

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE — PARTICIPANT’S GUIDE

LESSON 3 — BELIEVING THE GOSPEL

BIG IDEA

We have been focusing on the ways we minimize the gospel—the negative. This lesson turns our attention to the positive: what remedies has God given in the gospel to keep us from shrinking the cross and depending on our own effort?

NOTES:

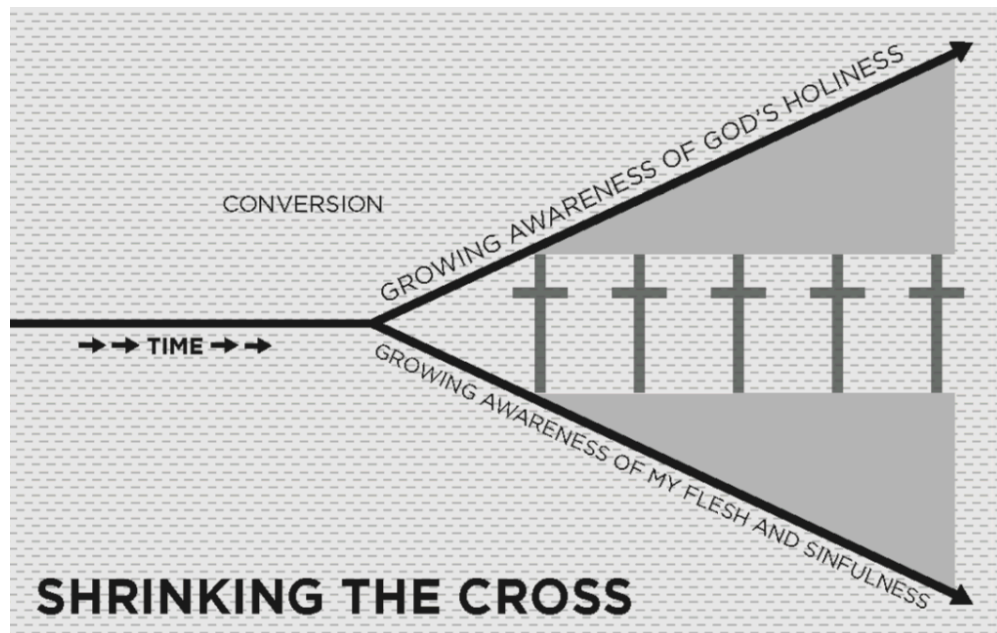
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LESSON 3 ARTICLE — BELIEVING THE GOSPEL

In the last two lessons we used a visual illustration to better understand the gospel and the way it functions in our lives. Last time, we considered our propensity to “shrink the cross” by pretending and performing. In this session we want to see how a strong and vibrant belief in the gospel frees us from ourselves and produces true and lasting spiritual transformation.

At the root of the human condition is a struggle for righteousness and identity. We long for a sense of acceptance, approval, security, and significance—because we were designed by God to find these things in him. But sin has separated us from God and created in us a deep sense of alienation. Speaking of the Jewish people in his own day, Paul writes, “[T]hey did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own” (Rom. 10:3). We do the same thing. Theologically speaking, pretending and performing are just two sophisticated ways of establishing our own righteousness. When we pretend, we are making ourselves out to be better than we are. When we perform, we are trying to please God by what we do. Pretending and performing reflect our sinful attempts to secure our own righteousness and identity apart from Jesus.

THE CROSS CHART



To really experience the deep transformation God promises us in the gospel, we must continually repent of these sinful patterns. Our souls must become deeply rooted in the truth of the gospel so that we anchor our righteousness and identity in Jesus and not in ourselves. Specifically, the gospel promises of passive righteousness and adoption must become central to our thinking and living.

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Passive righteousness is the biblical truth that God has not only forgiven our sin, but also credited to us Jesus’ positive righteousness. Romans 3 speaks of a righteousness from God that comes to us through faith: “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Rom. 3:21–22). Of this passive righteousness, Martin Luther writes:

It is called “passive righteousness” because we do not have to labor for it.... It is not righteousness that we work for, but righteousness we receive by faith. This passive righteousness is a mystery that someone who does not know Jesus cannot understand. In fact, Christians do not completely understand it and rarely take advantage of it in their daily lives... When there is any fear or our conscience is bothered, it is a sign that our “passive” righteousness is out of sight and Christ is hidden.

The person who wanders away from “passive” righteousness has no other choice but to live by “works” righteousness. If he does not depend on the work of Christ, he must depend on his own work. So we must teach and continually repeat the truth of this “passive” or “Christian” righteousness so that Christians continue to hold to it and never confuse it with “works” righteousness.¹

Luther reminds us that if we “wander away from passive righteousness,” our hearts will naturally tend toward self—or works—righteousness. To fight against our tendency to shrink the gospel in this way, we must consistently repent of false sources of righteousness and preach the gospel to ourselves, especially the truth of passive righteousness. We must cling to the gospel promise that God is pleased with us because he is pleased with Jesus. When we embrace the gospel in this way, seeing our sin is not scary or embarrassing. It actually leads to worship because Jesus has died for all of it, and it is liberating because we are no longer defined by it! Our righteousness is in Christ. The good news of the gospel is not that God makes much of us, but that God frees us to make much of Jesus.

Adoption is the biblical truth that God has welcomed us into his family as his own sons and daughters by virtue of our union with Jesus. Part of the work of the Holy Spirit is to confirm this adoption within us: “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom. 8:15–16). Galatians 4:7 says the same thing in different words: “So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.”

But just like we wander away from passive righteousness, we are also prone to forget our identity as God’s children. We live like orphans instead of sons and daughters. Rather than resting in God’s fatherly love, we try to gain his favor by living up to his expectations (or our mistaken view of them). We live life on a treadmill, trying to be “good Christians” so God will approve of us. To fight back against our tendency to

¹ Martin Luther, preface to his *Commentary on Galatians*, as quoted in *Sonship* (World Harvest Mission, 2002).

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shrink the gospel in this way, we must continually repent of our orphan-like mentality and dwell on our true identity as God’s sons and daughters. By faith, we must cling to the gospel promise that we are adopted as God’s children. Jesus’ righteousness has been credited to us apart from works (Rom. 4:4–8). We don’t need to do anything to secure God’s love and acceptance; Jesus has secured it for us. When we embrace the gospel in this way, the infinite standard of God’s holiness is no longer fearful or intimidating. It leads to worship, because Jesus has met it for us. Our identity is in him. The good news of the gospel is not that God favors us because of who we are, but that he favors us in spite of who we are.

At the root of all our visible sins lies the invisible struggle for righteousness and identity. In other words, we never outgrow the gospel. As Martin Luther wrote, “Most necessary is it that we know [the gospel] well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually.” As we realize our tendencies toward pretending and performing—our attempts to build our own righteousness and identity—we must repent of sin and believe anew in the promises of the gospel. This is the consistent pattern of the Christian life: repentance and faith, repentance and faith, repentance and faith. As we walk this way, the gospel will take root more deeply in our souls, and Jesus and his cross will become “bigger” in the day-to-day reality of our lives.

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LESSON 3 EXERCISE — SELF-ASSESSMENT: ORPHANS vs. CHILDREN

This is a practical exercise to reveal our sinful tendencies to manipulate life and our daily need to return to Christ. This exercise will humble you, which is one of the first steps in serving Christ and others. Read through each bulleted list. Under “The Orphan,” check the box if you see that tendency in yourself. Underline the words that most apply. Under “The Son/Daughter,” check the boxes that describe where you most want to grow, underlining the key words.

THE ORPHAN

- ☐ Lacks a vital daily intimacy with God
- ☐ Anxious about friends, money, school, grades, etc.
- ☐ Feels as if no one cares about you
- ☐ Lives on a success/fail basis
- ☐ Needs to look good
- ☐ Feels guilty and condemned
- ☐ Struggles to trust things to God
- ☐ Has to fix your problems
- ☐ Not very teachable
- ☐ Is defensive when accused of error or weakness
- ☐ Needs to be right
- ☐ Lacks confidence
- ☐ Feels discouraged and defeated
- ☐ Strong-willed with ideas, agendas, and opinions
- ☐ Solution to failure: “Try harder”
- ☐ Has a critical spirit (complaining and bitterness)
- ☐ Tears others down
- ☐ A “competent analyst” of others’ weaknesses
- ☐ Tends to compare yourself with others
- ☐ Feels powerless to defeat the flesh
- ☐ Needs to be in control of situations and others
- ☐ Looks for satisfaction in “positions”
- ☐ Looks for satisfaction in “possessions”
- ☐ Tends to be motivated by obligation and duty, not love

THE SON/DAUGHTER

- ☐ ☐ Feels freed from worry because of God’s love for you
- ☐ ☐ Learning to live in a daily partnership with God
- ☐ ☐ Not fearful of God
- ☐ ☐ Feels forgiven and totally accepted
- ☐ ☐ A daily trust in God’s sovereign plan for your life
- ☐ ☐ Prayer is a first resort
- ☐ ☐ Content in relationships b/c you are accepted by God
- ☐ ☐ Freedom from making a name for yourself
- ☐ ☐ Is teachable by others
- ☐ ☐ Open to criticism b/c you rest on Christ’s perfection
- ☐ ☐ Able to examine your deeper motives
- ☐ ☐ Able to take risks—even to fail
- ☐ ☐ Encouraged by the Spirit working in you
- ☐ ☐ Able to see God’s goodness in dark times
- ☐ ☐ Content with what Christ has provided
- ☐ ☐ Trusting less in self and more in the Holy Spirit
- ☐ ☐ Aware of inability to fix life, people, and problems
- ☐ ☐ Is able to freely confess your faults to others
- ☐ ☐ Doesn’t always have to be right
- ☐ ☐ Does not gain value from man-made “props”
- ☐ ☐ Experiences more and more victory over the flesh
- ☐ ☐ Prayer is a vital, ongoing part of the day
- ☐ ☐ Jesus is more and more the subject of conversation
- ☐ ☐ God truly satisfies your soul