A top-down view of a seedling tray with a grid of square compartments. Each compartment contains dark brown soil and a small green seedling with two leaves. The seedlings are at various stages of growth, with some showing small yellow flowers. The tray is made of a light-colored, textured material.

THE GOSPEL- CENTERED LIFE

A NINE-LESSON STUDY

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

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A NINE-LESSON STUDY

Bob Thune and Will Walker

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE



The Gospel-Centered Life: Participant's Guide

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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT WORLD HARVEST MISSION

World Harvest never set out to write and publish curriculum. We are a missions agency that has always believed the power and motive for mission is the gospel of grace at work in the life of a believer. However, along the way, we've also discovered that it's a lot harder to do cross-cultural, team-oriented ministry than we thought. Eventually, we started writing material to keep the gospel front and center in our own lives and relationships. Before long we had pastors and ministry leaders requesting gospel-centered materials for use in their churches and ministries.

Over the years, it's been our privilege to partner with friends who share our passion for the way the gospel transforms both believers and unbelievers alike. This study is the result of one such partnership. Bob Thune and Will Walker wrote *The Gospel-Centered Life* to help their church grow in the gospel. We're partnering with them to publish it because we think it may do the same for you.

Some of the content has been adapted from earlier World Harvest materials. If you are familiar with *Sonship* or *Gospel Transformation* you may recognize a few key themes and concepts. If you haven't heard them presented before, Bob and Will have done a great job of articulating the gospel in simple, deep, and transformative ways here. One of the strengths of this curriculum is the way that their experience of church-planting influenced the development of *The Gospel-Centered Life*, which is just one of the reasons that we're so pleased to make it available.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

The Gospel-Centered Life is a 9-lesson small group study intended to help you understand how the gospel shapes every aspect of life. Developed by experienced church-planting pastors, the material is designed to promote transformational conversations among groups of mature Christians, new Christians, and non-Christians. Each lesson is self-contained, featuring clear teaching from Scripture, and requires no extra work outside of the group setting.

THROUGH THE COURSE WE HOPE YOU WILL:

- » Deepen your grasp of the gospel as you see your need for continual renewal.
- » Grow as you experience transformation from the inside out.
- » Be challenged to develop authentic relationships as the gospel moves you to love and serve others.

HOW THIS STUDY IS ORGANIZED

The Gospel-Centered Life contains nine lessons that are grouped around three themes:

What is the gospel?

LESSON 1: THE GOSPEL GRID

If the gospel is constantly “bearing fruit and growing” (Col. 1:6), then everything has to do with the gospel—God, humanity, salvation, worship, relationships, shopping, recreation, work, personality...everything! The objective in this lesson is to establish a framework for talking about the gospel. This framework will get worked out in greater detail over the next two sessions.

LESSON 2: PRETENDING & PERFORMING

Each of us tends to “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.

LESSON 3: BELIEVING THE GOSPEL

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?

What does the gospel do in us?

LESSON 4: LAW & GOSPEL

Continue to think about how the gospel interacts with our lives, but now we turn to consider the gospel's relationship to the law. What is the law? Does God expect me to obey it? What is the purpose of the law? How does the law help me to believe the gospel? How does the gospel help me to obey the law?

LESSON 5: REPENTANCE

This lesson deals with repentance. In our culture, this usually sounds like a bad thing, but repentance is the norm for gospel-centered living. Becoming more aware of God's holiness and our sinfulness leads us to repent and believe the gospel of Jesus. Biblical repentance frees us from our own devices and makes a way for the power of the gospel to bear fruit in our lives.

LESSON 6: HEART IDOLATRY

The Christian walk consists of two repeated steps: repentance and faith. Turning our attention to the topic of faith, we focus on how we grow through believing the gospel. This week's goal is to take "believing the gospel" out of the abstract and make it concrete.

How does the gospel work through us?

LESSON 7: MISSION

The gospel is simultaneously at work in us and through us. Inwardly, our desires and motives are being changed as we repent and believe the gospel. As we experience Christ's love in this way, we are compelled to engage those around us with the same kind of redemptive love. God's grace brings renewal everywhere, in us and through us.

LESSON 8: FORGIVENESS

The gospel that works in us always works through us. It shows its power in our relationships and actions. One key way this happens is when we forgive others biblically.

LESSON 9: CONFLICT

Conflict is something we all experience (regularly), but often handle in very fleshly ways. The gospel gives us a pattern and a means to healthy conflict resolution.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

The Gospel-Centered Life is designed for small group study, although it is possible to work through the study independently or in a larger group. The tone of the material assumes a small-group format, because this is the setting we've found to be the most effective.

Each of these lessons follows a similar format including these elements...

BIBLE CONVERSATION

We want to start by talking about the Bible together. As the name suggests, this section is designed to stimulate your thinking and prepare you and your group for the ideas that will be presented in each lesson.

ARTICLE

The written articles are the primary source of the teaching content for each lesson. They are short, clear teachings of the concepts being

presented in the lesson. Each week, your group will take a few minutes and read the article out loud together.

DISCUSSION

This section is where we communally process the concepts being taught in the article. Often the discussion will work in conjunction with the next section (exercise) to help flesh out the teaching and apply it to our lives in concrete ways.

EXERCISE

Each of the exercises in this study is designed to help you make practical applications of the concepts being taught, or help you understand the content at a deeper heart level. Be sure to allow enough time for your group to adequately work through and discuss the exercises as directed.

WRAP-UP

The wrap-up gives the leader the chance to answer any last minute questions, reinforce ideas, and most importantly spend a few minutes praying as a group.

WHAT TO EXPECT

EXPECT TO BE CHALLENGED...

most of us have reduced the gospel to something much less than it is. As you work through each lesson, expect your thinking about the gospel to be challenged and expanded.

EXPECT THE HOLY SPIRIT...

to be the one ultimately responsible for the growth of your group, and for the change in each person's life—including your own. Relax and trust him.

EXPECT YOUR GROUP'S AGENDA TO INCLUDE...

an open, give-and-take discussion of the article, the questions, and the exercises. Also expect times of prayer at each meeting.

EXPECT STRUGGLE...

and don't be surprised to find that your group is a mixture of enthusiasm, hope, and honesty, along with indifference, anxiety, skepticism, guilt, and covering up. We are all people who really need Jesus every day. So expect your group to be made up of people who wrestle with sin and have problems—people just like yourself!

EXPECT A GROUP LEADER...

who desires to serve you, but who also needs Jesus as much as you do. No leader should be put on a pedestal, so expect that your group leader will have the freedom to share openly about his or her own weaknesses, struggles, and sins.

THE GOSPEL GRID ^{lesson} 1

BIG IDEA

If the gospel is constantly “bearing fruit and growing” (Col. 1:6), then everything has to do with the gospel—God, humanity, salvation, worship, relationships, shopping, recreation, work, personality...everything! The objective in this lesson is to establish a framework for talking about the gospel. This framework will get worked out in greater detail over the next two sessions, so this lesson is designed to help us understand the concepts and begin exploring how they relate to actual life.

NOTES:

lesson

1

ARTICLE

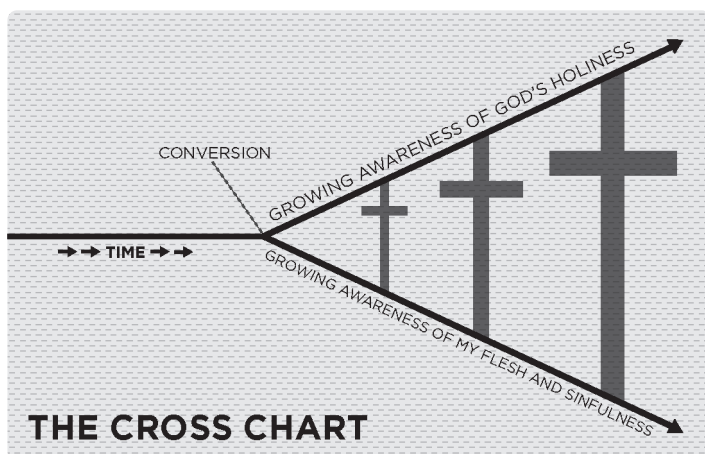
THE GOSPEL GRID

“The gospel” is a phrase that Christians often use without fully understanding its significance. We speak the language of the gospel, but we rarely apply the gospel to every aspect of our lives. Yet this is exactly what God wants for us. The gospel is nothing less than “the power of God” (Rom. 1:16). In Colossians 1:6, the apostle Paul commends the Colossian church because the gospel has been “bearing fruit and growing... among [them] since the day [they] heard it.” The apostle Peter teaches that a lack of ongoing transformation in our lives comes from forgetting what God has done for us in the gospel (2 Peter 1:3–9). If we are to grow into maturity in Christ, we must deepen and enlarge our understanding of the gospel as God’s appointed means for personal and communal transformation.

Many Christians live with a truncated view of the gospel. We see the gospel as the “door,” the way in, the entrance point into God’s kingdom. But the gospel is so much more! It is not just the door, but the path we are to walk every day of the Christian life. It is not just the means of our salvation, but the means of our transformation. It is not simply deliverance from sin’s penalty, but release from sin’s power. The gospel is what makes us right with God (justification) and it is also what frees us to delight in God (sanctification). The gospel changes everything!

The following model has been helpful to many people in thinking about the gospel and its implications. This diagram does not say everything that could be said about the gospel, but it does serve as a helpful visual illustration of how the gospel works.

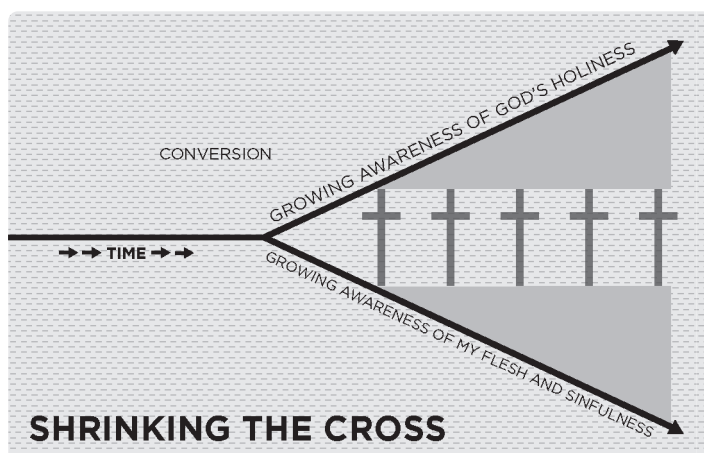
The starting point of the Christian life (conversion) comes when I first become aware of the gap between God’s holiness and my sinfulness. When I am converted, I trust and hope in Jesus, who has done what I could never do: he has bridged the gap between my sinfulness and God’s holiness. He has taken God’s holy wrath toward my sin upon himself.



At the point of conversion, however, I have a very limited view of God’s holiness and of my sin. The more I grow in my Christian life, the more I grow in my awareness of God’s holiness and of my flesh and sinfulness. As I read the Bible, experience the Holy Spirit’s conviction, and live in community with other people, the extent of God’s greatness and the extent of my sin become increasingly clear and vivid. It is not that God is becoming more holy or that I am becoming more sinful. But my *awareness* of both is growing. I am increasingly seeing God as he actually is (Isa. 55:8–9) and myself as I actually am (Jer. 17:9–10).

As my understanding of my sin and of God’s holiness grows, something else also grows: my appreciation and love for Jesus. His mediation, his sacrifice, his righteousness, and his gracious work on my behalf become increasingly sweet and powerful to me. The cross looms larger and more central in my life as I rejoice in the Savior who died upon it.

Unfortunately, sanctification (growth in holiness) doesn’t work quite as neatly as we’d like. Because of the indwelling sin that remains in me, I have an ongoing tendency to minimize the gospel or “shrink the cross.” This happens when I either (a) minimize God’s perfect holiness, thinking of him as something less than his Word declares him to be, or (b) elevate my own righteousness, thinking of myself as someone better than I actually am. The cross becomes smaller and Christ’s importance in my life is diminished.



We'll talk more about the specific ways we minimize the gospel in weeks to come. To counteract our sinful tendency to shrink the gospel, we must constantly nourish our minds on biblical truth. We need to know, see, and savor the holy, righteous character of God. And we need to identify, admit, and feel the depth of our brokenness and sinfulness. We don't need to do these things because "that's what Christians are supposed to do." Rather, we make this our aim because it is the life God wants for us—a life marked by transforming joy, hope, and love.

Growing in the gospel means seeing more of God's holiness and more of my sin. And because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, we need not fear seeing God as he really is or admitting how broken we really are. Our hope is not in our own goodness, nor in the vain expectation that God will compromise his standards and "grade on a curve." Rather, we rest in Jesus as our perfect Redeemer—the One who is "our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30).

SIX WAYS OF MINIMIZING SIN

lesson
1
SUPPLEMENT

DEFENDING

I find it difficult to receive feedback about weaknesses or sin. When confronted, my tendency is to explain things away, talk about my successes, or justify my decisions. As a result, people are hesitant to approach me and I rarely have conversations about difficult things in my life.

FAKING

I strive to keep up appearances and maintain a respectable image. My behavior, to some degree, is driven by what I think others think of me. I also do not like to think reflectively about my life. As a result, not many people know the real me. (I may not even know the real me.)

HIDING

I tend to conceal as much as I can about my life, especially the “bad stuff.” This is different from faking, in that faking is about impressing. Hiding is more about shame. I don’t think people will accept or love the real me.

EXAGGERATING

I tend to think (and talk) more highly of myself than I ought. I make things (good and bad) out to be much bigger than they are (usually to get attention). As a result, things often get more attention than they deserve and have a way of making me stressed or anxious.

BLAMING

I am quick to blame others for sin or circumstances. I have a difficult time “owning” my contributions to sin or conflict. There is an element of pride that assumes it’s not my fault and/or an element of fear of rejection if it is my fault.

DOWNPLAYING

I tend to give little weight to sin or circumstances in my life, as if they are “normal” or “not that bad.” As a result, things often don’t get the attention they deserve. They have a way of mounting to the point of being overwhelming.

JUDGING OTHERS

1 *lesson*

EXERCISE

One way to see the value of the Cross Chart is to apply it to a specific area where people commonly struggle. Judging others is something we all do in big and small ways. As a group, brainstorm about some of the specific ways we judge people. The questions below will help you see the connection between judging others and your view of the gospel.

1. What are the specific ways we judge others?
2. Why do we judge others? What reasons do we give for doing this?
3. How do these reasons reflect a small view of God's holiness?

PRETENDING & PERFORMING

lesson
2

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:

lesson

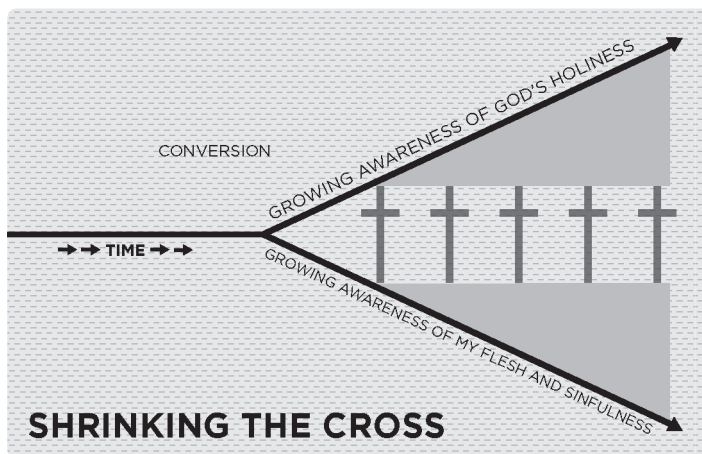
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ARTICLE

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.



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 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" 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**.

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

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.

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 overjoyed with 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.

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.

RIGHT & WRONG

lesson

2

EXERCISE

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.

BELIEVING THE GOSPEL

lesson
3

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:

lesson

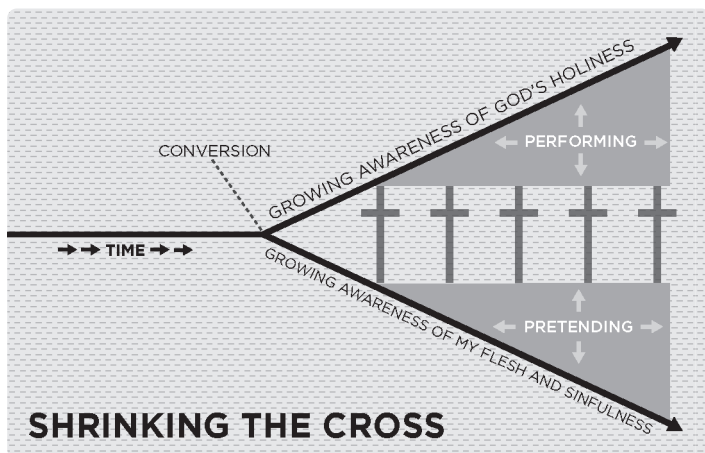
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ARTICLE

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.

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.

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.**

Luther reminds us that if we "wander away from passive righteousness," our hearts will naturally tend toward self- or works-righteousness. To

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

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 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.

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. On the next page, read through each bulleted description from left to right. 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

lesson

4 LAW & GOSPEL

BIG IDEA

We are still thinking about how the gospel interacts with our lives, but now we are doing it by considering the gospel's relationship to the law. What is the law? Does God expect me to obey it? What is the purpose of the law? How does the law help me to believe the gospel? How does the gospel help me to obey the law? These are the questions before us in this lesson.

NOTES:

THE LAW & THE GOSPEL

lesson
4
ARTICLE

Even a casual reader can see that the Bible is full of commands, prohibitions, and expectations. It tells us what to do and what not to do. These rules or laws often present an obstacle to faith. Non-Christians object to Christianity because it seems like “just a bunch of rules and regulations.” And even faithful Christians struggle to understand how the law of God and the gospel of God relate to each other. After all, if we are reconciled to God by grace and not by works, does it really matter whether we obey or not?

When we misunderstand the relationship between law and gospel, it leads to two opposite but equally destructive errors: **legalism** and **license**. Legalists continue to live under the law, believing that God’s approval is somehow dependent on their right conduct. Licentious people dismiss the law, believing that since they are “under grace,” God’s rules don’t matter much. These two errors have been around since the days of the apostles. The book of Galatians is written to combat the error of legalism: “Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” (Gal. 3:3). The book of Romans addresses the error of license: “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” (Rom. 6:15).

Both legalism and license are destructive to the gospel. To avoid these pitfalls, we must understand the biblical relationship between law and gospel. In a nutshell, here’s how God designed it to work: the law drives us to the gospel and the gospel frees us to obey the law. Realizing all that God expects of us should drive us in despair to Christ. And once we are united with Christ, the indwelling Holy Spirit causes us to delight in God’s law and gives us power to obey it. In his commentary on Romans, Martin Luther summarized it this way: “The law, rightly

understood and thoroughly comprehended, does nothing more than remind us of our sin and slay us by it, and make us liable to eternal wrath The law is not kept by man's own power, but solely through Christ who pours the Holy Spirit into our hearts. To fulfill the law ... is to do its works with pleasure and love...[which are] put into the heart by the Holy Ghost.”*

Read that last sentence again: “To fulfill the law...is to do its works with *pleasure and love*.” Just knowing what God requires is not enough. Obeying him “because it’s what we’re supposed to do” is not sufficient. Truly fulfilling the law means obeying God out of pleasure and love: “I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart” (Ps. 40:8).

How do we become the kind of people who love God and delight in his law? Answer: through the gospel.

First, it is through the gospel that we become aware of our disobedience to God’s law. The first step of the gospel journey is to become aware that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), and that our disobedience to God’s law places us under his curse: “For it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law’” (Gal. 3:10).

Second, it is through the gospel that we are freed from the curse of the law. The gospel is the good news that God is willing to forgive us if we turn to Jesus and are justified—declared “not guilty” in God’s sight—by faith in him. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ He redeemed us in order that...through Christ Jesus...by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit” (Gal. 3:13–14). Jesus has both atoned for our imperfection and attained our perfection through his work on the cross. The law no longer stands in judgment over us. In biblical language, we are no longer “under the law” (Rom. 6:14).

Third, it is through the gospel that God sends his indwelling Holy Spirit into us, transforming our hearts and enabling us to truly love God

* Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, J. Theodore Mueller, trans. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2003), pp. xxiii, xv, 110.

and others. As a result of our justification by faith, “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom. 5:5). We commonly read the phrase “the love of God” in this verse as God’s love for us. But contextually and linguistically this phrase also has the sense of “love from God” or “love for God.” Because God loves us, he has poured into our hearts his own capacity to love and delight in himself. Jesus prayed that the very love that God the Father has for his Son would be in us: “I have made you known to them...*in order that the love you have for me may be in them* and that I myself may be in them” (John 17:26).

A true Christian obeys God’s law, then, not out of obligation or duty, but out of love, for “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:10). Both legalism and license are fundamentally self-centered. They are not concerned with delight in God or in his law, but with self: “I keep the rules” or “I break the rules.” But the gospel frees us from our self-concern and turns us outward. We see that God’s law is not constraining but freeing; it is a “law of liberty” (James 1:25 ESV). It is a law that points us to Jesus.

Romans 10:4 says, “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (ESV). In other words, the end, the goal, the point of the law is to drive us to Jesus. When we really “get” what this verse is saying, we begin to see that every command in Scripture points us in some way to Jesus, who fulfills that command for us and in us. He is our righteousness. We no longer need to construct our own.

We are unable to do what the law commands us to do, but Jesus did it for us. And because he lives in us by his Spirit, we are enabled to do it, not from obligation, but from delight. So every command in Scripture points us to our own inadequacy (the bottom line of the Cross Chart), magnifies the good and holy nature of God (the top line of the Cross Chart), and causes us to look to Jesus as the One who forgives our disobedience and enables our obedience. In other words, the law drives us to Jesus and Jesus frees us to obey the law.

lesson

4

EXERCISE

THE GOSPEL GRID & THE LAW

A “grid” is a pattern for thinking, a filter to run things through, a particular way of looking at something. Understanding the Bible and articulating the gospel in creative, relevant ways involves applying various grids to make sense of truth. In Lesson One we gave you what we call the “gospel grid,” illustrated by the Cross Chart. This week we are going to learn how to understand the law of God through that grid.

Every Scripture passage asserts a moral imperative, either explicitly or implicitly. For instance, a verse may tell you not to lie. You can respond to this imperative in three different ways.

LEGALISM: You can try your very best not to lie. This is what it means to live under the law. You will inevitably discover that you cannot not lie, even when you lower your standards about what that means.

LICENSE: You can admit from the start that you cannot obey this command and simply dismiss it as a biblical ideal you are not actually expected to obey. This is what it means to abuse God’s grace and give in to sin.

GOSPEL: This is the grid we want to learn. It goes like this:

1. **God says**, “Do not lie.” (Top line of the Cross Chart: God’s holiness)
2. **I cannot obey** this command because I am a sinner.
(Bottom line of the Chart: my sinfulness)

3. Jesus did obey this perfectly. (I can point to countless examples in his earthly life as recorded in the Gospels.) Jesus did what I should do (but can't) as my substitute so that God can accept me (2 Cor. 5:17).

4. Because Jesus obeyed the law perfectly and now lives in me, and because I am accepted by God, I am now free to obey this command by his grace and power at work in me.

Applying this grid to your study of the Bible will help you believe the gospel and obey the law without falling into legalism or license. This empowers you to experience the reality that the gospel changes everything.

PRACTICE

Read a passage together and apply this grid. (Pick from Phil. 4:4–7, James 2:1–7, 1 Peter 3:9)

What is the command?

Why can't you do it? (Be specific about your particular struggles to obey this command.)

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE

How did Jesus do this perfectly? (Note specific examples in the Gospels.)

How can God's Spirit in you empower you to obey this command (in specific situations)?

REPENTANCE

lesson 5

BIG IDEA

This lesson deals with repentance. In our culture, this usually sounds like a bad thing—like getting called into the boss’s office on Friday afternoon. Far from being bad or unusual, biblical repentance is the norm for gospel-centered living. Becoming more aware of God’s holiness and our sinfulness leads us to repent and believe the gospel of Jesus. We are constantly turning from our performing and pretending so that we may live as sons and daughters. Biblical repentance frees us from our own devices and makes a way for the power of the gospel to bear fruit in our lives. But sin taints our repentance and robs us of its fruit. So our aim in this lesson is to (1) expose the ways in which we practice counterfeit repentance and (2) move us toward genuine repentance.

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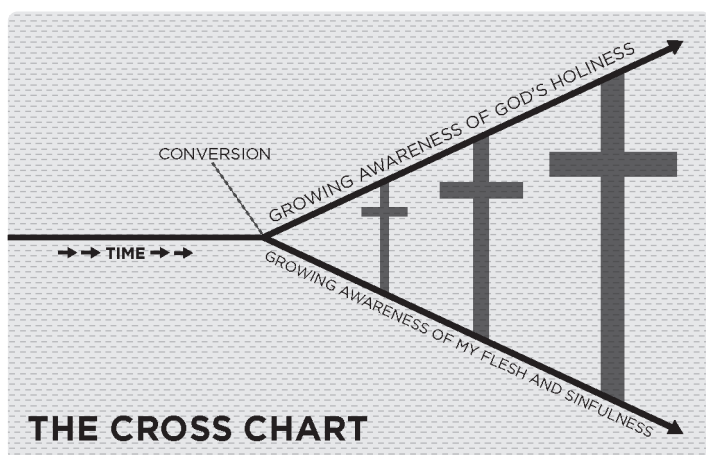
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ARTICLE

LIFESTYLE REPENTANCE

We have been thinking together about how to consistently live all of life under the influence of the gospel. For the past few weeks, the Cross Chart diagram has served as a visual model to help us understand how the gospel works.

As we have seen, the consistent pattern of the Christian life is repentance and faith. We never stop needing to repent and believe. Jesus' first words in the Gospel of Mark are, "Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). In the first of his Ninety-five Theses, Martin Luther observed, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent'...He willed the entire *life* of believers to be one of repentance." In repentance, we confess our tendency to shrink the cross through performance and pretending. We pull our affections away from false saviors and fraudulent sources of righteousness and turn to Jesus as our only hope.



On the surface, repentance seems simple and straightforward, but it's not. Because our hearts are a "factory of idols" (as John Calvin put it), even our

repentance can become a vehicle for sin and selfishness. We are skilled practitioners of **false repentance**. One of our greatest needs in gospel-centered living is to understand repentance accurately and biblically.

For most of us, the word *repentance* has a negative connotation. We only repent when we do something *really* bad. The Roman Catholic idea of penance often bleeds into our thinking about repentance: when we sin, we should feel really sorry about it, beat ourselves up over it, and do something to make up for it. In other words, repentance often becomes more about *us* than about God or the people we've sinned against. We want to feel better. We want things to be "back to normal." We want to know that we've done our part, so that our guilt is assuaged and we can move on with life.

Think, for instance, about a relationship in which you've spoken hurtful words to someone else. Perhaps your effort at repentance sounded something like this: "I'm sorry I hurt you. I shouldn't have said that. Will you forgive me?" But is this *really* true repentance? Does our sin consist only in the words we've spoken? Didn't Jesus say, "Out of the overflow of [the] heart [the] mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45)?

Though we may have acknowledged our hurtful words, the other person is often feeling the impact of the deeper resentment, anger, envy, or bitterness that lies in our hearts. Unless we confess those sins as well, our "repentance" is not true repentance at all.

How do we start to identify our tendencies toward false repentance? The answer is to look for patterns of *remorse* and *resolution* in our dealings with sin. Remorse: "I can't believe I did that!" Resolution: "I promise to do better next time." Behind this way of living are two great misunderstandings about our hearts. First, we think too highly of ourselves. We do not truly believe the depth of our sin and brokenness (the bottom line of the Cross Chart). This leads us to react in surprise when sin manifests itself: "I can't believe I just did that!" In other words: "That's not what I'm *really* like!" Second, we think we have the power to change ourselves. We think that if we make resolutions or try harder next time, we'll be able to fix the problem.

These patterns of remorse and resolution taint our attitudes toward others as well. Because we think so highly of ourselves, we respond to others' sin with harshness and disapproval. We are very lenient toward our own sin but we resent theirs! And because we think we can change ourselves, we are frustrated when other people aren't changing *themselves* faster. We become judgmental, impatient, and critical.

The gospel calls us to (and empowers us for) **true repentance**. According to the Bible, true repentance:

IS ORIENTED TOWARD GOD, NOT ME. Psalm 51:4: "Against *you, you only*, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight...."

IS MOTIVATED BY TRUE GODLY SORROW AND NOT JUST SELFISH REGRET. 2 Corinthians 7:10: "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly sorrow produces death."

IS CONCERNED WITH THE HEART, NOT JUST WITH EXTERNAL ACTIONS. Psalm 51:10: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (ESV).

LOOKS TO JESUS FOR DELIVERANCE FROM THE PENALTY AND POWER OF SIN. Acts 3:19–20: "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ who has been appointed for you—even Jesus."

Instead of excusing our sin or falling into patterns of remorse and resolution, true gospel repentance moves us to *realize* and *repent*. Realize: "I *did* do that." ("That IS what I'm really like!") Repent: "Lord, forgive me! You are my only hope." As we learn to live in light of the gospel, this kind of true repentance should become more and more normal for us. We will stop being surprised by our sin, so we will be able to more honestly admit it. And we will stop believing we can fix ourselves, so we will more quickly turn to Jesus for forgiveness and transformation.

Sin is a condition, not just a behavior, so true repentance is a lifestyle, not just an occasional practice. Repentance is not something we do only once (when we are converted), or only periodically (when we feel *really* guilty). Repentance is ongoing, and conviction of sin is a mark of God's fatherly love for us. "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent" (Rev. 3:19).

So what are you repenting of?

lesson

5

EXERCISE

PRACTICING REPENTANCE

We often make excuses for our sin to avoid the hard work of repentance. Below is a list of some common excuses—and (in parentheses) the inner thoughts they reveal. Take a minute to look over the list and then use the questions below to help each other practice genuine repentance.

- » **I was just being honest.** (Can't you handle the truth?)
- » **I'm just saying what I feel.** (There's nothing sinful about my feelings.)
- » **I was only kidding.** (Didn't you get the joke?)
- » **I misunderstood you.** (You're not as crazy as I thought you were!)
- » **You misunderstood me.** (I'm not as bad as you think.)
- » **That's just who I am.** (I'm a sinner, so that excuses my behavior.)
- » **I made a mistake.** (Don't we all?)
- » **I didn't mean to do it.** (I didn't mean to get caught.)
- » **I'm having a bad day.** (I deserve better.)

Which of the excuses listed above can you identify with?

What is a recent example (or a typical situation) when you used one of these excuses instead of truly being broken and repentant over your sin?

As a group, describe what true repentance would look like in these cases, using the steps below.

STEP 1: Acknowledge that you have sinned against God.

STEP 2: Confess forms of false repentance and selfish regret (remorse, resolution, etc.).

STEP 3: Discern and repent of the underlying heart motivations that drive you to this sin.

STEP 4: Receive God's forgiveness by faith.

STEP 5: Rely upon God's power to turn away from sin.

Repeat this process, working through as many responses as time allows: identify excuses, share examples, and practice true repentance.

lesson

6

HEART IDOLATRY

BIG IDEA

We've said that the Christian walk consists of two repeated steps: repentance and faith. In Lesson Five, we dealt with repentance. Now we turn our attention to the topic of faith. Remember, we grow through believing the gospel. That's the emphasis of this week's discussion and exercise. Easy enough, right? This week's goal is to take "believing the gospel" out of the abstract and make it concrete.

NOTES:

HEART IDOLATRY

6

lesson

ARTICLE

Over the past few weeks, we have said that repentance and faith should be the continual, consistent pattern of the Christian life. Last week we examined the nature of true repentance. This week we want to dive deeper into the subject of faith.

Think for a moment about this question: what one thing should I do to grow more as a Christian? If someone asked you that question, how would you respond? Would you suggest some basic spiritual discipline, such as reading the Bible, praying, finding Christian friends, repenting of sin, or learning theology?

The crowds brought this exact query to Jesus in John 6. His answer may surprise you:

Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” (John 6:28–29)

Notice that they are asking Jesus what they must do to live a life that pleases God. Jesus answers that the *work* of God is to *believe*. In other words, the Christian life is not about doing, it is about believing. Getting this right is crucial to sanctification. Most of us are naturally “doers.” We gladly embrace the next project, the next challenge, the next assignment. So our pursuit of Christian maturity produces a lot of busy effort, but little lasting change. Why is this so? *Because we are doing too much and believing too little.*

You see, our **surface sins** are only symptoms of a deeper problem. Underneath every external sin is a **heart idol**—a false god that has eclipsed the true God in our thoughts or affections. To paraphrase Martin Luther, every sin is in some way a breaking of the first commandment (“You shall have no other gods before me”). Luther wrote, “As [the First] Commandment is the very first, highest and best, from which all the others

proceed...so also its work, that is, faith or confidence in God's favor at all times, is the very first, highest and best, from which all other [works] must proceed, exist, remain, be directed and measured."* In other words, keeping God primary is foundational to spiritual growth. The key to gospel-driven transformation is learning to repent of the "sin beneath the sin"—the deeply rooted idolatry and unbelief that drive our more visible sins.

As a case study, let's take the surface sin of gossip—talking about people behind their backs in judgmental or destructive ways. Why do we gossip? What are we looking for that we should be finding in God?

Here are some common heart idols that can manifest themselves in the surface sin of gossip:

- » **The idol of approval** (I want the approval of the people I'm talking to)
- » **The idol of control** (Using gossip as a way to manipulate/control others)
- » **The idol of reputation** (I want to feel important, so I cut someone else down verbally)
- » **The idol of success** (Someone is succeeding—and I'm not—so I gossip about him)
- » **The idol of security** (Talking about others masks my own insecurity)
- » **The idol of pleasure** (Someone else is enjoying life—and I'm not—so I attack her)
- » **The idol of knowledge** (Talking about people is a way of showing I know more)
- » **The idol of recognition** (Talking about others gets people to notice me)
- » **The idol of respect** (That person disrespected me, so I'm going to disrespect him)

* Martin Luther, *Treatise on Good Works*, section 9, (1520).

All these idols are false saviors promoting false gospels. Every one of these things—approval, control, reputation, success, security, pleasure, knowledge, recognition, respect—is something we already have in Jesus because of the gospel! But when we are not living in light of the gospel, we turn to these idols to give us what only Jesus can truly give us.

Another way to identify your particular heart idols is to ask *what do I love, trust, or fear?* For example, if I fear being single, “being in a relationship” will probably be my idol (because it promises to deliver me from the “hell” of singleness). If I trust “having enough,” security will probably be my idol (because it promises that I’ll never be without anything). If I love order and structure, control will probably be my idol (because if I’m in charge, I can make sure things are in order).

Reflecting on the “sin beneath our sin” shows why the gospel is essential for true heart change. It’s possible to repent of surface sins for a lifetime yet never address the deeper heart issues behind them! At the moment I sin, I have already broken the first commandment. An idol has taken God’s place in my soul. I am trusting in that idol, rather than in God, to be my Savior. I need to apply the gospel by (1) *repenting* of my deep heart idolatry and (2) *believing*—that is, turning my mind toward the specific gospel promises that break the power of my characteristic idols.

According to Dr. Steve Childers, faith “involves learning how to set the affections of our mind and heart on Christ. . . . Faith requires a continual rehearsing and delighting in the many privileges that are now ours *in* Christ.”** Notice the two aspects of faith: setting our affections on Christ and delighting in the privileges that are ours in Christ. I must worship Jesus (not my idols), and I must remind myself of what is really true about me because of Jesus.

Let’s go back again to our example of gossip. Let’s imagine that I have identified *respect* as the dominant idol that drives me to gossip. After I acknowledge my sin and repent of it, I exercise faith in two ways. First, I pause and worship Jesus because he laid aside his right to be respected,

** Steven L. Childers, “True Spirituality: The Transforming Power of the Gospel,” available at www.gca.cc.

becoming humbled to the point of death (Phil. 2:5–11). Second, I remind myself of the gospel truth that I no longer need to crave the respect of others because I have the approval of God through faith in Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17–21). Whether people respect me or not is immaterial: God’s grace has freed me from demanding my own respect, and now I live for the fame and honor of Jesus (1 Cor. 10:31).

This exercise is fairly simple in the abstract, but it can be much more difficult when thinking through your own personal patterns of sin. So set aside some intentional time to (1) identify your common surface sins and (2) prayerfully consider what heart idols might lie behind them. Then (3) worship Jesus for his victory over that idol and (4) find specific gospel promises you can rely on to help defeat the power of that idol. Be sure to invite others into your process of reflection and repentance. As one writer has put it, “You can’t see your own face.” We need each other in order to see our sin clearly and deal with it honestly.

As you learn to live a gospel-centered life, remember that this is the essence of walking with Jesus. Repentance and faith are not steps *on* the path; they *are* the path. The work of God is to *believe*.

MISSION

lesson 7

BIG IDEA

The gospel is simultaneously at work in us and through us. Inwardly, our desires and motives are being changed as we repent and believe the gospel. As we experience Christ's love in this way, we are compelled to engage those around us with the same kind of redemptive love. God's grace brings renewal everywhere, in us and through us.

NOTES:

lesson

7

ARTICLE

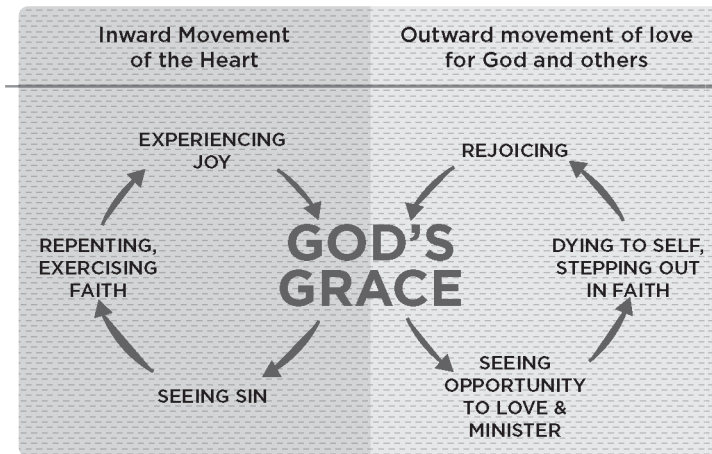
THE GOSPEL PROPELS US OUTWARD

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. (Gal. 5:13 ESV)

When we truly understand the depth and richness of the gospel, we naturally feel joy, delight, and freedom because of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. But as this verse teaches, it's possible to use even our freedom as “an opportunity for the flesh.” Our sinful hearts can take the good benefits of the gospel and use them for selfish purposes.

Nowhere is this more evident than in our tendency to make the gospel a private reality. When we hear words like *transformation*, *renewal*, or *growth*, we conceive of those benefits as being primarily personal and internal—*my* transformation, *my* growth, the gospel's renewal of *my* heart. And the gospel *is* personal and internal. But it's also much more than that. When God's grace is working *on* us and *in* us, it will also work itself out *through* us. The internal renewal of our minds and hearts creates an external propulsion that moves us out in love and service to others. The following diagram is helpful in illustrating this concept.

God's grace is the driving force of all change. The chart reminds us that God's grace has both an inward and an outward movement that mirror each other. Internally, the grace of God moves me to see my sin, respond in repentance and faith, and then experience the joy of transformation. Externally, the grace of God moves me to see opportunities for love and service, respond in repentance and faith, and experience joy as I see God work through me.



In other words, the gospel is not just the answer to your internal sins, struggles, and heart idols. It is also the answer to your failure to love others, engage the culture, and live missionally. If the gospel is renewing you internally, it will also be propelling you externally. It must do so, for it is “the good news of the kingdom” (Matt. 9:35), and the kingdom of God is not personal and private! Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). When we pray for the coming of God’s kingdom, we are praying both that Jesus would reign in the hearts of people (internal) and that his will would be done everywhere just as it is in heaven (external).

What does this external movement of the gospel look like in practice? Let me give an example. I know that I should love my neighbors. Jesus commanded it. In fact, he said it was the fulfillment of the law (Gal. 5:14). But my next-door neighbor and I just don’t have a lot in common. He is much older and has different tastes in everything—music, movies, food, cars, lifestyle. While I enjoy talking about a new musician I’ve discovered or a good book I’ve read recently, he’d rather reminisce about the old days when he served with the Marines in Vietnam.

For months I labored under guilt in my relationship with my neighbor. I knew I *should* reach out and befriend him. But that sense of “should”

had no motivational power. It was law, not gospel. It could show me what I ought to be doing, but it could not change my heart so that I actually wanted to do it. I was faced with a dilemma: either force myself to love and serve my neighbor even though I didn't *want* to, or ignore him and do nothing at all. I knew that ignoring him was sin, but the first option didn't feel much better. Was joyless, mechanical obedience really honoring to Jesus? Did God intend his commands to feel like drudgery?

When faced with this dilemma, most people settle for either legalism (obey even though you don't feel like it) or license (don't obey at all). But neither of these is the gospel! The gospel of God's grace is the fuel for mission, and when we run low on that fuel, our love and service to others grinds to a halt.

The answer to my dilemma with my neighbor came through the gospel. As God's grace began to renew my heart, I saw that the root problem was my own selfishness and lack of love. My love for my neighbor was conditional—if he were younger, or smarter, or had more in common with me, I would have appreciated him more. I began to repent of this sin and renew my mind by the promises of the gospel—especially the fact that God loved *me* while I was still a sinner (Rom. 5:8). God had graciously moved toward me when I had nothing in common with him. Certainly, by God's grace, I could love my neighbor in the same way! As the gospel renewed my heart, a strange thing happened. My attitude toward my neighbor began to change. I began to feel a true love and appreciation for him. And it wasn't a feeling I had mustered up, but one that came naturally. The internal renewal of the gospel propelled me outward in love and service toward my neighbor. Mission became a joy, not a burden.

Grasping the external propulsion of God's grace is crucial to our understanding of mission. It means that mission is not a duty (something we "should do") but a natural overflow of the gospel's work inside us. If you aren't motivated to love, serve, and speak the gospel to people, the answer isn't to "just do it." The answer is to examine your heart, repent of sin, and discern where your unbelief is short-circuiting the natural

outward movement of the gospel. As the gospel renews your heart, it will also renew your desire to move out in faith into the relationships and opportunities God places in your path.

To put it simply, the grace of God is always going somewhere—moving forward, extending his kingdom, propelling his people toward love and service to others. As we learn to live in light of the gospel, mission should be the natural overflow. God’s grace brings renewal internally (in us) so that it might bring renewal externally (through us).

lesson



GETTING TO THE HEART OF MISSION

EXAMINING YOUR HEART FOR MISSION

1. Identify a missional opportunity in your life in which you are not motivated to do what you “should” do. Here are some categories to jump-start your thinking: showing hospitality to neighbors; actively praying for and engaging with co-workers; sharing the gospel with a family member; serving someone in poverty; giving generously; leading spiritually as a spouse or parent; defending the biblical worldview on a particular issue.

2. What heart issues hinder you from rightly motivated action in this situation? As you pray and reflect on the root of your inactivity, what do you discern? Be as specific and thorough as you can about the things that keep you from expressing gospel-centered love toward others.

3. Repentance: What sin do you see in yourself that you need to repent of? **Faith:** What specific gospel promises or truths are you not really believing?

lesson

8

FORGIVENESS

BIG IDEA

The gospel that works in us always works through us. It shows its power in our relationships and actions. One key way this happens is when we forgive others biblically.

NOTES:

THE GOSPEL EMPOWERS US TO FORGIVE

Forgiving people who harm us is one of the most difficult things to do in life. And the deeper the wound, the more challenging it gets. We often feel confused about what real forgiveness looks like. Are we to “forgive and forget”? Is that even possible? And what exactly does it mean to “love my enemy”? What about the person who sexually abused me? Or the boss who furthered his career at my expense? Or the spouse who cheated on me? Or the friend who slandered me and damaged my reputation?

We have seen that when the gospel really takes root *in* us, it begins to work itself out *through* us. Forgiveness is one area where the gospel must “go to work” in our lives. In fact, forgiving others really isn’t possible unless we are living in light of God’s forgiveness ourselves. So let’s consider how the gospel moves us toward forgiveness.

The gospel begins with God’s movement toward us. God takes the initiative, though he is the offended party. He acted to reconcile the relationship “while we were God’s enemies” (Rom. 5:10). Our sin had separated us from him (Isa. 59:2). He had every right to condemn us, to resist us, and to sever the relationship, but he did not. Instead, he moved toward us: “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

However, reconciliation with God requires our repentance. By forgiving our sin, God extends the *offer* of reconciliation, but reconciliation is not complete until we repent and receive his forgiveness by faith. Notice how both dynamics are reflected in 2 Corinthians 5:19–20: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting

men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."

Scripture gives all credit, glory, and praise to God for our salvation, because it is only by his gracious initiative that we are able to respond (Eph. 2:8–9). But our response of repentance and faith is essential. Salvation is not universal. Only those who repent and receive God's gracious offer will be reconciled to him.

So we might summarize God's forgiveness this way: By moving toward us, God invites and enables us to move toward him. The gospel starts with God (the offended party) moving toward us (the offenders). He cancels our debt and opens to us an opportunity for reconciliation. If we acknowledge our sin and repent, we are reconciled to God and able to experience the joy and delight of relationship with him.

What, then, does it look like for us to forgive others as God has forgiven us? This, after all, is what the Bible commands: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32 ESV). Scripture assumes that if we have truly experienced God's forgiveness in the gospel, we will be radically forgiving toward others. By contrast, if we are unforgiving, resentful, or bitter toward others, it is a sure sign that we are not living out of the deep joy and freedom of the gospel.

Our forgiveness of others is intended to mirror the forgiveness God has given us. We are to take the initiative: "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:23–24 ESV). We are to offer forgiveness and open a door for reconciliation. But reconciliation is always contingent upon the other person's repentance. Christian author and counselor Dan Allender has suggested a helpful analogy: "Forgiveness involves a heart that cancels the debt but does not lend

new money until repentance occurs.”* Like God, we take the initiative to move toward those who have offended us and we invite them to move toward us in repentance.

What this means is that our work is not done once we have forgiven someone. Our heart’s desire is not simply to forgive the offense but ultimately to see the other person reconciled to God and to us. We want to see sin’s power over this person destroyed. We cannot make this happen, but we are to pray for it, long for it, and welcome it. Where do we find the power to do this? After all, it’s hard enough just *forgiving* someone who has deeply wounded us. How do we find the grace and strength to long for restoration?

The answer, of course, is the gospel. The gospel doesn’t just show us *how* to forgive; it *empowers* us to forgive.

When we say, “I just can’t forgive that person for what he did to me,” we are essentially saying, “That person’s sin is greater than mine.” Our awareness of our own sin is very small, while our awareness of another’s sin is very big. Our underlying feeling is that *we* deserve to be forgiven but the person who offended us does not. We are living with a small view of God’s holiness, a small view of our own sin, and a small view of the cross of Jesus.

But when we embrace a gospel perspective on our own sin, we recognize that the sin debt God has forgiven on our behalf is greater than any sin that has been committed against us. And as we grow in our awareness of God’s holiness, we begin to see more clearly the distance between his perfection and our imperfection. As the significance of Jesus’ work on the cross grows in our consciousness, our willingness and ability to seek restoration with others will also grow. After all, if God forgave the massive offense of our sin against him, how could we not forgive the sin of others—which, though it may be severe, pales in comparison with our own guilt before a holy and righteous God?

* Dr. Dan B. Allender and Dr. Tremper Longman III, *Bold Love* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992), p. 162.

Forgiveness is costly. It means canceling a debt when we feel we have every right to demand payment. It means absorbing the pain, hurt, shame, and grief of someone's sin against us. It means longing for repentance and restoration. But this is exactly how God has acted toward us in Jesus Christ. And through the gospel, the Holy Spirit empowers us to do the same toward others.



GETTING TO THE HEART OF FORGIVENESS

HOMework

(Answer these questions before your meeting. You may need a separate sheet of paper.)

1. Think of one or two people you need to forgive (or forgive more deeply). If you have a hard time thinking of someone, ask God to reveal someone to you. Here are some scenarios and feelings that might bring someone to mind: someone you have distanced yourself from; people you feel uncomfortable around; people you no longer enjoy; relational conflicts you keep rehearsing in your mind; someone who said or did something that hurt you; feelings of anger, bitterness, irritation, fear, gossip, or a critical spirit.

Write down one or two people who come to mind.

2. What irritates or disturbs you most about this person?

3. What issues of “justice” are involved in the situation? How has this person wronged you, hurt you, or sinned against you?

4. What conditions do you instinctively want to place on this person before you truly forgive him or her? In other words, what does your heart want to require from this person before you release him or her? What specifically would you desire the person to say or do?

5. Describe your own debt before God. How is it far greater than the debt of the people you have listed (yet it is cancelled and forgiven)? Do not rush through this question. Take time to describe your indebtedness in terms of the specific ways sin manifests itself in your life.

6. How has your previous way of relating to these people reflected a small view of your own debt and a small view of Christ's forgiveness?

lesson

9 CONFLICT

BIG IDEA

Conflict is something we all experience (regularly), but often handle in very fleshly ways. The gospel gives us a pattern and a means to healthy conflict resolution.

NOTES:

THE GOSPEL HELPS US FIGHT FAIRLY

We have seen that as the gospel renews us internally, it also flows out of us to bring renewal to our relationships. Nothing is more common to relationships than conflict. If the gospel is not affecting the way we deal with conflict, then it's probably not touching us very deeply! In this article, we will consider how the gospel helps us fight fairly.

Think of the most recent fight you've had. Perhaps the conflict was with your spouse, a family member, or a work associate. Now, set aside the circumstances of the argument (what the issue was, how it made you feel, who was right or wrong) and take a moment to ponder your actions during the conflict. Your behavior probably falls into one of two categories.

Some people are **attackers**. They like to be on the offensive. They place a high value on justice, so it matters greatly to them who is right and who is wrong. Below are signs that you might be an attacker.

- » You deal with anger or frustration by “venting” it.
- » You argue your case passionately.
- » You ask questions like “How do you know?” and “Can you prove that?”
- » You want to fight until the fight is over.
- » You cross-examine like a lawyer in order to “get to the heart of the conflict.”
- » Winning the argument is more important than loving the opponent.
- » You turn the argument to focus on the other person, even if it began with you as the focal point.

On the other end of the spectrum are **withdrawers**. People with this tendency often find themselves on the defensive. They tend to avoid or ignore conflict and, when pressed into an argument, they respond in sullen silence or apathetic passivity. If you're a withdrawer, here are some patterns you might recognize:

- » You deal with anger or frustration by suppressing it.
- » You have opinions but keep them to yourself in order to “keep the peace.”
- » You ask questions like, do we have to talk about this now? and does it matter?
- » You'd rather avoid a fight than win one.
- » You sometimes physically leave an argument in order to “get some space.”

These are typical ways we respond to disagreement, frustration, offense, or hurt. The fact that these responses are considered “normal” (i.e. natural) is a clue that they may not be biblical (i.e. supernatural).

How, then, do we move toward resolving conflict in a biblical manner? Let's learn from the disagreement between Paul and Peter in Galatians 2. This quarrel arose as the early church was expanding beyond Jerusalem and many Gentiles were being converted to faith in Jesus. The Jewish Christians imported some of their traditional practices into their worship of Jesus. The Gentiles, on the other hand, had no allegiance to Jewish customs like circumcision or dietary regulations.

Peter, a Jew, understood the gospel well enough to embrace the new Gentile believers with no strings attached (Acts 10:9–48). But his application of the gospel got tested when he found himself in mixed company. Some legalistic Jewish teachers from Jerusalem had begun to impose Jewish customs and laws on Gentile converts. When these teachers came to Antioch, where Peter was fellowshiping and eating with Gentiles, Peter began to separate himself from the Gentiles.

Peter's attempt to appease the legalistic Jews compounded the problem because it implied that he agreed with their beliefs. Eventually, even Barnabas followed suit. The two men had fallen into hypocrisy, professing to be one with the Gentiles in Christ, yet acting in ways that destroyed that unity.

As he observed this behavior, Paul knew he could not ignore or withdraw from the situation. The stakes were too high. But he also had to approach it in the right way. "Flying off the handle" wasn't going to bring about the kind of reconciliation he wanted. Though this passage does not give all the details, its description of Paul's interaction with Peter is a good example of a gospel-centered approach to conflict.

But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I [Paul] opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to [Peter] before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"
(Gal. 2:11–14 ESV)

Note these aspects of Paul's actions:

PAUL APPROACHED PETER PUBLICLY. He didn't avoid Peter, gossip about him, or try to bully him. He confronted him, going directly to the person with whom he had the conflict. In this case the confrontation was public. This isn't always necessary, but since the sin was public and had far-reaching consequences, Paul made sure the confrontation fit the situation.

PAUL'S MOTIVATION WAS NOT SELF-DEFENSE OR SELF-INTEREST BUT THE DEFENSE OF THE GOSPEL.

"Their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14). Paul's concern for the gospel and relationships in the church body outweighed the temptation to either attack or withdraw.

PAUL PRESENTED THE ISSUE PLAINLY AND INVITED A RESPONSE FROM PETER. "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Gal. 2:14).

This sort of gospel-centered confrontation mirrors God's movement toward us in the gospel. God did not pour out his wrath on us (attack) or remove his presence from us (withdraw). Instead, he sacrificially moved toward us in the person of Jesus, full of grace and truth. Jesus confronted sin, invited relationship, and provided a way of reconciliation. Thus, the gospel provides the pattern of biblical conflict resolution. We have a proper motivation (love), confidence (faith), and means for resolving conflict (grace and truth).

The gospel calls us to repent of our sinful patterns of attacking and withdrawing. And the gospel empowers us to move into conflict by faith, with a humble, confident, God-glorifying intentionality. We can forsake the "normal" way of doing things for the gospel way.

lesson

9

EXERCISE

GOSPEL-CENTERED CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The chart below outlines the differences between attacking and withdrawing and contrasts them with a gospel-centered approach to conflict. Not everything in this chart is going to resonate with every person or conflict, so focus on whichever descriptions are particularly relevant to you. The goal is to help you identify what is at the root of the unhealthy patterns of conflict in your life and to provide a clear path toward gospel resolution.

ASPECT	ATTACKING	WITH-DRAWING	GOSPEL
HEART FOUNDATION	Self-righteousness	Insecurity	Repentance, forgiveness
POWER SOURCE	Flesh, pride	Flesh, fear	The Holy Spirit
COMMITMENT	To be right	To avoid conflict	To understand & engage
DIRECTION	To argue or subdue	To deny or appease	To convey & invite
FEELING	Life is safe	Life is less painful	Life is challenging
GOAL	Self-protection	“Peace”	God’s glory, their good
RESULT	Hurt, divisiveness	Bitterness, separation	Healing, reconciliation

How do you usually deal with conflict; do you tend toward attacking or withdrawing? Which descriptions above do you particularly identify with?

A GOSPEL-CENTERED APPROACH TO CONFLICT

Outlined below is a process of dealing with conflict in a gospel-centered manner. Each aspect is listed, along with some questions that will help you assess your tendencies in that area. You may call to mind past experiences or even a current conflict with someone. Remember, the goal is to recognize unhealthy patterns in your life and to practice applying the gospel more effectively.

1. HEART FOUNDATION: Identify your tendency toward either self-righteousness or insecurity. Do you tend to be defensive, or blame others, or always think you are right (self-righteousness)? Do you tend to harbor anger or gossip, or stuff things to avoid confrontation (insecurity)? Confess these things as sin, to God and those involved.

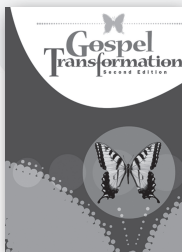
2. POWER SOURCE: Acknowledge what drives your attacking or withdrawing. Are you concerned with losing face, being wrong, disrupting the peace, other's disapproval, etc? By faith, affirm your trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to free you from these sins of pride and fear.

3. COMMITMENT: Communicate to those involved that you want to seek resolution. To help with this, identify what else you tend to seek instead of resolution (being right, being "safe", comfort)? Reject these pursuits as false and destructive.

4. DIRECTION: As you engage the person you are having conflict with, talk honestly and respectfully about your thoughts and feelings, and invite the other party to do the same. Do you understand each other? What usually gets in the way of your understanding, or being understood (anger, argumentativeness, dishonesty, timidity, assumptions you make about others, etc.)?

5. FEELING AND GOAL: Talk about what it will cost each of you to resolve this conflict. Specify what steps need to be taken toward resolution. Pray for God's will to be done (his glory and each other's good). Ask him to enable you to pay the price of resolution, thanking him for paying the ultimate price of death to resolve the ultimate conflict of our sinful rebellion.

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