

You Need the Gospel Every Day

Romans 1:13-16

Let's pretend today's scripture reading is all of Paul's epistles: Romans-Philemon. When you read through them, you notice Paul has a consistent pattern:

In the first half of the letter he virtually always addresses his readers with the gospel, the truths of salvation, the doctrine of justification. He articulates in one way or another their riches in Christ.

Then in the second half of the letter he tells them what to do about it; how to live out the implications of the gospel.

Isn't it strange for Paul to tell his readers again, who are already believers in Jesus, what Jesus has done for them? Why repeat that. Presumably they already know that, they have committed to and embraced the reality of Jesus death and resurrection. Why not just get on with the morality of the faith, the nuts and bolts where the rubber meets the road? Wouldn't Paul assume they'd flip through the first chapters and get on to the practical stuff?

Paul has an intentional logic. Christians need the gospel as much as non-Christians. You need the gospel every day. Though we tend to think we are justified by faith and then sanctified by works, the truth is, we are saved by faith and sanctified by faith.

...because God has chosen you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth... 2 Thess.2:13

Because we naturally tend to lose sight of the riches of Christ, we daily need to be confronted with their power. That's what changes us, as Paul says in 2 Cor. 3:18, from glory into glory, as we behold the glory of the Jesus, are being transformed into the same image.

What threatens the church? Not gospel-focused. Lapsing from gospel-centricity.

That's explains why Paul begins his epistle to the Romans: **1:15**

So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ.

2 Thess. 3:5

Here are a number of reasons why we must stay gospel-centered in all of our life:

1. The discovery

What does spiritual growth look like?

The discovery of two things, one wonderful, one not so.

The more we grow in grace we see the holiness of God, the extent of his standards, how lofty and pure an excellent he is. That's wonderful. God is beautiful, desirable, delightful, utterly perfect in all ways.

And of course in contrast, how much we are not like him. We see our sin (our tenacity of self-love, self-protection, self-reliance, self-absorption). In other words, growth in grace feels messy; we become increasingly aware of a war with sin in our hearts. This struggle is hard and full of unpleasant discoveries: the depth of our pride, the ease with which we lapse into doubt, and our relative indifference to the glory of God. You feel like a walking contradiction: I say the gospel is true but betray it in action.

2. The default mode

One outcome of this inner conflict is our tendency to experience vacillating feelings of security in our salvation. Why? The default mode of the heart is to base our assurance of God's acceptance on our performance. We innately think God accepts us because of our obedience, so if we are doing well in our religious activities, feel sincere, see relative infrequency of willful disobedience, we have greater security God accepts us. There's always a lurking temptation therefore to prove to God we were worth saving, yet with the unintended and unhappy result that we destroy the gospel (he saves unworthy sinners by *his* doing not *ours!*).

What do you do when you find you're not as impressed with yourself as you used to be? When God seems to be peeling back the layers of your heart (in kindness not showing us the depth of our depravity all at once) showing us the pervasive presence of pride, self-sufficiency, self-reliance? What do you do when you discover your frailty, lose battles, and can't hide from yourself what you can hide from others? You find yourself unlovable in God's sight and feel unworthy of his love. The gospel seems too good to be true!

3. Dysfunctional solutions

We tend toward one of seven directions upon the discovery of sin:

- a. Denial and smile: Tell yourself, I'm really not so bad. Then find a church that makes you feel good about yourself.
- b. Compare and compete: I may have issues, but I'm not as bad as so and so.
- c. Stare and despair: Enter into excessive navel gazing, concluding, I'll never get better. To these folks we need to say, Cheer up, you're a lot worse than you know.
4. Blame shift and excuse: My problems are larger due to the multitude of ways others have let me down. Take responsibility for your mess.
5. Lower and slower: Since sin feels awful to acknowledge, ease up and lower the standards (stop reading your bible or hanging out with folks who are all out for Jesus).
6. Get saved again, and again and again.. It obviously didn't work the first time, I'm still sinning! But who told you sin was going away? In fact, a sleeping giant has awakened inside you! Now you're at war with sin because sin is at war with you. It will wage a relentless battle until the day you die. The bible assumes we must constantly *abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.* (1 Peter 2:11)

I have found in my pastoral experience that most people in our churches resort to this strategy:

7. Work/hurt : I need to do more, exert more, try harder, buck up for Jesus. No pain no gain. So to compensate for your sins, read more, pray more, witness more, just do it. Work harder at obedience.

This last approach to managing depravity usually lands folks in one of two places: if you think you are succeeding, you will grow proud, critical, and intolerant; if you sense you are failing, you will grow weary, despairing, joyless, and live under condemnation.

There are two principle reasons why these strategies don't work, according to pastor Tim Keller.

First, they only restrain the heart, like holding my dog on her leash when she wants to chase a squirrel. The heart needs to be changed, spiritually transformed, for us to do the right thing for the right reason.

Haven't you discovered in your experience the impotence of the law? Rules have no power to constrain the flesh: Col.2:23:

These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

The law proscribes what to do but does not empower us to do it.

A perfect example is King David on Jerusalem's rooftop, lusting after Bathsheba, even though he knew the law of God better than anyone on the earth. The law in itself possessed no inherent power to constrain David from adultery, coveting, murder, lying, or the abuse of power. Same for Peter, when he denied Jesus. Of course he knew it was unlawful to be disloyal to his friend, disowning him with lies. But knowing the law had no power to produce obedience to it.

Only reliance upon the Spirit's power can produce spiritual fruit.

Second, they employ the wrong motives for change. The Puritans help us see two wrong motives for change:

fear (I'll be punished for not doing the right thing, God won't bless me, I'll get caught)

and pride (I'll feel better about myself and superior to others, I won't look bad).

Do you see that your motives are still self-centered and not Christ-glorifying? How odd: we are sinfully motivated to do the right thing. The things that lead us into sin (fear and pride) are still motivating us not to sin. Your motives are still self-centered. I'm not living as if the gospel is true, secure in God's love.

4. The delight of the gospel

What should you do once you confront sin and the Spirit, in grace, exposes your self-love? Magnify Christ. Your Christ is too small.

Only the cross can save us from these destructive strategies. Look to Christ in repentant faith. Yes, repent of sin, forsake it, but for love's sake, do it for all the right reasons. Look what Christ has done for you! Look what Christ has done in you! Sin crucified your savoir. Sin isn't you. You are a son of God. You're not defined by sin, but by the life of Jesus in you.

Looking to Christ, believing his promises, embracing all that you are in union with him, savoring his love in spite of your sin, is called faith. We begin the Christian life by faith, and we continue in it by faith. We are sanctified, conformed to Jesus' image, by faith not works.

Christians need the Gospel every day, not for justification but for sanctification.
...because God has chosen you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth... 2 Thess.2:13

Does he then, who provides you with the Spirit and works wonders among you, do it by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Gal.3:1-5

Let the sweet aroma of the grace of Jesus assault your proud proclivity to prove our worth to God by our own efforts. The gospel says, your heart is more wicked than you ever imagined, yet Jesus loves you more than you ever dreamt possible. John Newton wrote:

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believers ear,
it soothes his sorrows heals his wounds and drives away his fears.

Dear name the rock on which I build, my shield and hiding place,
my never failing treasury filled with boundless stores of grace

Grace, therefore, moves our will to do the right *thing* (obey God, please his heart, fulfill the law) for the right *reason*. Not to get God *to* accept me, but because he *has* accepted me.

In Titus 2:11-13 Paul says, *the grace of God...teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions..*

Tim Keller explains that the grace of the gospel argues with us, coaches us over time, until it changes the structures of our motivation: to be godly not to avoid getting caught or feeling bad about ourselves or feeling superior to others or the self-loathing that comes, but for love with Jesus. A glorious God chooses to delight in me and therefore I need no more than that, owing him nothing.

This frees us to say that with Paul, *I am what I am by the grace of God.*

1 Cor.15:10

Christian, you are not struggling to be free; you are free to struggle.

God doesn't change us in order to accept us, he accepts us in order to change us.

Believing he deeply loves me, cherishes me, is for me, that's the power of faith.

The gospel, therefore, daily preached to ourselves, keeps in front of us:

a) the cross, lest we boast in our best efforts: Gal.6:14

but far be from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...

b) his power, lest we strive on our own to please him 2 Thess.1:11-12

To this end we pray for you always that our God may count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power; in order that the name of our Lord Jesus be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

c) the love of Christ for us, which fuels our faith. Faith produces the fruit God is looking for, not works. 2 Thess.3:5

And may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

d) the reason he loves us, keeping us assured of our salvation. Rom.5:6f
God demonstrates his own love toward us in that while we were yet enemies, Christ died for us

5. Ditching conditional love

What is the natural bent of the human heart? We will love people for what they give us, but when they fail, we bail. We more readily see others' sins before our own. We will hold against other their sins against us, as if the basis of our love for them is their performance.

The gospel is the only true power for loving others. Paul is always talking about loving one another because it is the most powerful way to bless. Not about feelings. It is a commitment to promote what is best for another person.

If I am not secure in God's love for me I will be subconsciously radically insecure, showing up in my attitude toward others: proud, defensive, critical, asserting my own righteousness. I will inevitably seek to build a case for why I am acceptable.

The love of Christ for me frees me from:

the urge to win arguments,
compete with others, position for the upper hand,
crave their approval,
feel superior, or despise their weaknesses.

Faith looks outward in grateful love and humble service.

Gal. 5:6 For in Christ Jesus all that counts is faith working through love.

This is the freedom Paul celebrates for the Galatians:
you don't have to be right, Christ was right for you;
you don't have to be accepted, the king of glory loves you;
you don't have to make others pay, Christ paid for you.
You have to be in control, Christ rules the details of your life;
You don't have to fear; Jesus has a good plan for you.
You don't have to prove your worth; its already established in Jesus.

The logic supporting our love and compassion for others is irrefutable:

Others are worse off than us only because of grace mercifully lavished on us.

Do you really think you'd be so good apart from God's indwelling grace? Jesus underscored the principle with these words: *those forgiven much, love much*. The only motive to treat others in merciful way, to humbly serve the undeserving, is to be in awe of God's astounding mercy to you: I didn't get what I deserved. We love others to the glory of his mercy to us. (1 Cor.6:20)

Perhaps that is why Moses asked in Ps.90:14, *satisfy us in the morning with your loving-kindness and we will be glad and rejoice all the day*. Until the Lord is our primary source of joy, we will try to find false sources of joy, often in people. But all other sources (especially people) are fleeting and can't meet the deepest longing of our hearts, to be right with God, to be loved and secure in a lonely universe, to have access to paradise, and to see God. If you have to get your joy from others, you can't love them. Your relationship is fundamentally self-centered, not other centered. Love asks, what can I give them for their edification, not what's in it for me.