

GOSPEL FOUNDATIONS



AN INTRODUCTION TO
CHRISTIANITY'S TEACHING
AND PRACTICES

Written by Brandon Cooper

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SUGGESTED READING LIST

- ☐ *Hope Has Its Reasons*, Rebecca Manley Pippert
 - ☐ *Living by the Book*, Howard Hendricks
 - ☐ *Taking God at His Word*, Kevin DeYoung
 - ☐ *Praying the Bible*, Donald Whitney
 - ☐ *Reading the Bible Supernaturally*, John Piper
 - ☐ *Prayer*, Timothy Keller
 - ☐ *Prayer*, John Onwuchekwa
 - ☐ *Praying with Paul*, D.A. Carson
 - ☐ *The Gospel*, Ray Ortlund
 - ☐ *The Prodigal God*, Timothy Keller
 - ☐ *Basic Christianity*, John Stott
 - ☐ *Living the Cross-Centered Life*, C.J. Mahaney
 - ☐ *Disciplines of Grace*, Jerry Bridges
 - ☐ *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*, Jonathan Dodson
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GOSPEL FOUNDATIONS

LESSON ONE **THE WORD**

HEARING THE WORD

Welcome to Gospel Foundations!

In these six weeks, we will lay a foundation for our faith. That means we will focus especially on the *gospel*—the good news of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus—as well as two of the most important *means of grace*, the Word and prayer. J.C. Ryle, in his classic work, *Holiness*, highlights how important these means of grace are for our growth in the gospel:

One thing essential to growth in grace is diligence in the use of private means of grace. By these I understand such means as a man must use by himself alone, and no one can use for him. I include under this head private prayer, private reading of the Scriptures, and private meditation and self-examination.¹

Where should we start? It might make sense to start with the gospel, since that is the ground of all true Christian thinking and living (as we'll see). Or we could start with prayer: after all, what could be more important than our intimacy with God the Father?

However, it is best to start each week with the Word, because without grounding ourselves in God's revealed truth, we could quickly fall into a false gospel and find ourselves praying to a god of our own imagining!

That means each week we will open with an extended passage or two from God's Word. We will learn not only to *read* God's Word, but to *meditate* on it—turning our time of study into a time of worship, self-examination, gospel understanding, and ultimately prayer. Sounds good, doesn't it!

I find that many of us settle for surface engagement with God's Word, rather than chewing on it slowly, truly savoring every last bit of it. We would do well to heed Puritan preacher David Clarkson's advice on this point:

Be much in meditation if you desire the effect of your devotions to linger. The heart takes fire while the mind is musing. The sparks that fall from heaven upon your heart during preaching or praying will die unless you blow on them with meditation.²

In fact, our first passage emphasizes the importance of *meditating* on God's Word (called "the law" in this passage, as the Hebrew word for law, *torah*, often refers to the entirety of the Hebrew scriptures).

But before we get there, how do we move from mere reading to true meditation? Simply by asking good questions. Each week we will ask the same questions (plus a question specifically focusing on the week's topic) of whatever passage is before us, growing in our ability to read, study, and meditate well. There are many good questions we can ask of God's Word. In fact, we've compiled a lengthier list of them in Appendix B. I would encourage you to turn there if you're ever struggling with understanding the meaning of a passage, because Scripture rewards thoughtful

¹ *Holiness* (1877. Reprint, abr. ed., Chicago: Moody, 2010): 177.

² As quoted in *Voices from the Past: Puritan Devotional Readings* (vol. 2), ed. Richard Rushing (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2016): 24.

investigation. If you don't have the appendix handy though, you can always ask the six basic questions of any text: who, what, where, when, why, and how?

- *Who* . . . is the author? the audience? the subject? performing the action?
- *What* . . . is happening? the meaning of this word? the significance of this phrase? the implication of this statement? the theme of this passage?
- *Where* . . . is the author? the audience? the action taking place?
- *When* . . . is the author writing? did the action take place?
- *Why* . . . did the author write this? say it like this? use this tone?
- *How* . . . can I put into practice in the next 48 hours what I've learned in this passage?

Asking even just these six simple questions will increase your understanding markedly.³

For the purposes of this study, however, we're going to use 2 Timothy 3:16-17 as our guide:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Paul reminds us that Scripture is useful for four distinct, but related tasks: teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. Note that these are ordered chronologically. Scripture first teaches us. As we learn what it is teaching, we next feel the sting of rebuke where we're not living in accord with it. Third, it corrects us, showing us how we should live instead. And finally, as we apply it to our lives, we are trained to live as God intends—thoroughly equipped for every good work!

With those four steps in mind, let's consider some general questions we could ask under each heading.

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*?

- What does this passage mean (to its original audience, for us today)?
- What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?

Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*?

- As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?

Correcting: What does God want me to *do*?

- Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe?
- Is there a command to be obeyed?

³ For more on this, and a helpful illustration of how rewarding asking these questions can be, see Howard Hendricks, *Living by the Book: The Art and Science of Reading the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2007 [1991]): 94-99.

Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ?

- How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel?
- Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?

(If you're a little concerned about that last step, don't worry. We're going to spend quite a bit more time on it in week three.)

Let's try it out by looking at our first passage, Psalm 1. Read it over slowly a few times. Then ask our meditation questions of the text.

¹ *Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
² but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.*

⁴ *Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.*

⁵ *Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.*

⁶ *For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.*

PSALM 1

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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Using Psalm 1 as a foundation, how would you explain to someone beginning the Christian life the importance of regular, meditative engagement with the Word of God?

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PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Each week we will suggest four other passages for reading, studying, and meditation. If you wanted, you could choose one to study each day, providing you with a passage for your private worship time five days out of the week. We would highly recommend studying the preaching passage for the next Sunday as well, giving you six days of material, with one cheat day (which you don't have to take!).

- ☐ 2 Timothy 3:16-17
- ☐ Isaiah 55:8-11
- ☐ Joshua 1:7-9
- ☐ Hebrews 4:12-13

DOING THE WORD

As is evident even from our approach to meditation, the goal of reading God's Word is not just *information* but *transformation*. Scripture teaches, rebukes, correct, and trains us *so that we might be equipped*. Each week in the "Doing the Word" section, we will consider the truths on which we've meditated and allow them to take deep root in our hearts, hoping they will produce the fruit God intends. Come prepared to discuss these questions openly with the class.

How often and how deeply do you read God's Word? In light of Psalm 1, would you like to see those answers change? How and why?

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What was your experience of meditating on Scripture (perhaps for the first time)? Write down any insights, thoughts, or feelings.

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How did this approach compare to your usual time spent in God's Word?

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GOSPEL FOUNDATIONS

LESSON TWO **PRAYER**

HEARING THE WORD

Last week we considered the foundational discipline of Scripture reading, study, and meditation. In particular, we learned to ask key questions of the text before us that will allow it to *teach, rebuke, correct, and train* us in righteousness.

This week we consider the other foundational discipline, prayer. Not surprisingly, the passage we will consider is the model prayer Jesus taught his followers. Read the passage, then prayerfully and carefully ask and answer our study/meditation questions.

⁵And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹This, then, is how you should pray:

*“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
¹⁰your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹Give us today our daily bread.
¹²And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.”*

¹⁴For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

MATTHEW 6:5-15

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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What are some of the lessons about prayer that Jesus offers in this teaching?

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In this famous passage, Jesus offers his followers some general teaching on prayer, as well as a model prayer to emulate. He warns his followers not to pray hypocritically, drawing attention to yourself and seeking human praise. And he warns his followers not to pray mindlessly, like the pagans of that day, seeking to cajole and coerce gods of your own imagining to do your bidding. Instead, we should pray in secret (though this doesn't mean we should never pray publicly or in community, as we can see in Jesus' own life and throughout the Bible), approaching our Father in the genuine warmth of true intimacy.

Eugene Peterson offers some keen insight on this point. He reminds us,

Prayer is the act in which we approach God as living person, a *thou* to whom we speak, not an *it* that we talk about. Prayer is the attention that we give to the one who attends to us. It is the decision to approach God as the personal center, as our Lord and our Savior, our entire lives gathered up and expressed in the approach.¹

Think how differently we would approach God if we believed him to be Father, as Jesus teaches us to pray, versus Cosmic Errand Boy, as the pagans believed. Think how differently we would approach God if we believed him to be our gracious Redeemer instead of Taskmaster—if we came to him on the basis of grace, not to demonstrate our own (false) merit as the hypocrites do.

Peterson continues by offering us a thought experiment to make this very point:

Suppose yourself at dinner with a person whom you very much want to be with—a friend, a lover, a person important to you. The dinner is in a fine restaurant where everything is arranged to give you a sense of privacy. There is adequate illumination at your table with everything else in shadow. You are aware of other persons and other activity in the room, but they do not intrude on your intimacy. There is talking and listening. There are moments of silence, full of meaning. From time to time a waiter comes to your table. You ask questions of him; you place your order with him; you ask to have your glass refilled; you send the broccoli back because it arrived cold; you thank him for his attentive service and leave a tip. You depart, still in companionship with the person with whom you dined, but out on the street conversation is less personal, more casual.²

This is a lovely picture of prayer. When we go into our rooms and close the door in order to experience true intimacy with our very Creator, the world retreats to the shadows so we can focus exclusively on communion with him. Prayer

¹ *Run with the Horses*, 2d ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009): 95.

² *Ibid.*, 96.

like this stems from the conviction that listening to God (especially as we read and meditate on his Word) and answering him (in our prayers) is worthy of my absolute attention.

And yet, this isn't always how prayer goes for us, is it? Peterson flips the illustration on its head to show what often transpires in our "time alone with God":

But there is a parody of prayer that we engage in all too often. The details are the same but with two differences: the person across the table is Self and the waiter is God. This waiter-God is essential but peripheral. You can't have the dinner without him, but he is not an intimate participant in it. He is someone to whom you give orders, make complaints, and maybe, at the end, give thanks. The person you are absorbed in is Self—your moods, your ideas, your interests, your satisfactions or lack of them. When you leave the restaurant, you forget about the waiter until the next time. If it is a place you go regularly, you might even remember his name.³

That is precisely the sort of prayer Jesus warns against. Praying like the hypocrites, who love Self more than God. Praying like the pagans, with a laundry list of items our "god" needs to take care of before we meet again.

So how do we pray instead? We come to our *Father*, in the warmth of a relationship we don't deserve, and our purpose is to experience true intimacy with him. That means listening to him and responding. We don't hesitate to present our requests or make our complaints to him—that is what people in relationship do—but that is not all we say. Jesus, in his model prayer, offers five *movements* in prayer that we should be careful to make.

PRAISE

First, we *praise* God. "Our Father in heaven, *hallowed be your name*." Like a young man enraptured by his new bride, we cannot even begin conversation with our Beloved without first commenting on his majesty, glory, and beauty. Now, if you're at all like me, you can quickly fall into repetition and platitudes at this point. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and I already told him how great he was yesterday—so what more is there left to say? This is why we spend time meditating on Scripture. As we *listen* to God in his Word, we *answer* him. He moves first; we respond. As he reveals himself to us, we praise him for what we see in that revelation.

If you're meditating carefully, this movement in prayer follows directly from your meditation. Remember, we've already asked the text, "What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?" What did you write down? Good. Now speak it back to God in praise, honoring—hallowing—his name.

PRIORITIES

Second, we seek God's *priorities*. We seek his kingdom and will. "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." How different this is from how we usually pray! Whereas we immediately proceed to *our* needs and wants, Jesus teaches us to focus first on *God's* priorities. God is God and we are not. He calls us to seek first his kingdom and righteousness before we consider our immediate physical needs (Matthew 6:28-33). This involves bringing our will into alignment with his own, reminding ourselves that his priorities should be our priorities. When we read some of the great prayers offered for the saints in Scripture, it is easy to see how far short of God's priorities our prayers often fall. Consider Paul's prayer for the Colossians:

³ Ibid., 97.

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.

COLOSSIANS 1:9-12

Evaluate how Christians pray for one another—and how you pray for others especially—in light of this prayer. Are your priorities truly in line with God's? Or do you spend more time praying for physical circumstances—relief from pain, financial windfall, conflict resolution—rather than praying that the Christians you know would live lives worthy of the Lord, pleasing him in every way, bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, and being strengthened to endure in thanksgiving?⁴ To pray that his will be done requires that we both *know* and *seek* his will for ourselves and those around us

When I pray for his kingdom to come and his will to be done, I am praying that the Christ-followers I know, such as my church, any family and friends who believe, and even myself would grow in grace and holiness. I am also praying that anyone within my sphere of influence who doesn't know Jesus as Lord and Savior yet would repent and believe as God brings them to newness of life. That all seems much more important than my laundry list of requests!

PROVISION

Third, we ask for his *provision*. “Give us today our daily bread.” God cares about us, and he wants to know what concerns us and what needs we have. Peter tells us, “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). As you think through your day, where do you see opportunities for God to prove his sufficiency? Do you have a financial need? A relational struggle? A deadline looming? Cast those concerns on him. Presenting our requests to God reminds us that he is able, whereas we are inadequate. He provides, strengthens, gives wisdom and grace, works miracles (such as transforming hearts), and has all things in his hands.

And because Jesus teaches us this prayer in the plural—give *us* today *our* daily bread—we bring the requests of those around us to our loving Father at this time too. You know how when someone tells you about a need or struggle, you say, “I’ll be praying for you”? Well, this is the time to make good on it!

Note that here, too, our prayer should spring (at least in part) from our meditation on his Word. When we ask, “What does this passage ask me to do, think, feel, or believe?” we are making ourselves aware of spiritual needs within us. I will not change or obey apart from his gracious activity in my life, so I present this request to him in faith that he hears and will answer.

PARDON

Fourth, we seek his *pardon*. We confess and forgive. “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Confession is a much-neglected discipline in this day. I suspect this stems from a lack of hearty self-examination during our private worship times. Too often we settle for scrolling through a few sinful tendencies, grading ourselves for how

⁴ For more on Paul's prayers and how to use them as a guide for your own prayers, read D.A. Carson's *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 2d. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014).

we did in the last day or two. But if we're meditating on God's Word deeply, we have already practiced self-examination: "As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?" There you go. You have a ready-made confession—and because you're meditating on many different passages, you will give yourself a much more comprehensive examination.

Of course, as we face our sin squarely, and revel in the forgiveness we receive in Christ, we can't possibly hold onto grudges against others. God has forgiven us more than we will ever have to forgive anyone else. So Jesus simply assumes that we will have already forgiven those who've sinned against us. In light of verses 14-15 though, I think he expected us to take a moment and test that assumption. Am I harboring bitterness or resentment toward anyone? Is anyone getting the cold shoulder from me? How am I doing when it comes to my judgmentalism? Now is the time to deal with the issue.

POWER

Lastly, we pray for his *power*, lest we succumb to temptation. "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." We are going to face temptations today—from the world, the flesh, and the devil—and we will not stand firm apart from God's power. In essence, we're telling God, "Unless you help us, we haven't got a chance here." But we know that God does help us, and has provided his Spirit to indwell us for just this reason. In asking God to "lead us not into temptation," we're not suggesting that, had we not prayed thus, he might otherwise have led us into temptation. Jesus is using the rhetorical device *litotes* here, a form of understatement in which we deny the negative. (We use this when we say of the local billionaire, "He's *not poor*.") In other words, when we ask God not to lead us into temptation, we're asking him to lead us positively *away from* temptation, and thus to deliver us from the devil's schemes to ensnare us.

As we close our time of prayer (get ready to leave the restaurant, in Peterson's analogy—though we expect the conversation to continue!), we pray that God would fill us with his Spirit that we might discern and do his will. We want to keep in step with the Spirit throughout the day, so we surrender ourselves fully to him. Borrowing language from Romans 6:13, we might offer every part of ourselves to God as an instrument of righteousness:

- our minds, that we would think his thoughts,
- our eyes, that we would not covet or lust,
- our mouths, that we would speak edifying, true, gracious words,
- our hearts, that we would treasure Christ above all,
- our hands, that we would do what pleases the Lord, and
- our feet, that we would go where he would have us go.

Amen!

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ Philippians 4:6-7
- ☐ Luke 11:1-13
- ☐ 1 Peter 5:6-7
- ☐ Matthew 6:28-34

DOING THE WORD

As we learned last week, our goal in studying Scripture is not just more *information* but genuine *transformation*. Thinking deeply about Jesus' teaching on prayer and examining the model prayer he taught us should change the way we pray. Review the Lord's Prayer throughout the week **and commit to memory the five movements of prayer**. Praise. Priorities. Provision. Pardon. Power.

In what ways do you fall into hypocritical or pagan habits when praying? Why do you think that is?

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As you think about Peterson's restaurant analogies for prayer, which version better captures your approach to prayer? Is God the beloved across the table from you, or is he the waiter that you speak to only when you need something?

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How would you like your prayer life to change in light of this week's study? Be specific.

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GOSPEL FOUNDATIONS

LESSON THREE THE GOSPEL

HEARING THE WORD

This week we will truly lay the gospel foundation. As Paul memorably says, “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11). If we try to build the edifice of our faith, our spiritual life, on any other foundation, it will ultimately crumble and fall.

Earlier in that same letter, Paul tells us that his ministry centered entirely on the gospel of Jesus Christ: “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:2). Note that at this point he is speaking to a group of Christ-followers—those who have already believed the gospel—not to a group of skeptics or seekers. He is not doing evangelism, but discipleship (as we normally define the words). What this shows us, then, is that the Christian never outgrows the gospel. As Tim Keller and others have said, the gospel is not the ABCs of the Christian life, but rather the A to Z of the Christian life. J. Knox Chamblin said it well when he remarked, “The Spirit does not take his pupils beyond the cross, but ever more deeply into it.”

What that means is whether you have only just started walking with Christ or have been following him for decades, the most important truth you can learn, the one message you must preach to yourself daily, the central meditation of your life is the *gospel*.

There are many passages we could consider as we dive deeply into the gospel, but perhaps the most complete, and yet succinct, statement comes in Paul’s letter to Ephesus.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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As you read this passage this week, what aspect of the gospel most struck or challenged you? Why?

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In laying this gospel foundation, Paul answers the three basic questions we all need to ask. (1) What is the problem? (2) What is the remedy? (3) What is the result?

THE PROBLEM

First, what is the *problem*? In verses 1-3, Paul paints a pretty bleak picture of humanity. One of the major disagreements among worldviews is our view of humanity. Are humans well, sick, or dead? Most of us agree that we're not well (there is too much evil to suggest otherwise), but are we simply sick? If we're sick, we can get healthy. We can change our diet and exercise more. Spiritually, we can increase our discipline and devotion. But Paul tells us that we're not sick—we're dead. And the dead can't do anything to change their lifestyles. It's too late for that.

We are dead because of our sin. Sin is rebellion against our King. It's not that we broke some of his laws; it's that we want the King *dead* so we can reign in his place. That's exactly what Adam and Eve decided in the garden of Eden. Their desire for autonomy led them to transgress God's law (Genesis 3:1-6). Nothing has changed. We listen to the world (the values and beliefs of the current culture, which is always in rebellion), the devil (the outside influence that encourages our rebellion), and our flesh (our sin nature, which seeks to please self).

And this is true of every last one of us: "*All of us* also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts" (verse 3). It doesn't matter how religious your up-bringing, you came into the world hardwired for sin and rebellion. (If you doubt that, just remember what every parent learns when raising their first bundle of joy: you don't ever have to teach selfishness or ingratitude—those come naturally! You have to teach *every* child to share, think of others, say "please" and "thank you.")

This is exceptionally hard news, but it's not the worst of it. The hardest pill to swallow is in verse 3: "Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath." Our biggest problem is not the world, the devil, or our flesh. Our biggest problem is—*God*. Because of our sin, we have incurred his just and righteous anger. We deserve eternal death. Why? Remember, we didn't just break some of the King's laws, which might merit a fine or some jail time; no, we want the King dead—and for that, we deserve his wrath.

The key word here is *deserve*. If we're honest with ourselves, we can acknowledge this is not how we feel. Others might deserve punishment, but surely we do not. Martyn Lloyd-Jones exposes how difficult it is to come to terms with our sinfulness:

You will never make yourself feel that you are a sinner, because there is a mechanism in you as a result of sin that will always be defending you against every accusation. We are all on very good terms with ourselves, and we can always put

up a good case for ourselves. Even if we try to make ourselves feel that we are sinners, we will never do it. There is only one way to know that we are sinners, and that is to have some dim, glimmering conception of God.¹

We convince ourselves that our sin is not that serious. And yet, when someone who blazes past us on the highway going a zillion miles per hour gets pulled over a moment later, we think, “Good. She got what she deserved.” Or much more seriously, when someone who shoots up a school or workplace gets hauled into court to face justice on multiple murder counts, we think, “Good. That’s what should happen.” So it is with us, when we stand before a holy, perfect, pure Judge, untainted by selfishness or vindictiveness. This is what we deserve. This is what should happen.

Our problem is very bleak indeed. Is there any hope?

THE REMEDY

I’m glad you asked. Second, what is the *remedy*? Paul lays this out for us in verses 4-9. After hearing about our hopeless predicament, we come to some of the sweetest words in all of Scripture: “But God.” The emphasis in verse 4 is entirely on God’s initiating love. The Greek reads literally, “God, being rich in mercy, through the greatness of his love with which he loved us, made us alive with Christ.” What wondrous love is this!

Notice that God addresses our problem. We were *dead* in sin, so he made us *alive* in Christ. Because we were dead, we couldn’t do anything to save ourselves. We needed someone else to do it for us. Enter grace: “It is by grace you have been saved.” Grace is *unmerited favor*. We didn’t earn it. We didn’t deserve it. But Jesus earned it for us, by living the perfect life we should have lived. And what we deserved—wrath—he took on himself at Calvary, so that we could receive what *he* deserved instead. As Paul famously put it, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). That’s the beautiful exchange that happens at the cross.

Why does God do this? He saves us “in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” His purpose is to put his glory on display throughout all ages. Because the work is his alone, the glory is his alone too—“so that no one can boast.” Rather than boasting in our “good” works, we glory in Christ’s finished work. We are to be living masterpieces of his grace. And that’s exactly how Paul describes us in the last verse (translated as “handiwork” in the NIV).

We must not miss that this happens *through faith*. Faith is the mechanism by which we lay hold of grace. As Paul says in verse 8, our salvation happens by grace through faith. In many ways, faith is simply an acknowledgment of the problem and remedy we’ve already discussed. Faith admits that we are sinners, deserving of wrath. And faith clings to the promise that what we could not do (save ourselves), God has done for us in Christ.

But faith is more than mere belief. It is resolute trust as well. In the 1800s, there was a world-famous tightrope walker named Blondin. He once carried a man on his back on a tightrope across Niagara Falls. When he reached the other side, he asked another spectator if he thought Blondin could carry him across too. The man replied in the affirmative, because he’d just seen it done. Blondin told him to hop on—to which the man replied, “Not on your life!” Why? Although

¹ *Seeking the Face of God: Nine Reflections on the Psalms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005): 34.

he *believed* Blondin could do it, he didn't *trust* Blondin to do it. (Quite rightly, we might think!) True faith acts in accordance with its beliefs. Those who truly believe live like what they believe is true, which takes us to the last section.

THE RESULT

Third, what is the *result*? Christianity carries with it a great danger, and Paul is very aware of it. If we're saved by grace alone, not by good works, why bother doing good works? Why not sin all the more so that grace can abound all the more? (Paul asks this very question rhetorically in Romans 6:1.) Simple: because we have been saved for a purpose. While we are not saved *by* good works, we are saved *for* good works. As the Reformers liked to say, we are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is not alone. True faith—truly repenting of our sin and trusting in Jesus for salvation—is accompanied by the good works which God prepared in advance for us to do. In the absence of those works, we should question whether we have genuine faith or not. James makes this point powerfully in a famous passage:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

JAMES 2:14-17

The Puritan preacher Joseph Alleine describes the result of grace beautifully:

No sooner does Christ call one by effectual grace, but he immediately becomes a follower of Christ. When God has given him a new heart, he henceforth walks in his statutes. Though sin may dwell in him truly a wearisome and unwelcome guest, it has no more dominion over him. He is not one man at church and another at home. He is not a saint on his knees and a cheat in his shop. He turns from all his sins and keeps all of God's statutes, though not perfectly, yet sincerely, not allowing himself the breach of any. Now he delights in the Word, and sets himself to prayer. The new man bears fruit unto holiness, and though he makes many a blot, yet the law and life of Jesus is what he looks for as his pattern.²

That is the gospel.

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

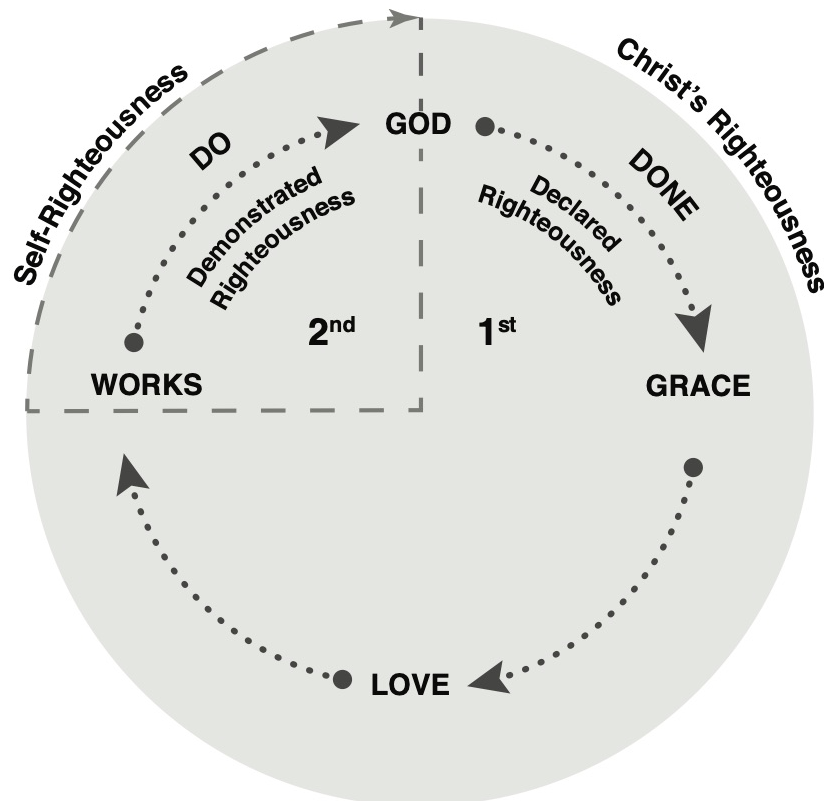
- ☐ Titus 3:3-8
- ☐ Romans 3:21-26
- ☐ John 1:9-14
- ☐ Luke 23:39-43

² As quoted in Richard Rushing, *Voices from the Past: Puritan Devotional Readings* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009): 11.

DOING THE WORD

The gospel, properly understood, should produce life transformation. Theologians speak of the difference between our *legal* righteousness and our *actual* righteousness. At the moment of our conversion, God declares us righteous in Christ. Righteousness simply refers to our performance record. At this point, we don't have much of a performance record (we're still gratifying the flesh, deserving God's wrath), so Jesus hands us his. From the very first moment we trust Jesus for salvation, God looks at us and sees Christ's sinless perfection. That is our *legal* righteousness.

But then God sends his Spirit to work in us—to produce the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), to conform us to the likeness of his Son (Romans 8:29), to make us zealous for good works (Titus 2:14). What happens? Our legal righteousness becomes our *actual* righteousness. We actually start to do the good works we should have been doing all along. So Zacchaeus, that miserly tax collector who was cheating his countrymen and hoarding his wealth, responds to the grace of God by changing his lifestyle: he pays back what he stole with restitution, and gives away half his possessions to help the impoverished (Luke 19:1-10). What was merely *declared* righteousness at first is now *demonstrated* righteousness—to the praise of his glorious grace! (Note: many “religious people,” like the Pharisees, try to save themselves. They jump right to the “Do,” trusting in their works to make them right with God. This is self-righteousness.)³



³ The following diagram is adapted from Randy Pope, *The Answer: Putting an End to the Search for Life Satisfaction*, rev. ed. (Johns Creek, GA: Life on Life, 2020 [2005]): 35-37.

How does this understanding of what Christianity teaches (the gospel) differ from or agree with what you believed before you studied our passage this week? What, if anything, changed? What truths did this lesson help you remember and understand?

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Do you believe that you were dead in sins, and deserving of God's wrath, prior to salvation? Why or why not?

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What does it mean to be saved by grace through faith? Try to explain it using your own words.

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How are you demonstrating the righteousness God declared when he saved you by grace? Or to put it another way, are you doing the good works he prepared in advance for you to do? If so, how? If not, why not?

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A GOSPEL PRIMER

Martin Luther said, “The gospel cannot be preached and heard enough, for it cannot be grasped well enough.” Being able not only to *understand* the gospel, but to *see* it in every passage—and to *preach* it to yourself and others in specific, meaningful ways—might be the most important skill a Christian can develop. While many of us can articulate the gospel using courtroom language (the doctrine of justification), few learn to expound all the gospel’s many facets. That lack means (1) we won’t be able to pick up on other gospel expressions when we see them in Scripture, so that we can’t read the Bible as a unified whole, a single story centering on Jesus, and (2) we won’t be able to apply the gospel to different circumstances, sins, and trials that we and others face.

To help us overcome this struggle, to help us develop “gospel fluency,” we are going to read Milton Vincent’s *A Gospel Primer*. Here is our challenge: for the next 31 days, read the prose version of the gospel in *A Gospel Primer* (pp. 57-65). Every day. Until you have it just about memorized.

In addition, each day read one of the 31 Reasons to Rehearse the Gospel Daily (pp. 13-54). You can either read them in order, or read the number corresponding to the day’s date. (If you choose this latter option, it is easier to continue reading it after our 31-Day Challenge concludes. I would highly recommend continuing, at least with the Reasons to Rehearse the Gospel Daily; it is a practice I have included as part of my daily private worship for some time, and it continues to be immensely profitable.)

As you dive deeper into the fullness of the gospel, a few things will happen. First, you will be able to answer the gospel meditation question in your daily Bible study much more easily, because you will have a wealth of understanding to draw on as you approach different texts. Second, you will be able to wield the gospel effectively in your battle against sin. It might be counter-intuitive, but *doctrine* is our most effective weapon against sin. This is because the doctrine of the gospel produces in us the joy in Christ that empowers our obedience. The gospel reorders our loves, transforms our desires, so that we want to pursue new habits. We’ll see how this works practically in the next two weeks.



GOSPEL FOUNDATIONS

LESSON FOUR

THREE WAYS OF RELATING TO GOD

HEARING THE WORD

Last week we learned the basic contours of the gospel message. This week, by looking at one of Jesus' most famous parables, we will see how that message shatters all our religious paradigms. Whereas most of us think of two possible ways of relating to God—we're either for him or against him—in this parable Jesus shows that the gospel offers a third, entirely different way of relating to God.

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²²"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

²⁵"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

³¹"My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

LUKE 15:11-32

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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How do the two sons relate to their father in this parable? How does that compare to the ways people might relate to God?

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Before we get into how this parable shatters our usual approach to religion, let's make sure we understand what Jesus is teaching here. Although the passage is well-known, that doesn't mean it is well-understood!

Notice that the man has two sons. That's a really important point, and one we're apt to miss. The first to act, the younger son, makes a shocking request. By asking for his inheritance now, he is, in effect, wishing his father dead. "I don't want you; I just want the things I'll get once you finally kick the bucket." Even more shocking than the son's unconscionable request is the father's response. He willingly divides his property between the two sons. In Greek, the word for property is *bios*, which means "life" (as in *biology*, the study of living things). When you depend on the land to make your living, as everyone does in an agrarian society, to sell part of the estate is to give up part of your life. Jesus would have stunned his hearers with this part of the story.

The part of the story most of us know well is the next part. The prodigal son fritters away his inheritance on wine and prostitutes, loses his "friends" once his money runs out, and eventually takes a job that no Jew should ever have done, considering pigs are unclean. It is then, while sharing food with an unclean animal, that he "comes to his senses." He sees the error of his ways, and elects to return home—not as a son, but as a hired hand. He fully expects to spend the rest of his life trying to pay his father back by working on the family farm.

Dad has other plans. He sees his son coming from "a long way off." Apparently, he casts his eye to the horizon with some frequency, hoping to see just this sight. His love for his wayward son is undiminished. Running to him, he welcomes him back as a *son*, rejecting (or maybe not even hearing in his excitement!) his son's plan to become a hired hand instead. And then he does what good parents do: he throws a big party.

Enter the older son. You'd forgotten about him, hadn't you?

He's easy to forget. After all, he's been out in the fields doing exactly what he's supposed to be doing. That doesn't make for good TV, so the camera has stayed off him.

But here he is again. And once he realizes what is happening, he loses it. He refuses to attend this shameful party, to pretend like irreparable damage to the family hasn't been done.

So, for the second time in the story, the father *initiates*—goes out to a son who is separated from him, and pleads with him. But the son is having none of it. "Look!" he says, refusing his father the courtesy of his title as father, "All these years I've been slaving for you—and what do I have to show for it?" By slaughtering the fattened calf for this party—a

lavish expense, especially in a culture that rarely ate meat—the dad has wasted *even more* of the older, obedient son's inheritance. All his work has been for nothing.

And then Jesus draws the parable to a close. The father makes a final plea: “My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” Interestingly, Jesus doesn't tell us what happens next. Does the older brother reconcile with his dad? What about his younger brother? We don't know.

Why is that?

Here's where Jesus starts to shatter our religious paradigms. In the typical reading of this parable—the one that forgets about the older son, as if he doesn't matter in the story—the prodigal son is the bad guy. After all, he has engaged in some flagrant, society-flaunting sins. Even today, in our permissive culture, we frown on people who frequent prostitutes. This guy is scum. There's no way around it. You can picture the Pharisees—part of Jesus' audience—celebrating at the end of Act One, when this punk gets what he deserves.

But that reminds us why Jesus is telling the parable in the first place. You see, there are *two* groups of people present for this series of parables. Luke 15:1-2 sets the scene: “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

Jesus tells this parable to two groups of people, because he wants each group—represented by the two sons—to see they need grace. And so he points out each group's *sin*.

The younger son's sin is obvious. He wanted his father dead so that he could taste the pleasures of the world. But is the older son really that different? He also doesn't care about his father. He describes life with Dad as “slaving for you,” and he resents that his father hasn't given him as much as he gave his younger brother. Do you see the connection? Neither son really loves his father; they both *use* their father to get what they really want. One is a bit more obvious about it (he actually tells his dad to drop dead), but both want Dad's stuff more than they want Dad.

What does that mean for us? It means that while some of us are separated from God because of our badness, others are lost because of their *goodness*. That's the older son's problem. It is not his sins keeping him from his father, who represents God, but his *righteousness*. How do we know his obedience to his father's commands is keeping him from being in true relationship with his dad? He shows his hand when he blows up in anger toward his dad at the end of the story. He's so mad at Dad because he's just lost some more of his inheritance on some stupid party for his idiot brother.

In other words, he wants exactly what his younger brother wants. He wants his father out of the way so he can have the inheritance too. This is like people who do good works to get into heaven. They're obeying not because they love God, but because they want the good things God offers them.

In the two sons, we see quite clearly the two ways people ordinarily relate to God. Some choose religion, and others choose irreligion. Here's how Tim Keller, in his book-length treatment of this parable, sums it up:

Jesus uses the younger and elder brothers to portray the two basic ways people try to find happiness and fulfillment: the way of *moral conformity* and the way of *self-discovery*. Each acts as a lens coloring how you see all of life, or as a paradigm

shaping your understanding of everything. Each is a way of finding personal significance and worth, of addressing the ills of the world, and of determining right from wrong.

The elder brother in this parable illustrates the way of moral conformity. The Pharisees of Jesus' day believed that, while they were a people chosen by God, they could only maintain their place in his blessing and receive final salvation through strict obedience to the Bible. There are innumerable varieties of this paradigm, but they all believe in putting the will of God and the standards of the community ahead of individual fulfillment. In this view, we only attain happiness and a world made right by achieving moral rectitude. We may fall at times, of course, but then we will be judged by how abject and intense our regret is. In this view, even in our failures we must always measure up.

The younger brother in this parable illustrates the way of self-discovery. In ancient patriarchal cultures some took this route, but there are far more who do so today. This paradigm holds that individuals must be free to pursue their own goals and self-actualization regardless of custom and convention. In this view, the world would be a far better place if tradition, prejudice, hierarchical authority, and other barriers to personal freedom were weakened or removed.¹

In the end, these two ways aren't that different. Both are inherently self-centered, egotistical. In both approaches, people resent God and seek to get out from his under control—either by openly rebelling against him, or by attempting to obligate him by fastidious obedience. I may be the moral, rule-keeping, respectable, “good” gal. Or I may be the fun-loving, open-minded, willing-to-try-anything guy. The key is that / get to decide what I am going to be. God is, at best, a prop for the costume I'm donning.

If this is our sin—our badness *and* our goodness—how can we be saved? Jesus teaches an entirely new way to relate to God—one that seeks him for who he *is*, not what he can *do* for us. He teaches grace. Instead of religious versus irreligious, moral versus immoral *or* open-minded versus bigoted, progressive versus backwards, he reminds us of the only distinction that really matters: humble versus proud. Why were the tax collectors and prostitutes entering the kingdom of God before the Pharisees? Certainly not because they earned it. No, it is because they knew they couldn't do it on their own. They need grace.

How do we respond to this parable? Let me offer three takeaways that should transform how we relate to God. If we're going to relate to God as Jesus teaches in this parable, we need to:

¹ Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 2008): 34-36.

1. *Receive the Father's initiating love.* Remember, the father in this story goes out to *both* sons. He welcomes prodigals *and* Pharisees. In fact, Jesus leaves the ending open so that his audience can respond. What will they, as "older brothers," do? Will they humble themselves and respond to their Father's initiating love? Will we?
2. *Repent of more than just our sins.* The trouble with repenting of flagrant sins only is that the older son didn't have any! And yet he was just as separated from his father as his younger brother. No, we need to repent of our sins *and* our religion. We need to repent of trying to save ourselves, thinking we can earn our way into God's good graces. And we need to repent of our selfish motivation, whether running from God in pursuit of hedonistic pleasure or trying to obligate him to us by putting him in our debt.
3. *Recognize what it cost to bring us back to our Father.* As you read this parable, you can't help but notice how much the father loses in restoring his wayward child. He has sold part of his estate. He has killed the fattened calf. This is why the older brother is so mad—for, as the father says to his oldest: "Everything I have is yours." Exactly! And now there's less than there used to be! But the older brother's response leads us to wonder what a *true* older brother would do. If the older brother loved his father (and not just his father's stuff), and loved his younger brother (and didn't just judge him for wasting his stuff), what would he do? He would count the cost himself—joyfully—to see his brother restored. And that's exactly what Jesus, our true Older Brother, does for us.

A NEW WAY OF RELATING TO OTHERS, TOO

Let's consider one key implication to this new way of relating to God before we close. Notice that in the other two ways, each group has to harden its heart against the other. The religious judge the irreligious (like the Pharisees sneering at the tax collectors and prostitutes) for being immoral. But the irreligious judge the religious for being narrow-minded, bigoted, and regressive. This is because every person—whether religious or irreligious—is trying to establish their identity and self-worth on the basis of what they do, whether good or bad. In order to preserve my identity, I need to disdain those who choose the other path, otherwise I risk undermining my own identity. If the key to living well is keeping all God's commands meticulously, then what choice do I have except to judge the irreligious for their godless immorality? Or if the key to living well is pursuing my own happiness and making sure others are free to do the same, what choice do I have except to judge the religious for their narrow-minded bigotry?

If my identity depends on what I do (good or bad), I will always be insecure. And insecure people can't love others well, because they're too busy worrying about their own identity. But if my acceptance comes from the gospel—I am saved by grace alone through faith alone—then I am free to love others because I am secure in my identity. I don't have to look down on others, because the gospel has humbled me out of my pride.

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ Luke 18:9-14
- ☐ Luke 15:1-7
- ☐ Luke 5:27-32
- ☐ Luke 7:36-50

DOING THE WORD

As you think through this parable, and this entirely new way of relating to God that Jesus teaches, consider the following questions.

With which son are you more likely to identify? That is, in your “default mode,” do you tend to be a prodigal (irreligious libertine) or a Pharisee (religious legalist)? How have you seen that tendency displayed in your life?

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As a Christian, have you repented of your *goodness* (doing the right things for the wrong reasons) as well as your *badness* (doing the wrong things)? Or are you still clinging to the idea that God owes you because of all the good you’ve done?

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When you interact with others, how do you struggle with disdain and judgment toward those who are either more religious or more irreligious than you? How does the gospel message—the third way Jesus teaches—free you to establish your identity in Christ, rather than your religion or irreligion? How could that change how you relate to others, even those who are very different from you?

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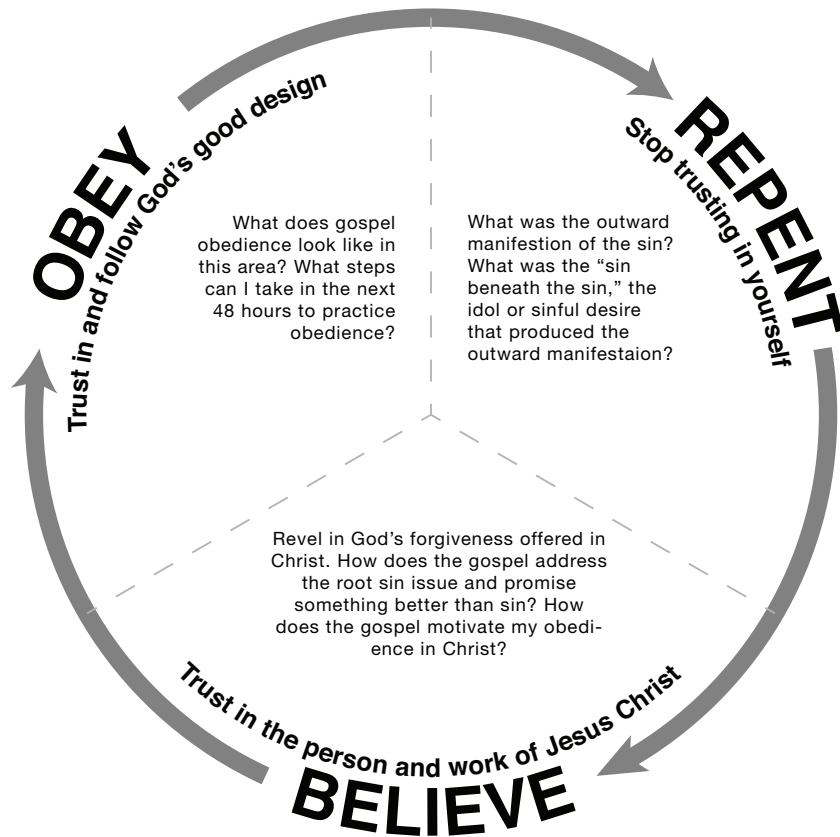
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THE GOSPEL WALTZ

Every disciple, every genuine Christian, has responded to the gospel message in repentance (turning from sin) and belief (trusting in Jesus), which is then followed by obedience (following Jesus). We turn from our old way of life, which is characterized by our sinful nature and rebellion against God, to trusting in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Once that decision is made, the Holy Spirit indwells us and begins to work on our hearts, giving us a desire to please the Lord with our lives. Our lives are now offered to God as an act of worship, thanking him for the gift of salvation. According to Jesus, we demonstrate our love for him by obeying his commands (John 14:15). We are mistaken, though, if we think that repentance and belief are a one-time event, while obedience is ongoing. Instead, repentance, belief, and obedience should define the whole Christian life—day by day, hour by hour, even minute by minute.

If you think of the Christian life as a dance, we want it to be a waltz—the Gospel Waltz. Now, the waltz is famous for having three steps. In the Gospel Waltz, those three steps are repentance, belief, and obedience, what we saw above. Let's take a closer look at this dance.²

² The Gospel Waltz was first developed by Robert Flayhart. To hear him explain it, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiT1NOwnj5I>. Accessed 1 July 2022.



The Three Steps

Repent: In this step, we hate and turn from sin in our lives. We see sin for what it is: rejection and rebellion against God and his good design on our lives. It is important to verbalize this sin before God and others.

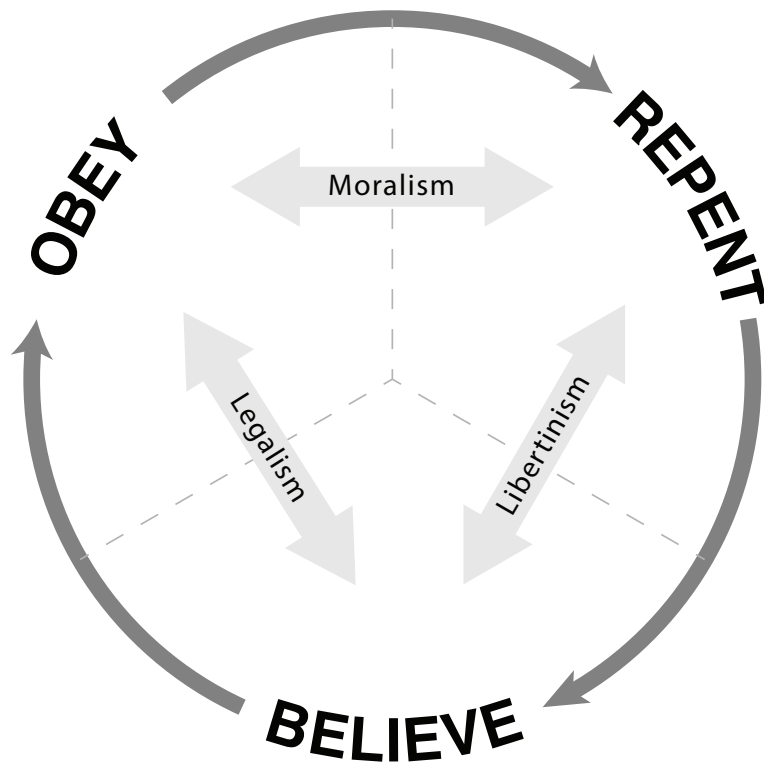
Believe: This is where we trust in the gospel, the good news of what Jesus has done for us. In this step, we recognize that even in our sin, when God looks at us, he sees Jesus. We need to cling to that promise, so that we don't end up believing the lie that God's love for us is based on our performance. We will explore this step more next week.

ObeY: This is where we let Scripture teach us how we should live. First John 2:6 says, "Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did." While we know Jesus was the perfect example of obedience, we also know that with the Spirit's help we too can say "no" to sin and "yes" to righteousness (Romans 6:15-18). Even though God's love is not based on our performance, we still want to please God by the way we live. That is the crucial step of obedience.

As we use the Gospel Waltz to attack sin habits in our lives, we will soon see victory. That means, by the grace of God, that we can start to battle sin at the point of temptation. Instead of repenting after you have fallen, you may be able to resist the sin (identifying the sin beneath the sin that motivates it) as you preach the gospel's better promise to yourself. That means you will soon be able to modify the Gospel Waltz to read “Resist, Believe, Obey” in more and more areas of your life. Praise God!

While the Gospel Waltz should be the normal routine in our lives, we often slip into the “Texas Two Step.” If we consistently default to two steps, we are no longer waltzing—and that means we are settling for an incomplete version of the gospel (which is not the gospel at all). As a result, we stunt gospel change in our lives.

Here’s what it might look like if we settle for the Texas Two Step:



It is helpful to be aware of the step we are most likely to skip, forget, or avoid, in order to ensure we properly apply the gospel to all our lives.

Which of the steps (repent, believe, obey) in the gospel waltz are you most likely to skip, forget, or avoid? Why do you think this is a missing step for you?

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How has missing that step affected your Christian life?

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How could focusing on including that missing step in your life bring about gospel change?

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As we read Scripture, it is easy to pick out those passages that help us acknowledge our sin and then be told what to do, the put-offs and put-ons. In other words, it is easy to see in Scripture, “I shouldn’t do this” (repent) and “I should do this instead” (obey). But applying the gospel in the “believe” step often proves the most difficult. Of course, every time we sin, we can seek God’s promised forgiveness if we ask. However, we want to grow in our ability to apply the gospel in specific ways to the specific sins and issues we are experiencing in life. We need to develop “gospel fluency” for our own lives and the lives of others, because the gospel—more than anything else—reorders our hearts, aims us toward our truest, deepest desire: God himself. Next week we will spend our time developing that skill.



GOSPEL FOUNDATIONS

LESSON FIVE IDOL THREATS

HEARING THE WORD

Last week we explored the two most common ways of relating to God, and finding happiness and fulfillment: through moral conformity (religion) or through self-discovery (irreligion). Both ultimately center on the self, bypassing or using God, and rendering love of others much more difficult. Jesus, however, teaches a third (entirely new) way of relating to God, through the gospel. We don't have to establish our own identity, either by moral conformity or self-discovery; we are *given* an identity in him.

In this week's passage, we will see how Paul used to relate to God, and how the gospel frees him to pursue that third way—leading to the greatest happiness, the deepest fulfillment, and the most genuine relationship with God.

Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. ²Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. ³For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

⁷But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

PHILIPPIANS 3:1-11

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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Why would Paul consider *everything* a loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus? Explain using your own words.

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How does the gospel fundamentally transform how we relate to God—and how we view our own accomplishments? This is the key question with which Paul wants us to wrestle. Without using the word, Paul raises the issue of *idolatry* for us. “Idolatry,” *The New City Catechism* tells us, “is trusting in created things rather than the Creator for our hope and happiness, significance and security.” Because our hearts are idol factories, as John Calvin famously quipped, this is an issue with which we all need to reckon constantly. Let’s see how Paul addresses the issue in his own life.

Paul opens this section on a note of joy, a recurring theme in his letter to the Philippian church. He doesn’t tell us what causes him to rejoice here, but we know it is something he said to them earlier, most likely when he was first with them. It is safe to assume, on the basis of where he goes next, that he is talking about the gospel.

The gospel produces joy in us because it frees us from the performance trap. We no longer have to fret constantly about whether or not we measure up. We are assured that God already loves us, not because we’ve done enough, but because *Christ* has done enough for us. We don’t have to worry. Instead, we can rest in the certainty that our acceptance depends on him, not us. Phew!

Interestingly, Paul mentions that this joy is a safeguard. The Philippians apparently face an ongoing temptation—one we all face too. What is that temptation? To trust in the flesh instead of Christ. And that is exactly what “those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh” are encouraging.

These legalists (the older brothers from last week) are telling the Philippians, “If you follow these rules, you will be accepted.” In this way, they are like dogs, who (at least in Bible times) were harbingers of death, flea-bitten scavengers, preying on the perishing. They are evildoers because, even though they are telling people to “do good,” they promote evil by tempting people to turn from life-giving grace. And they are mutilators of the flesh (referring to circumcision), because their approach to God is no different from the pagans they mock, who also cut themselves to earn God’s favor (see 1 Kings 18:28, for example).

Trying to earn acceptance—to make ourselves righteous—is bondage, but grace is joyous freedom. It’s not, “I obey, therefore I’m accepted.” Instead, in the gospel, it’s, “I’m accepted, therefore I obey.”

Now, if our acceptance depends on Jesus, and not on ourselves, that should generate a deep humility in us. That’s exactly what Paul says next. We boast, yes—but we boast *in Christ*. We have confidence in his work, and put no confidence in our own.

And here's the thing: that's not just for "sinners"—you know, the really *bad* people. That's for the really good people too. The ones who need to repent of their *goodness*, like the older brother from last week. And like Paul.

Paul even stacks himself up against other good people. "Go ahead," he says, "Try me. See if you have more reason to boast in the flesh than I do." He is the consummate Hebrew. Not only does he have the lineage, he's got the real-life credentials too. He's got the right theology (a Pharisee), the most passion (zealous to the point of persecution), and the best works (faultless with regard to the law). He has checked all the boxes. But still Paul knows even that is not enough to gain what he truly wants. So he sets aside the arrogance, self-righteousness, and judgment that accompany works righteousness, and leans into gospel humility instead.

If there's nothing I can do to get myself right with God—if not even *Paul's* performance record is good enough—how should I consider my efforts? In verse 7, Paul uses an accounting analogy to explain it. We should consider them as *loss*. They all amount to nothing now. Everything that used to be gain—all those works that I thought tipped the scales in my favor, moved me from the red to the black—I now consider as nothing "for the sake of Christ." Jesus is the decisive difference. He changes our whole approach to religious score-keeping.

But then, in verse 8, Paul doubles down. It's not just law-keeping, but now he considers absolutely *everything* loss. What does he mean by this?

Here's where last week's discussion comes into play again. Those two ways of relating to God? They're really the same way—just flip sides of the same coin. We are all trusting in something to establish our identity. Some of us are Pharisees, older brothers, legalists—tempted to trust in our religion and good works. Others of us are prodigals, younger brothers, libertines—tempted to trust not in our religion, but still in the works we have done. This might be career success, societal approval, the love (romantic? sexual? familial?) of others, commitment to progress and social justice, or whatever else.

Apart from the gospel, *we all are striving to put confidence in the work we do in the flesh*—and we're all terrified that it won't be good enough. That is idolatry: trusting in some aspect of creation—work, family, love, money, sex, power, religion—rather than the Creator to bring us happiness and fulfillment. Not only does it not work, but it separates us from what *will* bring us happiness and fulfillment—Jesus.

That is why Paul considers everything *loss*—both the good and the bad—and even considers it *garbage* (the actual word used is much stronger, but I won't say it in polite company). Compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, everything pales in comparison. It's all rubbish without him.

In order to gain Christ, however, we have to chuck the rest. If we're going to receive Christ's righteousness as our own, the righteousness that comes on the basis of faith, we need to set aside our own "righteousness," all the works we do to try and establish our identity apart from him. We give up our performance record (which is pretty lousy, even if it's as good as Paul's), and receive Christ's performance instead. (If this feels a bit like cheating, like you're turning in someone else's homework, then you've got it. That's the wonder of the gospel right there!)

It's not what I do. It's what he's done. I don't obey in order to be accepted. I obey because I am already accepted. My new life, the good works that I *will* do in Christ, springs from treasuring him above all else. I don't need to chase idols anymore, which produces all my sinful behavior.

I don't need to greedily acquire and hoard material goods, because they can't satisfy me like Jesus does. And they don't prove my worth, because my worth is in Christ.

I don't need to climb the corporate ladder to prove I'm capable, smart, successful. That's all garbage—those promotions and titles mean nothing ultimately. I'm already accepted in Christ.

I don't need to seek human love—sexual, romantic, familial—in order to prove I'm beautiful or lovable. God loves me unconditionally in Christ already. Nothing can separate me from his perfect love.

And on, and on, and on.

Blaise Pascal might have captured it best when he wrote,

There once was in man a true happiness of which now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present. But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God himself.¹

God is the gospel. He is what satisfies. He is the supreme pleasure. He is our treasure. The one who truly understands grace is the one willing to give up everything else for the surpassing joy of knowing him, gaining him, being found in him, being loved by him—all on the basis of what Christ did.

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ Jeremiah 9:23-24
- ☐ 1 Corinthians 1:26-31
- ☐ John 4:1-26
- ☐ Mark 10:17-31

¹ *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1995): 45.

DOING THE WORD

God takes idolatry very seriously. The first of the Ten Commandments—and they are given in order of priority—is about idolatry: “You shall have no other gods before me.” Nothing else should get pride of place in our lives. He alone deserves our highest devotion, he alone is of infinite worth, and he alone can provide us with the ultimate meaning we seek.

But our hearts are idol factories, as we saw above. You see, we are sinners—every one of us—and the root cause of sin is always idolatry. That is, we sin because we value some object more highly than God himself, even though he is the infinitely valuable One. We make something an idol when we attach ultimate value or meaning to something other than him, which is why even good things—marriage, family, achievement, ministry—can become idols if we are not vigilant.

If this is true, we need to pay exceedingly careful attention to our own patterns of idolatry. I will experience no victory over sin unless I see I am treasuring something above the love of Christ. What is it that I treasure more? Or, to put it another way, how can I identify my heart’s idols?

Here are six ways to pinpoint the root idols in our hearts.

1. **You are devastated if you lose it (or never get it).** We all experience disappointment and grief when we lose something we treasure, and that is true even if we have not made an idol of it. I am speaking of something else though: an utter *devastation*—the feeling of being unmade or undone—at the loss of your greatest treasure. We would all feel fear, anger, disappointment at losing our job, for example, but if your self-regard is tied to your career (“I achieve, therefore I am”), then the loss of a job becomes something else entirely. You will soon plunge into despair, desperate because you’ve lost, not just a job, but your very *self*. (And you can experience this same devastation if you never get the idol you’ve been worshipping—never made partner, never have children, etc.)
2. **You are always dissatisfied in this area.** No matter how much you get, you always want more—more money, more fame, more power, more pleasure. Your heart is like the leech’s two daughters crying, “Give! Give!” (Proverbs 30:15). Where do you see that you lack contentment? Dig deep enough, and you will undoubtedly find an idol at the core. Do you always want newer, nicer things? Look for idols of comfort, status, or security. Do you struggle with an addiction? Check for idols of pleasure and self-indulgence. Do you need another degree, another accolade, another promotion? Search for idols of success, approval, or achievement.
3. **You spend your time and/or money on it.** Worship demands sacrifice, and we will gladly count that cost to get what we treasure most. Watch your spending habits—time and money—and see what patterns you discern. If you’re spending more time exercising than connecting with your family, be concerned about the idol of health or appearance (and likely the deeper idols of security/control or love/acceptance). If you’re not giving sacrificially to support the work of God’s kingdom because you’re always on five-star vacations, that’s probably the idols of comfort and self-indulgence.

4. **You are willing to sin to get it.** This may seem like an obvious one, but it's worth teasing out a bit. What sin habits have you formed in your life—and *why*? Do you find yourself gossiping time and again? You're probably looking for status or acceptance, and the best way to get yourself *in* the inner ring is to get someone else *out*! Do you sit in self-righteous judgment of others? You've probably made an idol of your religious performance. Are you in a sexually illicit relationship, or willing to date someone who doesn't share your religious convictions? There's a good bet you're worshiping the idol of human love—marriage, sex, a sense of belonging.

5. **Your emotions spike in this area.** You don't just feel happy; you feel *elated* when that person compliments or affirms you (acceptance, approval). You don't have a good time; you have a *great* time when you're chasing that hobby (comfort, pleasure). You don't feel hurt; you feel *crushed* when you receive criticism at work (achievement, success). This is a bit more subjective—some of us feel more deeply than others, many factors contribute to our emotional state, and so forth—but if you see patterns of extreme emotional highs and lows, you'll want to start asking the hard questions.

6. **You can't help but mention it—right away.** Pay attention to what information you want to make sure people know about you early on. When you first meet someone, how do you introduce yourself? If you've listed all your degrees, titles, and credentials by the sixth sentence, for example, check for the idol of status or achievement. This can be subtle, by the way. I knew an older woman who always shared about her singleness when introducing herself, usually right after giving her name. It may have been her approach to her biography, but it may have inadvertently revealed a hidden idol of love (marriage, family, romance, belonging).

What idols are the biggest threat to your intimacy with God? How are you using them to provide you with false “hope and happiness, significance and security”?

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As you examine your own life, where do you see yourself falling into the performance trap? Where are you putting confidence in the flesh instead of resting in Christ?

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A GOSPEL PRIMER AND THE GOSPEL WALTZ

Last week we learned about the Gospel Waltz. The middle (and hardest) of the three component steps is *believe*. While some in your group might feel like they can do this well, we can all improve in our ability to apply gospel truths to specific struggles. For instance, many of us will confess sin and repent, and then we will truly believe that Jesus loves us, died for us, and will forgive us, leading to our obedience. However, if we merely focus on the *general* forgiveness of sins, which is a glorious and magnificent truth, we are missing out on other vital facets of the gospel that will help us overcome specific sins.

Jonathan Dodson, in his book *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*, gets at how important this really is: “Once we have identified our motivation for sinning, we can replace it with a superior gospel motivation. . . . When you identify the sin promise, it forces you to search the Scriptures for *how the gospel offers a better promise*. There’s something about seeing the futility of sin next to the beauty of Christ.”² Dodson quite rightly notes that sin promises us *something*—pleasure, power, control, security (our idols)—but if we mine the gospel, we will find it promises us *more* and *better*.

Remember what Augustine said: God has made us for himself, so that our hearts will only find rest in him. We are made to love the One who made and loves us. However, until that happens, our hearts are interminably restless, flitting about from one God-substitute (idol) to the next, desperately seeking in the created what only the Creator can offer. That is the *more* and *better* that the gospel promises.

This is where *A Gospel Primer* can help us. If we spend time daily rehearsing specific and varied gospel truths, we will be better able to overcome sin with the gospel. Instead of mere forgiveness (glorious though that is!), we will have a better understanding of why we struggle with a particular sin, and how we can use specific gospel truths to fight against it. The gospel will transform the way we view God and the sin in our lives.

An example should help us see how this works. Suppose that you are in the middle of a difficult situation. Perhaps you’re facing a problem with your health or an unexpected financial shortfall. As a result, you’ve noticed yourself struggling with feelings of bitterness and ingratitude—not only toward God, but even toward some loved ones in your life, who are simply collateral damage. Confess? Sure. Repent? Check. Want to practice gratitude instead? Yup.

Great. But *how*?

Is this just a matter of white-knuckling sin into submission? Try a little harder, do a little better?

Or . . . you could preach the gospel to yourself in ways specifically tailored to your struggle. Reason #28 of our 31 Reasons to Rehearse the Gospel Daily is entitled, “Thankfulness Enriched by Relief.” In these few short paragraphs, we read gospel truths that *specifically* enable us to cast aside ingratitude, even in the hardest circumstances, and instead rejoice in God’s abundant goodness to us. (I won’t spoil it for those who haven’t gotten there yet. But you can read it on page 47 if you don’t believe me.)

² *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012): 125, 135. (Emphasis original.)

As you reflect on the idols you just identified, how does the gospel meet your deepest need here? What would it look like if you trusted in Jesus, instead of putting confidence in yourself, in these areas? Write out a manifesto of sorts to help you preach the gospel to yourself specifically for your idols each day.

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As you read *A Gospel Primer* this week, try to apply one of the Reasons to Rehearse the Gospel Daily to a specific struggle in your life. Be prepared to share your insights with the group.

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GOSPEL FOUNDATIONS

LESSON SIX

OUR SINGE PURPOSE

HEARING THE WORD

Last week we examined how idolatry—seeking ultimate happiness or meaning in anything other than God, trying to establish our identity on our own apart from Christ—threatens every one of us. This week we will see how the gospel upends this threat. Instead of pursuing our own (false) glory through our own means, we commit ourselves to a single purpose: the glory of Christ.

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²²If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

PHILIPPIANS 1:15-26

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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How would you summarize Paul's purpose in life based on this passage?

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Why are we here? What are we supposed to be doing in this life? What is our purpose?

Too often we decide what to do first—likely without any rigorous thinking—and then we draw the “target” around our activities. We fool ourselves into thinking we’ve hit the bullseye for our life’s purpose, because we’ve made the bullseye “whatever it is I’m already doing.”

But if we want to avoid inadvertently wasting our lives, we need to have a clear, thorough understanding of our purpose *first*—and then make any and all adjustments necessary to see we’re carrying it out. So what is our purpose? Let’s see how Paul lays it out in his letter to the Philippians.

A bit of context: Paul is in prison, which concerns his Philippian friends. But Paul isn’t too concerned—he even tries to console them—because his imprisonment has provided him with an opportunity to witness to unbelievers and encourage his brothers and sisters in Christ (see verses 12-14).

But it gets better. He goes so far as to say he is *rejoicing* in his imprisonment because Christ is being preached as a result. Never mind that some are preaching Christ for bad reasons, with selfish motives—the important thing is that people are hearing about Jesus. And so he will keep on rejoicing, even though he doesn’t know how things will turn out.

It’s true that in verse 19 he says he knows this will turn out for his deliverance, but his deliverance could come in life or death, as he says in the very next verse. In what sense would dying be deliverance? The language is taken from Job 13:16, where Job isn’t seeking deliverance from circumstances (how we would read Philippians 1:19), but vindication *in* those circumstances. Job is confident he’ll be vindicated in glory: his suffering wasn’t a result of his sin, and he’s not separated from God. Paul has the same confidence, not only for his personal salvation, which is assured by the blood of Christ, but for his ministry as well. He won’t have run his race in vain (see Philippians 2:16).

This focus on ministry explains verse 20. Because of his friends’ prayers and God’s Spirit, he won’t falter for lack of courage, and thus be put to shame. Instead, he will be empowered, regardless of his circumstances, to keep preaching *so that Christ will be magnified*: “Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.” Whatever happens to us physically doesn’t matter, so long as it results in the glory of Jesus Christ.

That is the single purpose to which we are called. To make much of Christ. To see that he is exalted in us. We are *made to magnify*.

To say this requires a radical shift in our default mindset would be breathtaking understatement. We come into this world eager to glorify ourselves, and pursue our idols—career, family, money, power, or whatever else—to that end. But instead of trying to impress everyone, instead of running our own personal PR campaigns—“Look what I’ve done! Look what sort of person I am!”—we devote ourselves to making Christ look magnificent. Of course, he *is* magnificent regardless of what we do, but we put his magnificence on display that others might exalt him too.

This is precisely what Paul is getting at when he writes that famous phrase “to live is Christ and to die is gain.” What does it mean *to live is Christ*? Does it mean we live *like* Christ? Surely that’s part of it, but not the focus. Paul has already defined it for us: to live *for Christ’s exaltation*. As long as I go on living, my single purpose is the glory of Christ. Thus, to live is Christ.

Paul fleshes out exactly what this means in the passage we studied last week, Philippians 3:7-8. In fact, he uses the same word “gain” in both passages—“To die is *gain*” (1:21), “Whatever were *gains* to me” (3:7)—showing the connection between the two.

The surest way to glorify Jesus is to treasure him above all. He is so valuable that I would give all to have him. This is precisely the point Jesus makes in his parable of the hidden treasure. What would possess a man to sell *everything* he has just to buy a field? It only makes sense if that field contains within it a treasure beyond reckoning. Christ—and life in his kingdom—is that treasure. Jesus is better than anything else—than money, approval, pleasure, human love . . . you name it.

This explains the second half of verse 21 then: “to die is gain.” Jesus is better than anything we lose in death. I understand what a bold statement that is, but it’s true. It’s why Paul says, “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far” (verse 23). Better than what? Better than anything this life has to offer.

Paul isn’t at all concerned about how his circumstances turn out—life or death—because he knows he can glorify Christ regardless. But considering we’re likely to be a bit more optimistic about our prospects (we’re probably not facing untimely execution), *how do we do it in this life* specifically? That’s what Paul teaches us in verses 24-26.

Sure, Paul would rather depart and be with Jesus—who wouldn’t?—but he’s not thinking of himself first. Instead, he’s wondering what those around him need. It seems to him that, for the sake of the Philippians (and presumably his other churches), it is necessary for him to stick around a bit longer. And so he expects he will be able to continue walking alongside his brothers and sisters for a time at least.

That means he expects to be on the “to live is Christ” side of the equation for a bit longer. He gets to continue magnifying Christ *in this life*. How? “If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me” (verse 22).

Isn’t that interesting? To live is Christ, he says, but now that he gets to go on living, he doesn’t seem to talk about Christ. He talks instead of fruitful labor. What gives?

It seems that his fruitful labor must somehow magnify Christ so that to live for it *is* to live for Christ’s glory. That’s what he clarifies in verses 25-26. If he continues with the Philippians in this life, it will be for their progress and joy in the faith. By *progress* he means their spiritual growth, which exalts God. (“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” [1 Peter 2:12].) And by *joy in the faith* he means delighting in and embracing Christ above all—what Paul talks about in Philippians 3:7-8—which clearly magnifies him.

In other words, he knows he needs to stick around so that others are as satisfied in Christ as he is. Their “boasting in Christ Jesus will abound” on account of Paul being with them. We are made to magnify, yes, and then we are *sent to serve*.

We magnify Jesus by glorying and rejoicing in him no matter what we face in life or death. He is better than all we gain in life; he is better than all we lose in death. Our single purpose is to see this increasingly true in our own lives and the lives of those around us. When we find Christ to be our greatest joy and supreme satisfaction, we make Christ look magnificent. When we help others to experience Christ like this, we make him look magnificent in their lives too. *We are made to magnify and sent to serve.*

Rather than settling for our own counterfeit glory—chasing idols that bring no permanent satisfaction or lasting significance—we devote ourselves to God’s glory alone. What is the chief purpose of humanity? To glorify God and enjoy him forever. How magnificent!

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ Matthew 13:44-46
- ☐ Psalm 16:1-11
- ☐ Psalm 84:1-12
- ☐ Matthew 5:13-15

DOING THE WORD

Reflect on your life's purpose, the mission of magnifying Christ in your own life and the lives of those around you. In many ways, this is a continuation and intensification of the work you began last week of rooting out idols and replacing them with Christ's surpassing worth.

How would you describe your life's purpose so far? What would you like your purpose to be? Write out a personal mission statement, using your own words.

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If you truly lived for this purpose, what attitudes and activities would change in your life? Be specific about what this would do to your priorities, personal goals, calendar, bank account, and the like.

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Do you treasure Christ above all? Look at the evidence of your life carefully before answering the question. Where are you pursuing your own counterfeit glory rather than delighting in Christ? What would it look like to magnify Christ in these areas instead?

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How are you engaged in the "fruitful labor" of helping others to magnify Christ? What would you like to see change in this area?

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GOSPEL FOUNDATIONS

APPENDIX

APPENDIX: HELPFUL BIBLE-STUDY QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT

1. Genre: What kind of writing is this: narrative, poetry, prophecy, discourse, apocalyptic?
2. Historical: What do you know about the author, original audience, and historical situation that helps explain the text? (Hint: A good Study Bible will have this information in the introduction to each book.)
3. Literary: What is the main point of the passage immediately preceding and immediately following this one? In other words, how does this passage fit into the flow of the author's argument as a whole?

QUESTIONS ABOUT INTERPRETATION

1. Structure: How has the author organized this passage? Can you trace his line of thought throughout the passage?
2. Repetition: Is there a repeated word, phrase, or idea in the passage? What might that mean?
3. Theme: What is the theme of the book? What is the theme of the passage? How do the two relate? (That is, how does this passage contribute to the theme of the book as a whole?)
4. Tone: What is the tone (or emotion) of the passage: warning, rebuke, encouragement, anguish, hope, etc.?
5. Meaning: Summarize the main point of the passage in your own words.

QUESTIONS ABOUT SPECIFIC GENRES

1. Narrative: How is the text divided into scenes? What is the plot: setting, conflict, tension, climax, resolution? How does that contribute to the meaning of the passage?
2. Poetry: What might have prompted someone to write a poem like this? How does the tone shift in the poem? What does that tell us about its meaning?
3. Discourse: How does the logic of the passage illuminate the flow of ideas or argument? (Hint: Pay attention to logical transitions, such as: therefore, so that, however, but, because, etc.)

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE GOSPEL

1. Old Testament: How does the text anticipate or foreshadow the gospel? Is there a prophecy that will be fulfilled? an analogy to explore? a biblical theology thread to trace? an historical trajectory?
2. New Testament: How does the text explain or explore the finished work of Jesus in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension?