

Gospel Christianity

Leaders Guide | Course 1

*...know that a man is not justified by observing the law,
but by faith in Jesus Christ.*

Galatians 2: 11-16

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Gospel Christianity

What is the Gospel?

Study 1 | Course 1

The word “gospel” occurs so often in the New Testament that it is clearly a summary term for the basic core of what Christianity is all about. But what is that core?

KEY CONCEPT – GOSPEL

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

The gospel is *news* rather than instruction.

The Greek term “gospel” (*ev-angelion*) distinguished the Christian message from that of other religions.

- An “ev-angel” was news of a great historical event that changed the listeners’ condition and required response (such as a victory in war or the ascension of a new king).
- So the gospel is news of what God has done to accomplish salvation through Jesus Christ in history. It is not advice about what we must do to reach God.
- We do not achieve this salvation. We only accept it.

The gospel is *grace* rather than merit.

The gospel is: “I am accepted through Christ, therefore I obey.” Religion is: “I obey, therefore I am accepted.” So the gospel differs from both religion and irreligion.

- You can seek to be your own “lord and savior” by breaking the law of God. But you can also do so by keeping the law in order to earn your salvation.
- Disbelief in the gospel of grace, of course, keeps the unconverted from God. But a lack of deep belief in the gospel is also the main cause of spiritual deadness, fear, and pride in Christians, because our hearts continue to act on the basis of “I obey, therefore I am accepted.”
 - a) Our failure to forgive others is not simply a lack of obedience, but a failure to believe we are saved by grace, too.
 - b) Our lying in order to cover up a mistake is not simply a lack of obedience, but a failure to find our acceptance in God rather than in human approval.
- So we do not “get saved” by believing the gospel and then “grow” by trying hard to live according to Biblical principles. Believing the gospel is not only the way to meet God, but also the way to grow into him.

The gospel is *reversal* of the weak and the strong.

Christ wins our salvation through losing, achieves power through weakness and service, comes to wealth via giving all away. And those who receive his salvation are not the strong and accomplished but those who admit they are weak and lost.

- This pattern creates an alternate kingdom or city (Matt.5:14-16) in which there is a complete reversal of the values of the world with regard to power, recognition, status, wealth.
- When we understand that we can be saved by sheer grace through Christ, we stop seeking salvation in these things. The reversal of the cross, the grace of God, thus liberates us from bondage to the power of material things and worldly status.
- This means we no longer disdain those of classes or races that we used to think beneath us.

1. Which statements impressed you and why?

The three statements are all important perspectives on the gospel.

- The first stresses the doctrinal content of the gospel. It shows us that the gospel is the news that Jesus Christ died and rose for our salvation in history.
- The second stresses the personal individual impact of the gospel. It shows that the gospel is a transforming grace that changes our hearts and inmost motives.
- The third stresses the social impact of the gospel. It shows that the gospel brings a new order in which believers no longer are controlled by material goods or worldly status and have solidarity with others across traditional social barriers.

These three perspectives are Biblical and should be kept together. There is a tendency for Christians and churches to major on just one of these perspectives and ignore the others.

- If you stress the *social impact* to the exclusion of others, you might call loudly for social justice, but your ministry would not convert people and give them the changed lives they need to serve the needs of the poor.
- If you stress the *doctrinal content* to the exclusion of the others, you might have a ministry that was very doctrinally accurate but failed to apply the gospel to practical psychological and social issues.
- If you over-stress the *personal impact*, you might psychologize the gospel so that it is presented as strictly a way for an individual to overcome his or her guilt and unhappiness.

2. “If you are saved no matter how you live, what incentive is there for living a virtuous, obedient life?” Formulate some answers.

There is both a negative and positive response to this question.

The Negative Response

There is a hidden premise in this question. The premise is that once the fear of condemnation is taken away there will be no incentive for leading a life that pleases God. But if you have no incentive to be holy once all fear of condemnation and rejection is removed, then the only incentive you really had to be holy was fear!

- The gospel of sheer grace reveals and removes a motivation to “be good” that was essentially selfish and negative.
- Of course, when you are deeply in love and sure of the other person’s unconditional commitment to you, there is a kind of fear motivation. But it is not primarily fear for you — that you may be rejected and hurt — but fear for the other — that he or she will be dishonored and hurt.
- Your motivation to submit to the will of the beloved is not fear of being rejected, but rather fear of disappointing the one who will never reject you.

The Positive Response

So if you know that “there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1), what incentive is there for living a virtuous, obedient life? All the incentive in the world. Here are just three aspects of it.

1. We live a virtuous life because we want to delight the Lord who saved us.
 - When he died on the cross, he did not “please himself” (Rom 15:1-3). In a sense, he placed his happiness *within* our happiness. That is, he so identifies his heart with our interests that what brings *us* good and pleasure automatically brings him pleasure.
 - So anyone who has experienced the grace and love of God in the gospel, finds growing within, a desire to bring God delight and pleasure. We now do not serve him just in order to get things from him.
 - As he put his happiness within ours — so now we put our happiness within his. Our delight is to know he is delighted.

2. We live a virtuous life because we want to resemble the Lord who saved us.
 - There is a deep human instinct to imitate what we admire and honor.
 - To honor great people, for example, we make images of them — statues and paintings. And we urge people to emulate them.

- A godly life is the deepest way to honor the one who lived and died to serve and save us. We make ourselves into images of him.

3. We live a virtuous life because we want to get near and have fellowship with him.

- In religion, we go to God because he is useful for getting the things our heart most wants.
- In the gospel, we go to God because he is beautiful. We go simply to get God himself. We want to sense his presence and we know that living a life imitating him is the way to do that.

In summary, the gospel makes the law of God a thing of beauty instead of a burden. We can use it to delight, resemble, and have fellowship with the one who has saved us rather than to get his attention or procure his favor. We now run the race “for the joy that is set before us” rather than “for the fear that comes behind us.”

3. “Well, if you know you are always forgiven then what incentive is there for ever repenting?” Formulate some answers.

It is important to consider how the gospel affects and transforms the very act of repentance. In religion, the purpose of repentance is basically to keep God happy so he will continue to bless you and answer your prayers. This means that “religious repentance” is selfish, self-righteous, and bitter all the way to the bottom.

1. Religious repentance is selfish. In religion we are sorry for sin mainly because of its consequences to us. It will bring us punishment and we want to avoid that. So we repent.
 - The gospel tells us that sin can’t ultimately bring us into condemnation (Rom 8:1). Its heinousness is therefore what it does to God; it displeases and dishonors him.
 - Thus in religion, repentance is self-centered; the gospel makes it God-centered. In religion, we are mainly sorry for the consequences of sin, but in the gospel we are sorry for the sin itself.
2. Religious repentance is self-righteous. The repentance easily becomes a form of atoning for the sin. Religious repentance often becomes a form of self-flagellation in which we convince God (and ourselves) that we are so truly miserable and regretful that we deserve to be forgiven.

BIBLE STUDY

Galatians 2:11-16

1. Why did Peter originally begin “eating with Gentiles” (v.15-16a)? What led him to stop (v.12b)?**Why did Peter originally begin eating with Gentiles?**

Circumcision, refraining from eating with Gentiles, and refraining from eating certain foods were parts of the Jewish ceremonial law by which Jews prepared themselves to be clean and fit for the presence of God in worship.

- Peter began eating with Gentiles (v.12) because God had shown him that no one is made clean and fit for the presence of God by their own moral efforts. We are acceptable (“*justified*”) before God only by faith in Christ.
- Peter had learned this (v.15-16a). He knew that no one is “unclean” in Christ. This was the way he learned he could, as a Jew, eat with Gentile Christian believers.
- [Read Acts 10 and 11 to see how Peter was forcefully shown this by God through the conversion of Cornelius. After God had shown him this Peter ate with Gentiles despite criticism (Acts 11:2). Even later he asserts that the Gentiles have been “*purified [made clean] by faith*” (Acts 15:7-9).]

What led him to stop?

When Peter withdrew from the Gentiles, it was not just cowardice but “*hypocrisy*.” Peter could not have forgotten something as momentous as the vision at Joppa and the conversion of Cornelius.

- He did not really change his mind or convictions. He still believed the gospel — that we are “clean” through Jesus alone — but he did not act in accordance with his deepest understanding and convictions.
- What then led Peter to act as he did? We are told “*he was afraid*” (v.12).
 - a) Perhaps he was simply afraid of criticism.
 - b) It is possible that he was also afraid of persecution by Jewish authorities.
- But in addition, his old racial pride may have re-asserted itself. Peter and all the Jews had been drilled since their youth that Gentiles were “unclean.”

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READINGS

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There is a righteousness which Paul calls “the righteousness of faith.” God imputes it to us apart from our works — in other words, it is *passive* righteousness... So then, have we nothing to do to obtain this righteousness? No, *nothing at all!* For this righteousness comes by doing nothing, hearing nothing, knowing nothing, but rather in knowing and believing this only — that Christ has gone to the right hand of the Father, not to become our judge, but to become *for us* our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness, our salvation! Now God sees no sin in us, for in this heavenly righteousness sin has no place. So now we may certainly think, “Although I still sin, I don’t despair, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my eternal life.” In that righteousness I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life of mine and in my own righteousness, but I have another life, another righteousness above this life, which is in Christ, the Son of God.

Christians never completely understand [this] themselves, and thus do not take advantage of it when they are troubled and tempted. So we have to constantly teach it, repeat it, and work it out in practice. Anyone who does not understand this righteousness or cherish it in the heart and conscience will continually be buffeted by fears and depression. *Nothing gives peace like this passive righteousness.* The troubled conscience has no cure for its desperation and feeling of unworthiness unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by *grace*, offered free of charge in Jesus Christ, which is this passive or Christian righteousness... Once you are in Christ, the Law is the greatest guide for your life, but until you have Christian righteousness, all the law can do is to show you how sinful and condemned you are. But if we first receive Christian righteousness, then we can use the law, not for our salvation, but for his honor and glory, and to lovingly show our gratitude.

– Martin Luther ¹

Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives... Many... have a theoretical commitment to this doctrine, but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for their justification... drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience. Few know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther’s platform: *you are accepted*, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing

