

Embracing A New Identity: The Demands of the Gospel

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Scripture Reading

But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Galatians 2:14 ESV)

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11-14 NIV)

THE GOSPEL: TWO MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Gospel is good news, which is freeing news. But sometimes we don't seem to get it. This 2000-year-old teaching is still brand new for some of us. And the problem can be illustrated by the parable of the Good Samaritan. For example, for some of us, we just assume it's really about ME. Because throughout much of Christian history, so many Christians have sought to add religious duties to finish out the work of Jesus's cross. I love the way Tim Keller puts it. Those of us who think that way have looked at God through the lens of the older brother in the parable. Do you remember what the older brother thought? (1) My track record of surrender should get me into the kingdom and deserving of a party. (Religion is about good deeds and controlling my own future.) (2) My record is head-and-shoulders better than my brother's record and if I'm better than him, then I deserve to get into the kingdom and have a party in my honor. (Religion is about constant comparison with others.) (3) Unless God gives me a blessing, I won't go in. (Religion is about seeking something, not someone.)¹

¹ Tim Keller, “What is the Gospel?” <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/what-is-the-gospel-4611/>

The problem with the older brother scenario is that it is not seeking God for salvation; it is trying to use God to earn our salvation. But the gospel is not about receiving something; it's about receiving *someone* who did the only fully-accomplishing thing. When I believe this gracious truth and move my allegiance to him, it shows in my life.

And here is a second misunderstanding. If the gospel is tough to hear for the older brothers among us, it's also something tough to hear for prodigals *enjoying their prodigal life*. For people caught up in worldliness, the gospel sounds like some legalistic code—because it claims we have sins that need forgiven, it demands total surrender to Jesus as Lord, and it proclaims one and only one way to live forever.

But do you know who hears the gospel right, receives it right, and rejoices in it? The prodigal who wants to come home. That's the gospel's target audience. You see, the gospel is freeing—but that doesn't mean it's call is easy. An addict who wants to get well knows that the path to recovery is hard and long. But for an addict who wants to get well, there is nothing sweeter than hearing the news “I'm here to get you out of your addiction. You don't have what it takes. But I do.” A freeing message is good news for those seeking a way out; even when “freeing” also means “costly” in a way that demands everything.

Is that hard for us? Is it hard for us to keep these two truths in our minds at the same time? (1) Salvation is free, and yet (2) Salvation is never cheap. (1) The Gospel is about what God, in Christ, has done and is doing for you, and yet (2) God's work will be in you and through you? (1) God saves you from the prison of sin not through your own righteous deeds but through his righteous deed, and yet (2) He saves you for a new way of life, full of fruit-bearing, as God's Spirit transforms every single part of your life?

This is the age-old dilemma of how to pair faith and works, acceptance and action, the gospel as something to receive, and the gospel as something to obey. It didn't seem that difficult for Jesus, or Paul, or James, even though it often seems to trouble us. But I hope the lessons leading up to this last lesson have prepped us to make sense of it.

There are two ways to misunderstand this, one has to do with where you start, the other is where you end up.

The gospel *starts* with Jesus Christ. Most of the time, when you hear people complaining about “works salvation”, or “baptismal regeneration”, or “religiosity”, what they are rightly complaining about is any *false start*. I didn't call myself to be God's child. God called me. I didn't offer love for his in return; He first loved me. The story starts in the Old Testament. Look at Exodus. God called a people, rescued them from slavery, and led them by the hand out of danger before he ever gave them a law. That should be a clue! When someone asks you what God's plan of salvation is, if your first words are

“you gotta do” then fill in the blank, you are starting wrong! To summarize the first few chapters of virtually every book Paul ever wrote: God is great, and you are not. You were dead, but Christ made you alive. You were enemies, bitter, and lost, but God made you, loved you, called you, and redeemed you. It might seem small, but here we are carefully in this. To say “I got saved, and I know I have a home in heaven because I’ve done everything God asks me to do and I did it the right way” doesn’t sound like the New Testament at all! We don’t have time to repeat all the verses used in our 4-week series, but I hope by now your Bible is bleeding ink from all the places you’ve circled where the Bible says “He saved us, not by any works of righteousness which we have done!” “All have sinned and are coming short of the glory of God but now, apart from any law, the good news has been revealed.” “We are saved by grace through faith, and not from ourselves; not by works, lest anyone should boast!” “I want to be found in Him, not having a righteousness that is my own, but that which is through faith in Christ.” On our best day, said Isaiah, our righteousness is but filthy rags!” We don’t have what it takes. We didn’t save ourselves. And grace is not God setting up a system by which we save ourselves! We aren’t the firemen; we are the ones trapped in the fire. God’s plan of salvation was to send his Son Jesus Christ—the rescuer, who lived the perfect life I did not, died the sacrificial death in my place, and pleads the case on my behalf that I did not and do not deserve. The gospel starts with God, in Christ, by His Spirit, rescuing and saving and changing and transforming. It’s a story about God. As one writer in the *Gospel Advocate* put it nearly 100 years ago: “it was a cross, not a ladder, that was erected on Calvary.” “Nothing in my hands I bring; only to thy cross I cling.” This is the gospel.

But where does the gospel *point*? You see, a second misunderstanding is failing to see where the gospel *leads*, what the gospel creates, what develops as a result of the gospel. Can you imagine an advertisement to be “free from weight loss” where the before and after picture looked the same? In the New Testament, the gospel that frees, the gospel that saves, the gospel that redeems leads to freed, saved, redeemed people living free, saved, redeemed lives. It means recognizing not just what we were saved *from*, but also what we were saved *for*.

Look back at some of those passages that are so remarkably strong in putting the emphasis on God and not on my works. Ephesians 2 is a great example. “We are saved by grace through faith; and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God. Not the result of works, so that no one can boast.” There is the saved *by* and saved *from* language of the gospel. But look at the next verse: “For we are His workmanship, (Or, “we are what He has made us”), created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand *to be our way of life*” (NRSV).

Another great example of the “from” language and the “for” language brought together is in Titus 2:11-14. Listen carefully to Paul’s language here:

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It *teaches* us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (NIV)

I think verses like these help us understand how Paul could write a book like Galatians, where in chapter 1 he makes it abundantly clear that the gospel is about what God did in Christ, not my legal additions, and to add those in is to corrupt the gospel. But then in chapters 5&6, he can list all kinds of ungodly behavior and give a warning—to Christians, no less—that whoever engages consistently and persistently in those practices will not inherit the kingdom of God. You see, *the gospel that is all about God at work in Christ, is still a story about God at work in Christ, when Christ moves into your life*. Paul says this clearly in Philippians 2:13: “it is God at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” In Titus 1, Paul is expressing deep sadness at how people act in the world, and he says “they profess to know God, but in their works they deny him” (Titus 1:16).

This is why the New Testament, including Paul, says on several occasions that final judgement will take our works into account (Matt 16:27; 2 Cor 11:15; Galatians 5:19-15; 2 Tim 4:14; James 2:14-26; 1 John 3:12; Rev 2:23, 26; 20:12, 13). Hear Jesus in the gospels: “For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works” (Matt 16:27). Hear Jesus again in the book of Revelation: “I will give unto every one of you according to your works” (Rev. 2:23). And what does John see in Revelation 20? He sees opened the book of life “and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books” and “every man” was judged “according to their works” (Rev 20:12-13).

How we live matters, because we were saved so that God, in Christ, might be at work in and through you and me. I’ve always found it fascinating that in Matthew 25, Jesus presents a judgment day scene where only one question is asked. We must keep in mind that Jesus is using this as an illustration. This is not the only judgement day scene in the Bible. But He’s trying to say something important to us. A judgment day scene with only one question: Did you feed, and clothe, and visit, and help those in need? Whatever you did or didn’t do to the least of these, my brothers, you did or didn’t do to me (Matt 25). 1 John is all about God saving and redeeming sinful people by his grace and love. But even there John says if you see your brother in need and don’t care for him, how

can anyone say the love of God abides in him? This is because refusing to care for others is a clear sign we don't believe the gospel. This is why Paul says to Titus: “We are saved by his mercy, not our righteous deeds!” But in the very next breath he says: “This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that you affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works” (Titus 3:8 KJV).

So we see the twin poles of misunderstanding. If we start with ourselves, and define the good news of redemption and salvation as you and I working hard to keep a list by which we accomplish enough to get a ticket to heaven, we butcher the gospel! We are saved by grace, through faith in what God accomplished, not because of what we accomplish. But if we fail to appreciate the *end* of the gospel, the goal of the gospel, we will never understand that the same God who purchased salvation in the death of Christ has placed His spirit within us so that he might have a people who look and act like a redeemed kingdom of priests, a holy nation, a light in this dark world. God is still at work, working in us, with us, and through us. Which leads to this question that James asks in chapter 2 of his book: “What do we have to show for it?”

There is a long, great tradition in church history that says “the center of the gospel is salvation by grace through faith.” Martin Luther, against the backdrop of his own church experience where you could pay money or do some deeds to purchase forgiveness for yourself or for dead loved ones, made a rousing case for the heart of the gospel as about God doing all the work in Christ. I want to agree with his emphasis when it comes to how we *start* our conversation about the gospel.

But there is a second approach in church history that says “the center of the gospel is not passive, but active: it's participation in Christ. Notice how often Paul talks about being “conformed to the image” of Christ. Notice how the second half of all his books point out all the ways the gospel changes lives, changes behavior, and makes us different people. If we have a new identity in Christ, that means we are changed people. That is the essence of the gospel.² I want to agree with this emphasis when it comes to how we talk about where the gospel *points*. It's not that complicated!

THE GOSPEL: TWO IMPROPER MOTIVATIONS

Perhaps now we can understand passages that speak of “obeying” the gospel, or “walking in line” with the gospel. I thought the gospel was something you believe and receive (1 Cor 15)? It is. But to believe it deeper and deeper, to receive it fuller and fuller, is to believe not only where it *starts*, but where it *leads*.

² For excellent presentations of the gospel that include the call to live a Kingdom life under the Lordship of Christ, see Matthew Bates's works, such as *Salvation by Allegiance Alone* & *The Gospel Precisely*.

And now, we have to talk about how to *get people to live out* this point.³ There are lots of options. Maybe we could preach about hell fire more often and scare people into shaping up. Fear can certainly work. I wonder how many of us were knocked on our heels when we were hit in the face with a brimstone during a Sunday morning service, so we came forward and “backed up” into the arms of Jesus. Or maybe we can play on people’s ego and encourage us to keep a list of our accolades to compare ourselves with others and always know whatever happens, I’m way better than they are.

Those two motivators—fear and pride—are commonly used by preachers to make our appeal to get people to live right. Fear is saying “do this or you’ll get in trouble with God.” Pride is saying “Don’t do that—outsiders do that, you’ll look like those pitiful people who aren’t as good as you.” But both of these are self-centered motivations: do this thing and it will pay off for you. And preaching like that uses, manipulates, leverages selfishness. But the gospel abolishes it.

But what if we truly believed that the pay off was accomplished 2000 years ago on the cross? And that the cross now is joyfully, willingly, the shape of my life? We would call that “believing the gospel deeper and deeper.”

Let’s revisit Titus 2:11-12. “The grace of God teaches us to say no to things of the world.” Can you think of reasons we might say no to the things of the world? Keller lists several possible answers we might tell ourselves:

I say no to the things of the world because I’ll look bad.

I say no to the things of the world because I’ll be excluded from my social circle of friends.

I say no to the things of the world because God won’t give me health, wealth, and happiness.

I say no to the things of the world, because I might go to hell.

I say no to the things of the world because I’ll hate myself in the morning and lose my self-respect.

But in Titus, Paul doesn’t appeal to any of that. Just one chapter later, Paul says “you know, we were foolish, disobedient, slaves to our various passions and pleasures...But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy” (Titus 3:3-5 NRSV).

³ For this section, see especially Tim Keller, *Center Church*, p.66-70.

If fear and pride are not the motivators, what is? The answer is *the gospel*. But how does that work? I love Keller’s analogy of “gospel heat.” Have you ever tried to bend a spoon? Its hard until you put a fire under the spoon and use some heat. Sometimes we try to bend people into conformity with Christ, while the gospel melts people into conformity with Christ.

Do you remember what Paul tells Christian husbands about how to treat their imperfect wives? “Husbands, love your wives like Christ loves the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy” (Eph 5:25-33). Do you remember what Peter tells Christian wives about how to win over their unbelieving husbands? To live in such a way that “if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word” by the way you live (1 Peter 3:1). Don’t bend them into truth; melt them into truth by living out the love of God.

Why are churches full of people baptized 30 years ago, still fighting gossip, backbiting, jealousy, and all the rest? One reason could be because some of those people came to Jesus out of fear or pride, and those simply are not healthy, long-term motivating factors. It’s a sign that we need something better: not more preaching about what’s wrong with gossip and backbiting; what’s needed is to believe and receive the gospel.

Keller remarks “fear and pride restrain the heart, but they cannot change the heart. Instead, we need to be melted into truth, and you can only be melted by Joy. When the thing that most assures you is that God will never reject you because of what he has done – the thing that most assures you is the thing that most convicts you.”

Two weeks ago in our “Diving Deeper” class, a young lady in this congregation shared this remarkably powerful point in class: “The gospel is simple and brings joy. When we wrap it up with all those other trappings, it robs the gospel of its joy.” Amen!

And this joyful life-giving truth becomes a life-changing truth. It leads to a new identity.

THE GOSPEL: NEW LENSES FOR A NEW IDENTITY⁴

The gospel provides an antidote for how we see ourselves. The gospel provides a new lens for how we see the world. The gospel provides a new lens for love and relationships. The gospel provides a proper lens for sex, how we see racial differences, how we do business, and how we act as neighbors. The gospel changes everything as we take on a new identity. The question for us is simply this: do we really believe it? James says “Do you believe it? I’ll believe you believe it, when I see it” (James 2).

⁴ For this section, see Tim Keller, *Center Church*, pp. 48-51.