

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE — PARTICIPANT’S GUIDE

LESSON 2 — PRETENDING & PERFORMING

BIG IDEA

This lesson deals with how we “shrink the cross,” which is to say that something is lacking in our understanding, appreciation, or application of Jesus’ sacrifice for our sin. This manifests itself in two main ways: **pretending** and **performing**. Pretending minimizes sin by making ourselves out to be something we are not. Performing minimizes God’s holiness by reducing his standard to something we can meet, thereby meriting his favor. Both are rooted in an inadequate view of God’s holiness and our identity.

NOTES:

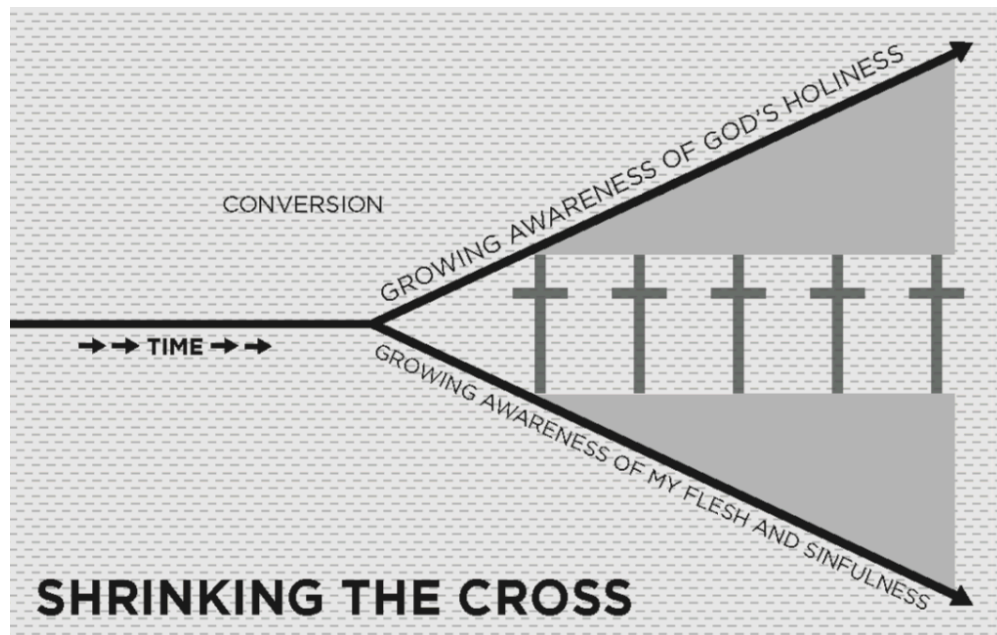
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LESSON 2 ARTICLE — SHRINKING THE CROSS: PRETENDING & PERFORMING

Last week we looked at a model that illustrates what it means to live in light of the gospel. This week we want to look more closely at the ways we minimize the gospel and reduce its impact in our lives.

Notice that the top line of the chart is labeled “Growing Awareness of God’s Holiness.” As we stated last time, this does not mean that God’s holiness itself is increasing, for God is unchangeable in his character. He has always been infinitely holy. Rather, this line shows that when the gospel is functioning correctly in our lives, our awareness of God’s holy character is constantly growing. We realize in fuller and deeper ways the weight of God’s glorious perfections.

THE CROSS CHART



Likewise, the bottom line shows that when the gospel is functioning correctly in our lives, our awareness of our own sinfulness is consistently growing. This does not mean that we are becoming more sinful. (In fact, if we’re growing in Christ, we’ll be starting to see victory over sin.) But we are realizing more and more “how deep the rabbit hole goes” in our character and behavior. We are seeing that we are more profoundly sinful than we first imagined.

As these two lines diverge, the cross becomes larger in our experience, producing a deeper love for Jesus and a fuller understanding of his goodness. At least that’s the ideal. But, in reality, because of indwelling sin, we are prone to forget the gospel—to drift away from it like a boat loosed from its moorings. That’s why the

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Bible urges us not to be “moved [away] from the hope held out in the gospel” (Col. 1:23) and to “let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly” (Col. 3:16). When we are not anchored in the truth of the gospel, our love for Jesus and our experience of his goodness become very small. We end up “shrinking the cross” by either **pretending** or **performing**.

Look again at the bottom line of the chart. Growing in our awareness of our sinfulness is not fun! It means admitting—to ourselves and others—that we are not as good as we think we are. It means confronting what Richard Lovelace called the complex web of “compulsive attitudes, beliefs, and behavior”¹ that sin has created in us. If we are not resting in Jesus’ righteousness, this growing awareness of our sin becomes a crushing weight. We buckle under its load and compensate by pretending that we’re better than we really are. Pretending can take many forms: dishonesty (“I’m not that bad”), comparison (“I’m not as bad as those people”), excuse making (“I’m not really that way”), and false righteousness (“Here are all the good things I’ve done”). Because we don’t want to admit how sinful we really are, we spin the truth in our favor.

Growing in our awareness of God’s holiness is also challenging. It means coming face to face with God’s righteous commands and the glorious perfections of his character. It means realizing how dramatically we fall short of his standards. It means reflecting on his holy displeasure toward sin. If we are not rooted in God’s acceptance of us through Jesus, we compensate by trying to earn God’s approval through our performance. We live life on a treadmill, trying to gain God’s favor by living up to his expectations (or our mistaken view of them).

It’s easy to talk about pretending and performing in the abstract. But let’s consider how these tendencies find practical expression in our lives.

To discern your subtle tendencies toward pretending, ask yourself this question: what do you count on to give you a sense of “personal credibility” (validity, acceptance, good standing)? Your answer to that question will often reveal something (besides Jesus) in which you find righteousness. When we are not firmly rooted in the gospel, we rely on these false sources of righteousness to build our reputation and give us a sense of worth and value. Here are some examples.

JOB RIGHTEOUSNESS: I’m a hard worker, so God will reward me.

FAMILY RIGHTEOUSNESS: Because I “do things right” as a parent, I’m more godly than parents who can’t control their kids.

THEOLOGICAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: I have good theology. God prefers me over those who have bad theology.

¹ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 88.

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INTELLECTUAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: I am better read, more articulate, and more culturally savvy than others, which obviously makes me superior.

SCHEDULE RIGHTEOUSNESS: I am self-disciplined and rigorous in my time management, which makes me more mature than others.

FLEXIBILITY RIGHTEOUSNESS: In a world that's busy, I'm flexible and relaxed. I always make time for others. Shame on those who don't!

MERCY RIGHTEOUSNESS: I care about the poor and disadvantaged the way everyone else should.

LEGALISTIC RIGHTEOUSNESS: I don't drink, smoke, or chew, or date girls who do. Too many Christians just aren't concerned about holiness these days.

FINANCIAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: I manage money wisely and stay out of debt. I'm not like those materialistic Christians who can't control their spending.

POLITICAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: If you really love God, you'll vote for my candidate.

TOLERANCE RIGHTEOUSNESS: I am open-minded and charitable toward those who don't agree with me. In fact, I'm a lot like Jesus that way!

These are just a few examples. Perhaps you can think of many more. (Think of anything that gives you a sense of being “good enough” or better than others.) These sources of functional righteousness disconnect us from the power of the gospel. They allow us to find righteousness in what we do instead of honestly confronting the depth of our sin and brokenness. Furthermore, each of these sources of righteousness is also a way of judging and excluding others! We use them to elevate ourselves and condemn those who aren't as “righteous” as we are. In other words, finding righteousness in these things leads us into more sin, not less.

Now, to reveal your tendency toward performance, pause and answer this question: as God thinks of you right now, what is the look on his face?

Do you picture God as disappointed? Angry? Indifferent? Does his face say “Get your act together!” or “If only you could do a little more for me!” If you imagined God as anything but satisfied because of what Jesus has done for you, you have fallen into a performance mindset. Because the gospel truth is that in Christ, God is deeply satisfied with you. In fact, based on Jesus' work, God has adopted you as his own son or daughter (Gal. 4:7)! But when we fail to root our identity in what Jesus has done for us, we slip into performance-driven Christianity. We imagine that if we were “better Christians,” God would approve of us more fully. Living this way saps the joy and delight out of following Jesus, leaving us to wallow in a joyless, dutiful obedience. Our gospel becomes very small.

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Performance-driven Christianity is actually a minimizing of God's holiness. Thinking we can impress God with our "right living" shows that we've reduced his standards far below what they actually are. Rather than being awed by the infinite measure of his holy perfection, we have convinced ourselves that if we just try hard enough, we can merit God's love and approval.

Our subtle tendencies toward pretending and performing show that failing to believe the gospel is the root of all our more observable sins. As we learn to apply the gospel to our unbelief—to "preach the gospel to ourselves"—we will find ourselves freed from the false security of pretending and performing. Instead we will live in the true joy and freedom promised to us by Jesus. We'll think more about that next time.

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LESSON 2 EXERCISE — RIGHT & WRONG

We have all constructed certain rules or laws that we live by, believing that if we keep them, we are more “right” before God. It is then only a small step before we start judging other people based on their performance regarding these rules or laws. The rules we make for ourselves are usually good things. However, we often abuse them. For example, as we struggle with the desire to be in control of our lives, we erect laws that try to maintain that control. These laws could be as simple as “Don’t cut me off the road,” or “The house must be kept tidy.” When people break these laws, we feel that we are losing control and that people do not respect us. Moreover, we feel that we are right and they are wrong. The usual result is anger, as we try to regain control of the situation and show just how right we are. Thus, instead of the law being used to tell us how we ought to love other people, we use it against other people.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. Give an example of a rule you have made for yourself and others that makes you feel good when it is kept, but irritated or depressed when it is broken.

2. How has your rule-keeping given you a sense of self-righteousness?

3. How does being mastered by this rule keep you from genuinely loving other people? Be specific.