 *You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.*
 2. Matthew 10:32-33 *Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.*
 3. Luke 9:23-24 *And He was saying to them all, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.”*
 4. Luke 9:62 *But Jesus said to him, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”*
 5. Romans 2:6-9 *God, who WILL RENDER TO EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life. But to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation, there will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek.*
 6. James 2:14, 19-24 *And what does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?... You believe that there is one God. You do well; even the demons believe – and tremble. But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not our father Abraham justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with works, and by works, faith was made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which says, Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness. And He was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works and not by faith only.*
 7. 1 John 2:3-4 *By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, “I have come to know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.*
 8. 1 John 2:5c-6 *By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.*
 9. 1 John 3:6 *No one who abides in Him sins. No one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.*

- C. **Group One** would respond to those passages by saying:
1. Mt 10:22 – “Saved” here – as in >90% of the NT uses – is not “eternal life” saved. It is the idea of being saved from a fruitless Christian life (something the other side says doesn’t exist).
 2. Mt. 10:32-33 – “Deny” here is in terms of deny them the co-regency he offers faithful believers (metachoi). PLEASE see 2 Tim. 2:11-13 for an example.
 3. Luke 9:23-24 – similar here to Mt. 10:22 – “lose your life” does not mean go to hell. It means that you lose the profit that would have been gained if you had lived for Christ. (PS *Part of why we know this is that if I had to do something to be saved, it would not be a gift.*)
 4. Luke 9:62 – This is true. They are not fit for ruling with Christ in the kingdom because they turned away while they were on earth after coming to faith. Many will be in this place.
 5. Romans 2:6-9 - This is the simple truth that God renders to us all according to our deeds – whether at the Great White Throne judgment or at the Bema.
 6. James 2 - The focus is not on justification before God. James has already called them “brethren” repeatedly in the book. What’s more, Abraham’s “justification before God” was Genesis 15:6 (“He believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness”), but James is talking about Genesis 22 when he offered Isaac. That was not justification in the sense of being made right with God. That is justification in a different way – it is proof before man that someone has followed through. It is proof of a person applying their faith. As for “does that faith save him,” again, he is not talking about “justification” salvation, since they are brothers in Christ and since the example he gives is not a passage about justification with God. “That faith save him” is once again referring to a fruitful and rewarded Christian life.
 7. For the 1 John passages, the book focus is on abiding fellowship with God – are you abiding in Him? It is not a book testing to see if you are a Christian. Just look at 1:1-10, 2:12-14, and at 1 John 5:1-15 – it is written to people who are believers. It is saying that if you do not abide, you will not reflect Christ. You will sin. It is similar to Romans 7:17, 20 that says, “it is no longer I who sin, but sin which indwells me.” Paul is not in Romans 7 denying his culpability; he is saying it is not his true self. Similarly, 1 John (see 3:6, 5:18) is not saying true Christians do not sin (after all, remember 1:7-9). Nor is it saying, “true Christians do not **practice** sin... we just occasionally accidentally fall into it.” It is saying that when we abide in Christ, we will not sin (see 1:6-7). See Galatians 5:16 to verify this, as well as Romans 8:4-6. John is saying that when we sin, we deny God because we are not abiding in Him, and when we do not abide in Him, we are not reflecting our true (new) nature.
- D. **Group Two** says that *they see people who claim faith in Christ but live disobedient lives. When such lives clearly dishonor Christ, they can’t believe such people are saved and on their way to heaven.*
- E. **Group One** would agree that there are believers who live disobedient lives. They do not have a hard time believing they will go to heaven because God promised that eternal life was a gift to those who believe – not to those who persevere. Plus, God’s Word has lots of warnings about what happens to a believer who lives a disobedient life. Since that is worth its own class, we won’t go there now, but for starters, just read 1 John 2:28 and 2 Cor. 5:10-11.
1. We would add something more. This statement by those in Group Two who say it is a scary argument because it misunderstands existing scripture, overlooks their own sin, and requires man’s logic regarding salvation, rather than the clear teaching of scripture.
 2. If you want to know what real Christians are capable of, just read every command to believers in the NT. They are warnings to believers NOT to do those things – something not necessary if they couldn’t do those things.
 3. Plus, the NT doesn’t waste time warning non-Christians about particular sin patterns as their real problem. Their problem is that they do not believe in the only Son of God (John 3:18).

- F. Group two believes that many warning passages in the NT (see examples below under “G”) are warnings that people are not actually saved.
- G. Group One believes that the NT warning passages that Group Two refers to are warnings that Christians will undergo a type of judgment on earth or at the judgment seat of Christ (not hell).
1. 2 Cor. 5:10-11 *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done – whether good or bad. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God, and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences.*
 2. Hebrews 6:1-8 *Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God... and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.... For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the good word of God... and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame....*
 3. Hebrews 10:26-31 *For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.... How much severer judgment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God and regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified.... The Lord will judge His people. It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*
 4. 1 John 2:28 *Now little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming.*
 5. There are two dangers about this particular error.
 - a. We no longer look to what Jesus promised, and what we believed for assurance. Instead, our assurance is, “well, at least I didn’t sin in this and such a way.” When my assurance of salvation counts on me and not on Christ and His promises, I am in trouble. It is the reason that when John Piper was asked 10-15 years ago, what the number 1 spiritual problem he saw in his church, he said, “Lack of assurance of salvation is clearly #1.”
 - b. It means I will not understand the warning passages the way they were meant to be understood. That shortchanges believers and whole churches from understanding a lot of scripture, including things like how completely we have been forgiven, how much we are loved, how much has been accomplished by the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, my new identity, reward, and the loss of rewards that emanates from not abiding in the complete forgiveness offered by Christ such that obedience from gratitude is the result, but rather, instead abiding in our own faithfulness.
- H. Group Two believes that giving people assurance of salvation when their lives do not comport with NT living is giving them a false assurance based on a false gospel, with the result that they are going to spend eternity in hell and might have repented if they had been more accurately warned. By the way, this is very inconsistent among many of those who believe this is the gospel. Most of them believe that certain people are chosen by God and will believe because they have been chosen.
- I. Group One believes:
- a. But assurance for believing the gospel is included in the gospel and we believe Group Two is misunderstanding other passages and then changing the offer.
 - b. God warns believers about attitude and behavior and consequences. He has told them they will be judged based on how they have lived and has taught them that their “hereafter” experience – at least in the millennium if not in the eternal state – will be compromised.

- J. Group One believe, “By front-end loading the gospel (with turning from participating in sinful behavior patterns even before you have been born again and thereby enabled by the Holy Spirit to do so) and back-end loading the gospel (with what righteousness you better do from now on and what unrighteousness you better avoid doing now that you claim Christ), you not only fail to teach the scriptures accurately, you fail to offer people the free gospel which might have really given some people the hope they needed. Your additions to the gospel – in addition to being additions to the gospel, its own error (Gal. 1:6-10) – may well have kept people from believing on Christ. Since fewer on the free grace side believe in individual election in the manner common to Lordship people (and all in Reformed circles), there are probably more people in this camp who could consistently believe this.
- K. Group One does have some questions for Group Two:
1. How does a person know she/he has repented adequately? For example, if a man thinks he believes the gospel when it was offered, but continues having frequent problems controlling his anger, or he continues to drink alcohol injudiciously, or a woman thinks she believed the gospel, but continues her critical spirit and her tendency towards judging others and her difficulty forgiving them, or a teenage girl who believes on Christ still is attracted to girls, does that mean they didn’t really repent of their sins properly when they believed the gospel, and therefore are not yet saved?
 2. Which ongoing sin patterns disqualify a person as a true believer?
 3. Since salvation requires perseverance, when do you know that you have persevered enough be confident that you truly are saved? What would happen if you just stopped walking with the Lord, perhaps out of sorrow or loneliness, after 35-40 years of following Him? Maybe you didn’t deny Him, you just stopped practicing the disciplines.
 4. If the apostle John didn’t call for repentance in the book about how to be saved (The Gospel of John), was his gospel incomplete?

V. Resources

- A. *Grace Notes* by Charlie Bing www.gracelife.org/resources/gracenotes
- B. *Free Grace Soteriology* by David R. Anderson
- C. *Grace, Salvation and Discipleship* Charlie Bing
- D. *Salvation* by Dr. Earl Radmacher
- E. Tracts by *Evantell* or *Grace Evangelical Society*
- F. *The Gospel According to Jesus* John MacArthur