

THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL: PART I

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IMPLICATIONS

IMPLICATION #1 - THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL.

In Galatians 2:14, Paul lays down a powerful principle. He deals with Peter's racial pride and cowardice by declaring that he was not living "in line with the truth of the gospel". From this we see that the Christian life is a process of renewing every dimension of our life-- spiritual, psychological, corporate, social-- by thinking, hoping, and living out the "lines" or ramifications of the gospel. The gospel is to be applied to every area of thinking, feeling, relating, working, and behaving. The implications and applications of Galatians 2:14 are vast.

First, Paul is showing us that that bringing the gospel truth to bear on every area of life is the way to be changed by the power of God. The gospel is described in the Bible in the most astounding terms. Angels long to look into it all the time. (I Peter 1:12). It does not simply bring us power, but it is the power of God itself, for Paul says "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation" (Rom.1:16).

It is also the blessing of God with benefits, which accrue to anyone who comes near (I Cor.9:23). It is even called the very light of the glory of God itself--"they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ...for God...has made his light shine into our

hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (II Cor.4:4,6)

It has the life of God. Paul said to the Corinthians, "I gave you birth through the gospel"! And then, after it has regenerated us, it is the instrument of all continual growth and spiritual progress after we are converted. "All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth." (Col. 1:6).

Here we learn: 1) That the gospel is a living thing (cf. Romans 1:16) which is like a seed or a tree that brings more and more new life--bearing fruit and growing. 2) That the gospel is only "planted" in us so as to bear fruit as we understand its greatness and implications deeply--understood God's grace in all its truth. 3) That the gospel continues to grow in us and renew us throughout our lives--as it has been doing since the day you heard it.

This text helps us avoid either an exclusively rationalistic or mystical approach to renewal. On the one hand, the gospel has a content--it is profound doctrine. It is truth, and specifically, it is the truth about God's grace. But on the other hand, this truth is a living power that continually expands its influence in our lives, just as a crop or a tree would grow and spread and dominate more and more of an area with roots and fruit.

IMPLICATION #2- THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE GOSPEL.

Second, Paul is showing that we never "get beyond the gospel" in our Christian life to something more "advanced". The gospel is not the first "step" in a "stairway" of truths, rather, it is more like the "hub" in a "wheel" of truth. The gospel is not just the A-B-C's



but the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not just the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom, but the way we make all progress in the kingdom.

We are not justified by the gospel and then sanctified by obedience, but the gospel is the way we grow (Gal.3:1-3) and are renewed (Col.1:6). It is the solution to each problem, the key to each closed door, the power through every barrier (Rom.1:16-17). It is very common in the church to think as follows. “The gospel is for non-Christians. One needs it to be saved. But once saved, you grow through hard work and obedience.” But Col.1:6 shows that this is a mistake. Both confession and “hard work” that is not arising from and “in line” with the gospel will not sanctify you--it will strangle you. All our problems come from a failure to apply the gospel. Thus when Paul left the Ephesians he committed them “to the word of his grace, which can build you up” (Acts 20:32)

The main problem, then, in the Christian life is that we have not thought out the deep implications of the gospel, we have not “used” the gospel in and on all parts of our life. Richard Lovelace says that most people’s problems are just a failure to be oriented to the gospel--a failure to grasp and believe it through and through. Luther says, “The truth of the Gospel is the principle article of all Christian doctrine....Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually.” (on Gal.2:14f)

The gospel is not easily comprehended. Paul says that the gospel only does its renewing work in us as we understand it in all its truth. All of us, to some degree live around the truth of the gospel but do not “get” it. So the key to continual and deeper spiritual renewal and revival is the continual re-discovery of the gospel. A stage of renewal is always the discovery of a new implication or application of the gospel--seeing more of its truth. This is true for either an individual or a church.

APPLICATIONS

THE TWO “THIEVES” OF THE GOSPEL.

Since Paul uses a metaphor for being “in line” with the gospel, we can consider that gospel renewal occurs when we keep from walking “off-line” either to the right or to the left. The key for thinking out the implications of the gospel is to consider the gospel

a “third” way between two mistaken opposites. However, before we start we must realize that the gospel is not a halfway compromise between the two poles--it does not produce “something in the middle”, but something different from both.

The gospel critiques both religion and irreligion (Matt.21:31; 22:10). Tertullian said, “Just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so this doctrine of justification is ever crucified between two opposite errors.” Tertullian meant that there were two basic false ways of thinking, each of which “steals” the power and the distinctiveness of the gospel from us by pulling us “off the gospel line” to one side or the other. These two errors are very powerful, because they represent the natural tendency of the human heart and mind. (The gospel is “revealed” by God (Rom.1:17)-- the unaided human mind cannot conceive it.)

These “thieves” can be called moralism or legalism on the one hand, and hedonism or relativism on the other hand. Another way to put it is: the gospel opposes both religion and irreligion. On the one hand, “moralism/religion” stresses truth without grace, for it says that we must obey the truth in order to be saved. On the other hand, “relativists/irreligion” stresses grace without truth, for they say that we are all accepted by God (if there is a God) and we have to decide what is true for us. But “truth” without grace is not really truth, and “grace” without truth is not really grace. Jesus was “full of grace and truth”. Any religion or philosophy of life that de-emphasizes or lose one or the other of these truths, falls into legalism or into license and either way, the joy and power and “release” of the gospel is stolen by one thief or the other.

“I am more sinful and flawed than I ever dared believe” (vs. antinomianism)

“I am more accepted and loved than I ever dared hope” (vs. legalism)

THE MORALISM-RELIGION THIEF.

How does moralism/religion steal joy and power? Moralism is the view that you are acceptable (to God, the world, others, yourself) through your attainments. (Moralists do not have to be religious, but often are.) When they are, their religion is pretty conservative and filled with rules. Sometimes moralists have views of God as very holy and just. This view will lead either to a) self-hatred (because you can’t live up to the standards), or b) self-inflation (because you think you



have lived up to the standards). It is ironic to realize that inferiority and superiority complexes have the very same root. Whether the moralist ends up smug and superior or crushed and guilty just depends on how high the standards are and on a person's natural advantages (such as family, intelligence, looks, willpower). Moralistic people can be deeply religious—but there is no transforming joy or power.

THE RELATIVISM-IRRELIGION THIEF.

How does relativism steal joy and power? Relativists are usually irreligious, or else prefer what is called “liberal” religion. On the surface, they are more happy and tolerant than moralist religious people. Though they may be highly idealistic in some areas (such as politics), they believe that everyone needs to determine what is right and wrong for them. They are not convinced that God is just and must punish sinners. Their beliefs in God will tend to see Him as loving or as an impersonal force. They may talk a great deal about God's love, but since they do not think of themselves as sinners, God's love for us costs him nothing. If God accepts us, it is because he is so welcoming, or because we are not so bad. The concept of God's love in the gospel is far more rich and deep and electrifying.

What do both religious and irreligious people have in common? They seem so different, but from the viewpoint of the gospel, they are really the same.

They are both ways to avoid Jesus as Savior and keep control of their lives.

Irreligious people seek to be their own saviors and lords through irreligion, “worldly” pride. (“No one tells me how to live or what to do, so I determine what is right and wrong for me!”) But moral and religious people seek to be their own saviors and lords through religion, “religious” pride. (“I am more moral and spiritual than other people, so God owes me to listen to my prayers and take me to heaven. God cannot let just anything happen to me—he owes me a happy life. I've earned it!”)

The irreligious person rejects Jesus entirely, but the religious person only uses Jesus as an example and helper and teacher—but not as a Savior. (Flannery O'Connor wrote that religious people think “that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin...” These are two different ways to do the same thing—control our own lives. (Note: Ironically, Moralists, despite all the

emphasis on traditional standards, are in the end self-centered and individualistic, because they have set themselves up as their own Saviour. Relativists, despite all their emphasis on freedom and acceptance, are in the end moralistic because they still have to attain and live up to (their own) standards or become desperate. And often, they take great pride in their own openmindedness and judge others who are not.)

They are both based on distorted views of the real God.

The irreligious person loses sight of the law and holiness of God and the religious person loses sight of the love and grace of God, in the end they both lose the gospel entirely. For the gospel is that on the cross Jesus fulfilled the law of God out of love for us. Without a full understanding of the work of Christ, the reality of God's holiness will make his grace unreal, or the reality of his love will make his holiness unreal. Only the gospel—that we are so sinful that we need to be saved utterly by grace—allows a person to see God as he really is. The gospel shows us a God far more holy than the legalist can bear (he had to die because we could not satisfy his holy demands) and yet far more merciful than a humanist can conceive (he had to die because he loved us).

They both deny our sin—so lose the joy and power of grace.

It is obvious that relativistic, irreligious people deny the depth of sin, and therefore the message “God loves you” has no power for them. But though religious persons may be extremely penitent and sorry for their sins, they see sins as simply the failure to live up to standards by which they are saving themselves. They do not see sin as the deeper self-righteousness and self-centeredness through which they are trying to live lives independent of God. So when they go to Jesus for forgiveness, they only as a way to “cover over the gaps” in their project of self-salvation. And when people say, “I know God is forgiving, but I cannot forgive myself”, they mean that they reject God's grace and insist that they be worthy of his favor. So even religious people with “low self-esteem” are really in their funk because they will not see the depth of sin. They see it only as rules breaking, not as rebellion and self-salvation.

A WHOLE NEW WAY OF SEEING GOD.

But Christians are those who have adopted a whole



new system of approach to God. They may have had both religious phases and irreligious phases in their lives. But they have come to see that their entire reason for both their irreligion and their religion was essentially the same and essentially wrong! Christians come to see that both their sins and their best deeds have all really been ways of avoiding Jesus as savior. They come to see that Christianity is not fundamentally an invitation to get more religious.

A Christian comes to say: “though I have often failed to obey the moral law, the deeper problem was why I was trying to obey it! Even my efforts to obey it has been just a way of seeking to be my own savior. In that mindset, even if I obey or ask for forgiveness, I am really resisting the gospel and setting myself up as Savior.” To “get the gospel” is turn from selfjustification and rely on Jesus’ record for a relationship with God. The irreligious don’t repent at all, and the religious only repent of sins. But Christians also repent of their righteousness That is the distinction between the three groups-- Christian, moralists (religious), and pragmatists (irreligious).

SUMMARY

Without a knowledge of our extreme sin, the payment of the cross seems trivial and does not electrify or transform. But without a knowledge of Christ’s completely satisfying life and death, the knowledge of sin would crush us or move us to deny and repress it. Take away either the knowledge of sin or the knowledge of grace and people’s lives not changed. They will be crushed by the moral law or run from it angrily. So the gospel is not that we go from being irreligious to being religious, but that we realize that our reasons for both our religiosity and our irreligiosity were essentially the same and essentially wrong. We were seeking to be our own Saviors and thereby keep control of our own life. When we trust in Christ as our Redeemer, we turn from trusting either self-determination or self-denial for our salvation from either moralism or hedonism.

A WHOLE NEW WAY OF SEEING LIFE.

Paul shows us, then, that we must not just simply ask in every area of life: “what is the moral way to act?” but “what is the way that is in-line with the gospel?” The gospel must be continually “thought out” to keep us from moving into our habitual moralistic or individualistic directions. We must bring everything into line with the gospel.

THE EXAMPLE OF RACISM.

Since Paul used the gospel on racism, let’s use it as an example. The moralistic approach to race: Moralists/legalists would tend to be very proud of their culture. They would fall into cultural imperialism. They would try to attach spiritual significance to their cultural styles, to make themselves feel morally superior to other peoples. This happens because moralistic people are very insecure, since they look a lot at the eternal law, and they know deep down that they cannot keep it. So they use cultural differences to buttress their sense of righteousness.

The relativistic/hedonist approach to race: But the opposite error from cultural imperialism would be cultural relativism. This approach would say, “yes, traditional people were racists because they believed in absolute truth. But truth is relative. Every culture is beautiful in itself. Every culture must be accepted on its own terms.”

The gospel approach to race: Christians know that racism does not stem so much from a belief in truth, but from a lack of belief in grace. The gospel leads us to be: a) on the one hand, somewhat critical of all cultures, including our own (since there is truth), but b) on the other hand, we can feel morally superior to no one. After all, we are saved by grace alone, and therefore a non-Christian neighbor may be more moral and wise than you. This gives the Christian a radically different posture than either moralists or relativists. Note: Relativists (as we said above) are ultimately moralistic. And therefore they can be respectful only of other people who believe everything is relative! But Christians cannot feel morally superior to relativists.

THE EXAMPLE OF A PHYSICAL HANDICAP.

Let’s come down from something sociological (racism) to something psychological. Imagine that through disease or an accident, you lost your eyesight--you became blind. How would you bring the gospel to bear on this pain and grief? The moralistic person will either a) despair, because the handicap takes away something which was his/her “righteousness” or b) deny, refusing to admit the new permanent limitation. The hedonistic person will also either a) despair, because the handicap takes away their ability to live a pleasure-oriented life, or b) deny, because his/her philosophy cannot bear it. But the gospel will lead to a) resist the handicap, yet b) accept it too. Too



much resistance is denial and too much acceptance is despair. The gospel is real about both sin and grace, and thus can give the handicapped person the same balance.

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Share a) what helped you most, and b) what puzzled you.
2. Now try to think through the following three subjects to come to a gospel-based position. In each case, distinguish the moralist view, the hedonist/relativist view, and a gospel view: How/whether to evangelize non-Christians. How to relate (as adults) to difficult parents. How to regard the poor.
3. If there is time, choose other issues or subjects that the group wants to work on, using the same schema for thinking the through.
4. Before concluding, select one personal problem or issue in your life. During the next week, pray and reflect and fill out the following form:
 - a. The moralistic way to handle this:
 - b. The hedonistic way to handle this:
 - c. The gospel way to handle this: