
SANCTIFICATION: LIVING BY THE GOSPEL

By Les Newsom, RUF Campus Minister at Ole Miss

INTRODUCTION

I was on the campus of my alma mater a while ago. I was informed by one of my students that a significant “something” was going on in the midst of what is called Spiritual Emphasis Week, and quite frankly, I wanted to see it. As I sat in my seat in the auditorium and watched the morning pass with moving testimonies and tear-filled eyes announcing new commitments, I couldn't help but remember similar times when I sat through chapels like this. And as I walked away I found myself wishing that I could talk with each one of them to make sure that what has been started gets finished.

I make no claims to have some keen understanding on the issues with which students deal. However, I can say that I am noticing a common thread of misunderstanding in the lives of students especially those of a covenant or Christian background. And it has to do with their understanding of the goal and means of living the Christian life. Stated simply, they don't understand the very nature of what the Christian life looks like. And therefore I find that they rarely have the spiritual resources either (a) to move into the world with confidence or (b) to withstand the temptations which they will face when they get there.

Recently, I have had many of these issues made plain to me with the use of a certain illustration given to me by my fellow campus ministers who have noticed the same things coming from their own covenant children with which they deal. And the illustration touches at the heart of what it means to live the Christian life. How do I do it? Where do I get the power to withstand sin? What is the goal of my striving?

THE NEW BEGINNING

We begin the discussion with the student. We are going to interrupt his life at the moment of something significant in his life. It is a spiritual “something.” Let's say he is at church on Sunday and something happens. Or perhaps he is reading his Bible on his own time and something touches him. Or perhaps, even more vividly, a chapel speaker comes and challenges them to their core... and something happens. It is time to get “right with God.”

Now, we all here know what that means. A sinner sits under the preaching of the gospel and hears about God's standard for them. Jesus, in typical terse fashion, sums up just what God expects of his creatures in Matthew 5:48. “Be perfect,” he says. Now, as if that isn't clear enough, Jesus goes on to qualify this statement. Jesus finishes to protect from the hypocrite who might dream of saying something like, “Well, c'mon, Jesus, I mean, ‘perfect?’ That's a relative term isn't it?” But Jesus tells us what kind of perfection he demands, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Basically put, Jesus tells us to be as perfect as God is. Tall order for the best of us, I might add.

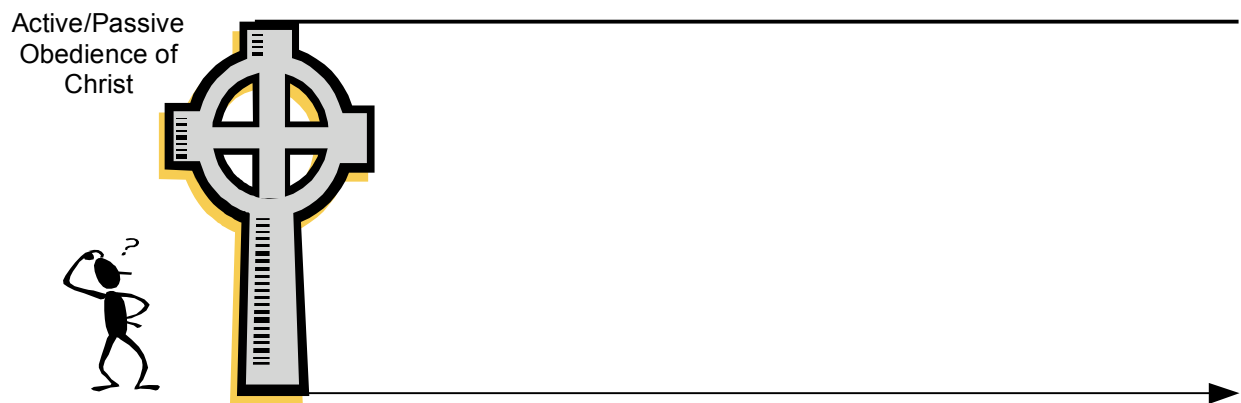
(By the way, I have begun to ask students this question, “What does God expect of us?” Almost never have I heard the response, “Perfection.” The top two responses to date are: 1) “Well, God doesn't expect anything of us. Unconditional love imposes no expectations.” Obviously, this student hasn't thought through this answer else they would recognize the contradiction in what they are saying. Universalism is too easy to fall into from here. Not only that, but you are going to have a little trouble justifying all those commands and laws that pervade the Scripture. And 2) “God expects us to do our very best. I mean, what else can we give?” My usual response to this answer is, “Well, have you done your best then?” Very rarely will anyone be bold enough to say, “yes,” to this question, in which case they are in the same boat as before. We have not met God's standard.)

But back to our student. He hears that God will not put up with his willful sin any longer. He also hears that God is equally unimpressed by the deeds which he would arrogantly call “good.” In short, he is

convicted by his sin. For a moment, he is left to despair of his condition. "What can I do to be saved?" he asks, quoting from Acts 2.

But a good preacher will not stop there and simply send him out to "try harder the next time." This gospel preacher explains to the student that there was one who has bridged the gap between his sinful state and God's holy standard. The Lord Jesus Christ is presented with all of his fullness and beauty. Our student is moved by the sacrifice of Christ on his behalf. He realizes that his sins are paid for, that the wrath that was due him was poured out on the very Son of God. Yet at the same time, the righteous acts that he should be doing as a servant of God have also been supplied by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to his spiritual account. Hence, both his sins of commission and of omission are accounted for in the active and passive obedience of Christ. It is the grace of the gospel. And in the midst of this moment, he is moved to cast himself fully upon Christ alone for his salvation, knowing full well that there is no hope only in himself. Hence the illustration:

God's Holy Standard



Now, this isn't Earth shattering at all. This is a simple illustration of what the gospel is. However, it is at this point that I have the first bit of interest. In my dealings with students on campus (and I am limiting myself to covenant children here) I cannot remember ONE time when I have heard a student get all of this. And very few who could come close with an explanation of this. Over and over again, when I ask people about how they became a Christian, I get no further explanation than, "Well, I answered the invitation at camp on summer," or "Well, there was a chapel speaker at school and I just realized that I needed to get my heart right." Students can talk about the circumstances surrounding their conversion, but they can't talk about their conversion.

(It would be tempting to digress into what the reasons for this are. I would venture to say that most of the students with whom I deal have implicitly learned that since salvation is a personal, emotional thing, putting it into words is difficult by definition. They don't feel bad about not being able to talk about their conversion because, well, you just can't describe those things in words. Chalk one up to the Charismatic Movement for lending credence to this type of thinking. I would recommend David Wells' engrossing books *No Place For Truth and God In The Wasteland* for a further discussion on this topic.)

Now, please don't get me wrong. I am not so naïve or irrelevant as to expect some student to give me some kind of advanced theological outline of the intricacies of salvation... BUT I WOULD LOVE TO HEAR SOMEONE MENTION THE NAME OF JESUS RATHER THAN THEMSELVES ONCE IN A WHILE. Even if that comment was nothing more than, "Well, I don't really know what to tell you about my salvation, Les. All I know is that Jesus took care of that for me. Isn't it great?!" Over and over again, they relate their salvation to something that THEY did, and few can even give me the most basic of gospel explanations. **They have responded to something, but almost categorically, that was an emotional, content-less response to an event in their lives.** "I just felt something," and that is their *justification*... literally.

THE NEXT STEP

It isn't the purpose of this discussion, though, to do an extended look into an individual's justification, as interesting as that would be. What concerns me is what the Bible teaches about what inevitably follows our justification. What concerns me is the next few moments after this significant "something" has just happened, whatever it may be. And this is where I believe students makes a wrong move. Now, it might just be that this first wrong move happens precisely because of his misunderstanding of what he was responding to when he decided he needed to "get things right with God." He felt guilty, remember... the preacher said to do something (pray a prayer, come forward, whatever...) and he did it. "There... I got myself 'right with God,'" he reasons.

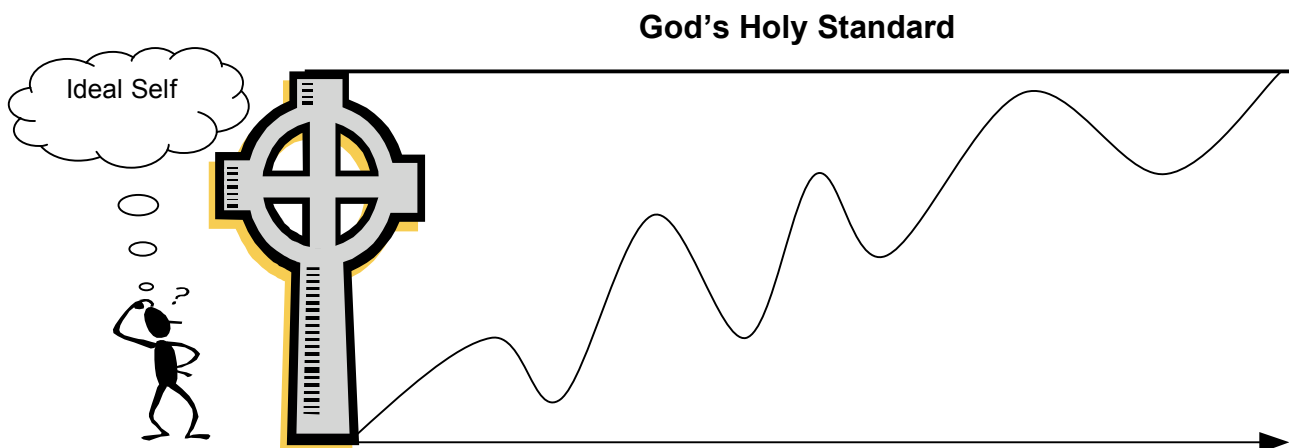
(Again, it is tempting to digress into the very Roman Catholic-like understanding of our dealings with God. Any self-respecting practitioner of the altar call system would more than likely toss the idea of transubstantiation right out the door, but wouldn't hesitate to tell a seeking sinner, "just pray this prayer" to secure his salvation. The altar call has replaced the Eucharist.)

And so the event is over. And it is what he thinks to himself as he rises from his knees that sets him on the wrong foot. "I am not doing what I need to be doing," he rightly thinks. And at this moment he begins to imagine what he would look like if he finally met that all-too-high standard of God that he just heard about. He pictures himself without the hindrance of that sin that made him feel so guilty before. Usually, this is pictured in terms of what he should not do. "I need to quit doing things with my girlfriend on the weekend. I need to quit looking at the cyberporn on the Internet when my parents go to bed. I need to quit using bad language. Etc." (Remember, his standard for what God wants from him is severely warped. It is simply the absence of guilt that is his immediate concern. But God's continuing requirement of meeting this standard rarely occurs to him.)

In so doing our student creates a mental image of what I am going to call his "ideal self." This is the self that does not feel guilty for what he has done, he meets God's standard. **And the Christian life, for him, becomes climbing the ladder to reach this ideal self.** "This is God's standard, I must meet it. Now, let's get to work."

Let me show you just what life looks like when it is lived with this controlling assumption. Life becomes sort of a roller coaster of wrongs and rights that he has done at various times in his life. Let's say that he leaves the church service that he is attending and purposes himself to read his Bible every day... a good thing to do. But after a few weeks or months, he goes a whole week and forgets. But then he rebounds back for a while because he has decided to volunteer to teach a Sunday School class. But soon falls again, because there was that weekend with his girlfriend where they caught themselves doing things that they didn't think they'd ever be tempted to do.

But the point of their struggle comes in what they think of their relationship to God all this time. That is, what is the guiding assumption of this kind of living, what is driving their actions here. I would suggest to



you that it is this. **When I do what I am supposed to do... God likes me. When I don't do what I am supposed to do... our relationship is in jeopardy.** Now, this is powerful motivation, he reasons. As long as I do what I am supposed to do, then everything will be okay. Knowing that God is going to quit being on my side if I screw up is going to keep me from dropping off the deep end.

(Of course, he's wrong about this. Guilt and manipulation never motivated anybody. Marriage and family relationships, appropriately enough, demonstrate the truth of this principle. How many students have I seen whose attitudes have been sorely affected by a parent's constant use of guilt to extract desired behavior from their kids. And the fear and distrust that is produced in marriage because of guilt manipulation is the very opposite of love and can only sour the marriage.)

Now, let's let some time pass. I doesn't really matter how long. If a student lives underneath this kind of guiding principle for a certain amount of time, one of two things usually results from it. In some cases, the student suffers from **BURNOUT**. This is the student that has had enough of the roller coaster ride and they are getting off. They get to college and could not be happier. They fall off the deep end morally and even the most committed of Christians get talked about in hushed tones, "Did you hear what happened to so-and-so? Why... she was such a 'good girl' in high school," or "When was the last time you heard from so-and-so? You wouldn't believe what he is into these days while he is away at school! Boy, some leader he turned out to be." Interestingly enough, I have found these students the easiest to talk with, simply because they have at least been honest enough to say that they have quit. The problem is, "talk" is all they want to do. One of sin's most frightening affects is that it hardens its subjects, and very often you can exhort until you are blue in the face, but this student has no interest in responding. His heart is hard.

These guys are far different from the other result of this type of living. The other option for the one who lives on the roller coaster is that they become **SELF-RIGHTEOUS**. These are those who have become pretty good at the game. I like to joke (sort of) that there are actually two forms of the self-righteous. The first kind is the old Fundy kind. This is the person who lives very confidently in Christ, after all they have their quiet times faithfully, they go to all the best Bible studies, and they certainly do not hang around *those* people... the *bad* people that is... (those who drink or sleep around). **And God likes me because I do so.** The other form of self righteousness is what I call the Theologian kind. These people don't boast so much in their accomplishments as they do in their knowledge. They replace the quiet time with theological precision. But the disease is just the same, God likes me because I have attained unto a certain understanding of all that is deep and philosophical about the Bible.

My conversations with these people over lunch in the Cafeteria at school so something like this. From the Fundy: "So how are you doing spiritually?" "Well, funny you should ask, Les. This New Year's I made a resolution to read my Bible every day. And you know what, I have! And it has been such a blessing!" From the Theologian: "So how are you doing spiritually?" "Well, Les, you are not going to believe what I just finished reading the other day. I picked up Richard Pratt's book *Every Thought Captive* and read through it again. I am learning so much about how to show people that they are wrong to reject Christianity."

Now, is there anything wrong with making a New Years resolution to read one's Bible every day? Far from it, would that all of us would make the same resolution and keep it. Or is there anything wrong with re-reading a good book on apologetics to gain a better understanding on how to defend the faith? Absolutely not! **But as the answer to the question, "How are you doing spiritually?" it could not be more wrong!!**

The New Testament measures spirituality by one measure and on measure only: how much do you love the Lord Jesus. Jesus is asked right out by the Pharisees in Matthew 22, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus answers, "Love the Lord your God... And love your neighbor as yourself." And I mean LOVE him, with the same affection that a woman has for her husband and a man for his wife, the kind of love we have expressed in the Song of Solomon. The only evidence of true Christians is love for the Lord Jesus. What we do ought to be merely a result of loving Christ, never the other way around. But more on that later.

I was having a conversation with a fellow campus minister about these things, and we were lamenting to each other that in the years that we have been doing campus ministry (which, granted, are very few) we have yet to even hear the name, Jesus, in these kinds of conversations. *He* doesn't seem to be the point. It is *me* that is the focus of my salvation.

And in the illustration, can't you see why that is the case? Look what happens to the Cross when a person lives this way. It shrinks. And why does it shrink? Because, quite frankly, they don't need it. They are doing just fine for themselves. Oh, they may need Jesus to appease any guilt experienced along the way, but his work is fading from the scene.

And this is where we start to see the effects of this kind of thinking in the life of this person. There is a relevant story in Luke 7 about Jesus visit to a Pharisees house for a meal. During the dinner a woman bursts into the room described by Luke only as one "who had lived a sinful life" (most probably a euphemism for a prostitute). This woman begins to weep over Jesus feet and anoint them with expensive perfume and wipe them off with her hair. The Pharisee is appalled at the scene that was being made in his own house. Jesus, knowing the man's thoughts asks him a question.

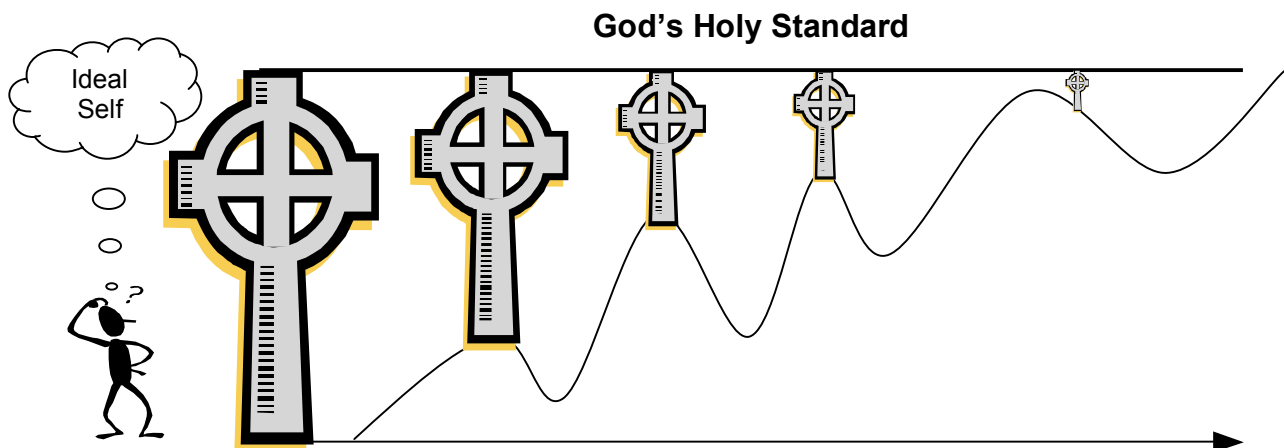
"Two men owned money to a certain money lender," he said, "One owed the man about 500 days wages, the other about 50. Neither of them had the money to pay him back so the moneylender canceled the debts of both. Now, which of them will love him more?"

The Pharisee answers, "Well, I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus responds. "For he who has been forgiven little... loves little."

You see, Scripture teaches us that our love for Christ is directly proportional to how much we know ourselves to have been forgiven by him. The individual in question, rather than finding his love for God increasing, finds it decreasing instead. Why? Because his need for the Cross is decreasing.

And since his love for Christ is decreasing, his love for others is decreasing. He has no love, no patience, no kindness for others. He is incapable of producing these things. We hate to be around these people, don't we? They are not genuine. They come across as inauthentic people. How many of you know someone who is so stinking religious that you wonder if you'll ever have a REAL conversation with them? They are plastic. There is no love in their hearts for other sinners and hence no sympathy with our thoughts or feelings at all. The reason for this is that while the Cross steadily shrinks, so does the heart. We are hard and uncaring. And hence, rather than becoming more approachable and easy to talk to, we shun people by our actions and drive them away. Sin makes us selfish and inward. And in typical Pharisee style, when people avoid them, they will chalk it up to, "Well, I guess we all have to suffer for Jesus."



A BETTER WAY

What I am trying to suggest to you is that this entire way of viewing our sanctification was wrong from the start and therefore impossible to improve upon. There is no real victory over sin, nor any growing love for Christ and for others. This entire way of viewing the situation is wrong. And I would like to suggest an alternative.

As Christians, we are to be those who are LIVING BY THE GOSPEL. Now, at this point, I just lost the vast majority of my audience. "The gospel?" many Christians reason, "well, I thought we were talking about our growth as Christians. The gospel is what we talk about in evangelistic talks. What we are talking about here is called 'discipleship.'"

But it is that very understanding of the gospel that I am trying to dispel. That is to say this, the very same message that converted you is the same message that will grow you as a Christian. There is no distinction in the message of the gospel in terms of its evangelistic use and its discipleship use. It is one and the same message. Let me explain what I mean by "living by the gospel."

If you are wondering if you are hearing the gospel, can I suggest a two things that are absolutely necessary in the presentation of the gospel? The first is the law. Whenever we are going to present some good news to people, it makes utterly no sense without the bad news. To simply walk up to someone and say, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life," says nothing to them. So what? What does it matter? Why should I care? Well, we should care because of our desperate situation in life because of God's standard, the law. The law then becomes that which sets the stage, or provides the context for what is coming next.

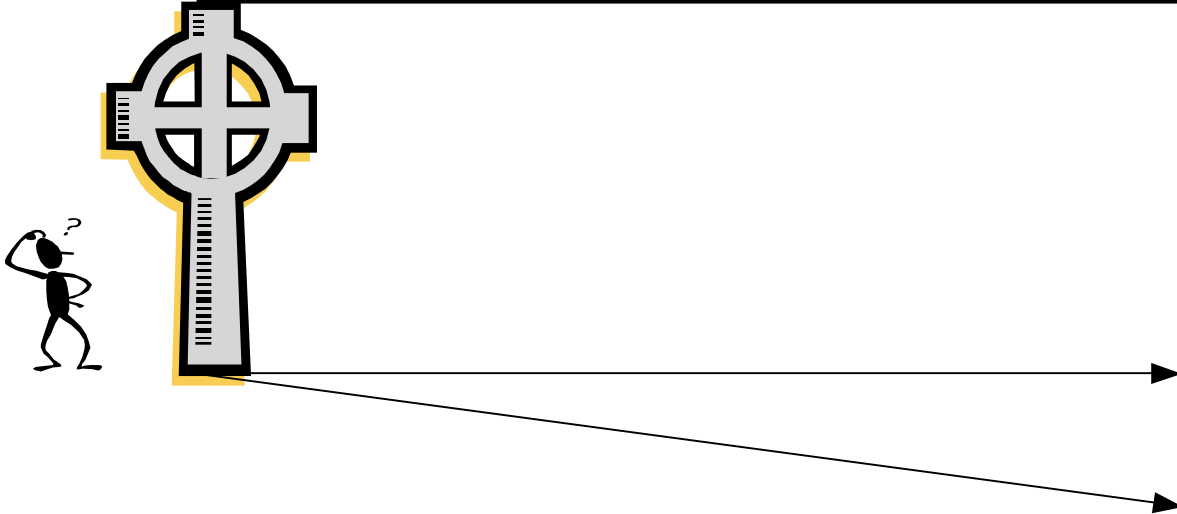
You see as a Christian grows in his understanding of the law, whatever he previously thought was God's standard of behavior in his life, he finds to be quite low. If the truth be told, God's standard is infinitely higher than anything we can possibly conceive. And this ought to be what happens to us as we grow, God ought to become holier and holier in our experience.

And so, of course, there is an equal and opposite reaction to all of this knowledge about God's holy standard, so far from my estimation of myself growing, I find myself in my experience getting farther and farther AWAY from God's standard. "True Christian growth," said J.I. Packer, "is growth downward." I grow deeper in my knowledge of sin. That is, I either find that there is new and undiscovered sin in my heart that I never knew existed (I think this is called "Marriage," by the way), or I discover that the sin that I thought I had conquered in my life comes back with double strength. **Let's be honest, to become a Christian makes life more difficult.** If you are afraid of the struggle, then find another faith. This one is not for you.

To grow as a Christian means to become more and more aware of what Jesus died for on the Cross. That is, I begin the Christian life by learning more and more just what was the quantity and the quality of my sin from which I have been set free. This is obviously a difficult experience. Especially, if we are not understanding our new relationship to sin since we have been converted.

Now, this is not my idea. I think this principle is clearly drawn from the life of the Apostle Paul. Remember Paul's self-evaluation early on in his ministry? In I Corinthians 15:9 Paul says of himself, "I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle..." What a shame that Paul is so insecure! He obviously has not tapped into his "Personal Power" that Tony Robbins talks about. But it gets worse. Later on in Paul's ministry he describes himself again in Romans 7:24, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Paul here is obviously struggling with a low self-esteem. If only he could learn to feel better about himself. But finally, towards the end of his ministry in I Timothy 1:15, Paul is saying this about himself, "Here is a trustworthy saying that is worthy of full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners- of whom I am the worst..." This is the Apostle Paul, author of some one third of the entire New Testament, a man who, when his very shadow passes over the sick, they were healed... THIS Paul has the opinion of himself that he is the chief of all sinners. Therefore, our illustration looks like this:

God's Holy Standard



But please don't misunderstand. I do not mean to say that this means that as I grow as a Christian, that I am sinning more and more. What I am saying is that as I grow, I *see myself* as more and more sinful. The reality is exactly the opposite, but I'll save that for later.

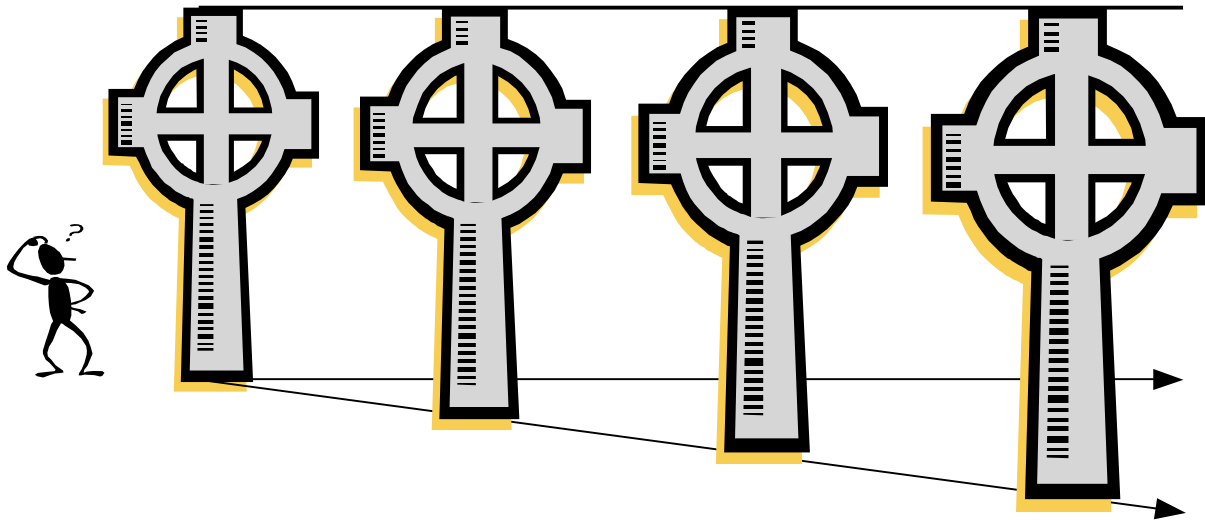
Also, I do not intend to suggest that this constitutes the entirety of the Christian experience, far from it! I am not suggesting that our job is to walk around all day with long faces and sad looks because, "We are so miserable in our sinful selves..." Tragically, we see another aberrant form of Christian preaching today that leaves it at just this point. The idea is that the good Christian is one who can "feel badder longer," if you will. The more miserable I am, the more I am acceptable to God. I can only imagine that the God of Grace is more nauseated by this abortion of the gospel than any other. How awful to turn what is so lovely and peace-giving into a dreadful yoke around our necks, for which he paid at the cost of his own Son to release us from! Moralism ought to be as repugnant to the Christian as the worst of heretics. This is not the gospel.

Quite the contrary, we have not gotten to the other side of the issue. For on the other side of law is **grace**. That is, I live every day with a more and more vivid knowledge of my sin, yes. However, at every turn of my sinful soul, God's word says to me as if to ask, "Yes, you are even more wretched than you originally thought. Now, who are you going to trust in for your standing with me?" For as I see myself getting farther and farther away from God's standard, the Cross swells in its importance. And I confess that I need Christ today so much more than I did yesterday, but not near as much as will tomorrow. I begin to understand what the Psalmist meant when he prayed, "O, Magnify the Lord with me..." That is, to be magnified means to become bigger and more prominent. Is that not the very goal for which we were created as human beings? Again, the illustration (on the following page).

And what accompanies this? Nothing less than a love for Christ! His work, his Cross, takes a more and more central role in my life, I find that I can hardly take a step without needing Christ. He is all and in all. We can say with the Apostle Paul, "For me to live is Christ..." I was talking to a student about this the other day and I quoted that very verse in Paul. His response was interesting, "Yea, but doesn't that sound so arrogant of Paul? As if he has achieved so much that he loves Christ so much..." But I think he had it all wrong. So far from boasting in that verse, I believe that Paul is expressing this fact, "I can't get out of the bed this morning if I don't have Christ. I know my heart and I am capable of ruining myself in sin today. My only hope in present or in future is in the work of Christ." For Paul to live is Christ!

And the beauty of this is that in the same way that our hearts shrank in the other view, our hearts enlarge when we see Christ as such. That is, we become authentic Christians. We become approachable and genuine. We can dispense with the masks that we wear trying to fool everyone that we are not screwed

God's Holy Standard



up more than they can possibly imagine. We can look at others with compassion because we know ourselves to be messed up. We can accept into our fellowship those saints who have fallen into grievous sin, because "but for the grace of God, there go I." Our hearts grow for God and for others. Love for God and neighbor, it is the greatest commandment.

C.H. Spurgeon was greeting parishioners outside the Metropolitan Tabernacle after a certain Sunday worship service. He was accompanied by his elders and a throng of people came by to thank him for the service. However, as the crowd paraded by Spurgeon, an elderly lady approached him with a look of consternation on her face. "Mr. Spurgeon," she sharply began, "you are the most arrogant, obnoxious, annoying man that I have ever heard of. And I wanted to be the one to tell you so." The crowd grew somewhat quiet with embarrassment as the old woman stormed off in a huff. With all eyes on him, Spurgeon turned to the elder standing next to him and said, "Sheesss, she doesn't know the half of it."

Now, why do we smile when we hear that story? I would venture to say that when we hear it we think to ourselves, "I want to be around more people like Spurgeon. He's the kind of guy that I want to hang around with. Unpretentious, unassuming, self-effacing." And isn't it true that we ALL love people like that? Spurgeon was only drawing off his knowledge of what the Scriptures have said about him. If it was true that he was "more sinful, wretched, and depraved than he could ever imagine," then what was the opinion of some old woman who happened to confirm that in him? The answer is, that it was nothing. Spurgeon knew that he was on Rock Bottom as far as God was concerned, and it so colored his opinion of himself that he was able to forgive and be patient and love and show kindness to this old woman. Because he knew that even though he was a screw up like us, he also knew that his God loved screw-ups. And that was enough.

THE MYSTERY

There is a mystery here that happens at this point. The Holy Spirit does something in us while we are looking desperately to Christ. All the while as we get our eyes off ourselves, he is producing fruits in us. We find ourselves with a new patience, because we know how patient God has been with us. We find a new wellspring of forgiveness in us, because we know the great debt we owed that has been forgiven. We find a new love, because he first loved us. Go down the line of Galatians 5 and the fruits of the Spirit, all these come about "naturally" as we look to Christ for our only hope. In other words, they really are "fruits," they are not things that I noticed and said, "Oh,... 'love'... well, I need to work harder at being loving." Yes, harder work is needed, but only in the context of setting our eyes totally on Christ alone for our salvation.

I had this principle illustrated for me recently in a most vivid way. I wonder how many of you have ever been dumped. I mean, you have had someone reject you severely. I had one such girl in my living room with my wife recently. This young lady had been dating a great guy whom everyone thought would ask her to marry her, until things just simply changed (as they often do in dating relationships) and he said goodbye to her. And as she sat and described her pain, it brought back a lot of memories for me.

I can vividly remember being rejected by an old girlfriend. And if the event is bad, the weeks or months afterward are worse. And I can still remember the strange, awkward pain that I would feel after these times. I used to think that this pain was nothing more than having to get “out of the habit” of the other person, to get used to not having them around so much. But I think I know better now. The pain that one goes through a break up is nothing more than the pain of rejection. Someone, who knows us well, has said to us in effect, “You aren’t the man. You’re not good-looking/pretty enough. You’re not ambitious enough. You’re not funny enough. You don’t have the right personality. I can do better, so I’m leaving.” And the awkwardness of the following weeks comes from wrestling with this estimation of yourself.

I have seen people react to these kinds of break ups in one of two ways. On the one hand, they simply look for (often desperately so) a replacement who will tell them that their worst fears about their own estimation of themselves is not true. “You really are valuable, you really are loved,” they assure us. And after time, the pain goes away. The other type of response comes from the person who becomes depressed and despondent about themselves. These are those who literally grow to hate themselves. Guys just get more insecure and unsure about relationships, while girls grow desperate to change themselves (dieting, exercising often leading to eating disorders or worse).

But my friend sitting in my living room this evening hadn’t done either of those things. Her comment went something like this, “I don’t know how else to say it, Les. I just got to the point where I stopped being afraid of what I was so afraid was true. *And I owned up to who I was.* And something happened. I all of a sudden was okay. I knew that I was going to be fine.”

What she had done was to own up to her limitations. She had admitted to herself that it just might be true all the things she was thinking about herself. She allowed herself to hit “rock bottom.” And all the sudden, she realized that rock bottom wasn’t all that bad. As a matter of fact, it was “good solid ground.” But the really amazing fact that both my wife and I noticed at that moment was that, so far from being a morbid, self-absorbed kind of self-realization (it was the farthest thought from my wife’s mind that she wasn’t going to be okay), this girl actually became more attractive to us. Her confidence that she had gained had made her look and sound so mature, so peaceful, so attractive.

This is nothing less than gospel truth illustrated in real life. I have often struggled with how the freedom of the gospel is to be squared with the necessity that we lead holy lives. But I think I am beginning to see that it is the *very nature of the gospel to change us*. The minute that we “own up to who we are,” to cease trying to be someone that God has not created us to be, to admit to our sin and to the fact that the God of the universe has rejected us (has “dumped” us), it is at that very moment that we hear the Gospel say to us that **God adores just those kind of people**. And strangely, we are fine. We have a new humility, a new patience, a new kindness, a new sincerity, new genuineness. THESE are the fruits of the Spirits work in our lives to assist us to understand that 1) I am more sinful, wretched, and depraved than I could possibly imagine, and 2) I am more loved, accepted, and forgiven in the Lord Jesus than I could ever dare dream. THIS is living by the gospel.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones used this illustration. What if someone approached you out of the blue and told you that they had recently paid one of your bills, but they didn't tell you which one. They might have paid your dry cleaning bill this month. But then again, they might have paid the balance that you owe on your automobile. The point is that it is the size of the debt which determines the amount of the joy that you have upon discovery that it has been paid for you. Could it be that the reason why so many Christians have no joy in the Lord Jesus is for one of two reasons: either they are not aware of how large was their debt they owed to God for their sins (like the parable of the ungrateful servant in Matthew 18), OR they are not aware of the depth of God's radical provision in Christ for our sins.

SO WHAT DO I DO?

This brings us to an important question. If we are truly saying that God's plan in our sanctification is for us to see the depth of our sin, couldn't someone legitimately ask, "Well, then, if all this is true, then I can just sin all I want so that I can see the Cross get larger and larger in my experience. This is a great relationship. I love to sin, Jesus loves to forgive. I could get used to this." How does the gospel protect us from license?

This question ought to sound familiar. Romans 6:1, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" Therefore, we are not alone in asking our question. Some would suggest that this is a very necessary question. As a matter of fact, Martyn-Lloyd Jones once said (in his commentary on Romans 6:1):

The true preaching of the gospel of salvation by grace alone always leads to the possibility of this charge begin brought against it. There is no better test as to whether a man is really preaching the New Testament gospel of salvation than this, that some people might misunderstand it and misinterpret it to mean that it really amounts to this, that because you are saved by grace alone it does not matter at all what you do; you can go on sinning as much as you like because it will redound all the more to the glory of grace. That is a very good test of gospel preaching. If my preaching and presentation of the gospel of salvation does not expose it to that misunderstanding, then it is not the gospel.

It is quite likely then, if this question arises, that the individual has heard the gospel. The gospel *ought* to sound too good to be true. It is the *freedom* of the gospel that strikes as the most vivid point of the gospel.

But what about the question. Well, the answer is obvious. "Of course this truth does not give us license to sin willingly." And the reason why is rooted in what Christ has created us to be. When Christ accomplished the work of our redemption on the Cross and the Holy Spirit applied it to our hearts, we were dead to sin. It is impossible for us to continue to live in it after that. The rest of Romans 6 is an exposition on this fact.

But the question might also come back, "Well, but what about our striving? Are you promoting some kind of 'let go and let God' idea? Are we not supposed to struggle with our sin?" And the answer to this question is equally as obvious. "Of course we struggle with sin, of course we fight and strive against the presence of sin in our lives." As a matter of fact, we do more than just struggle, we struggle *all that much more with sin*. Let me explain.

There is a mysterious verse that has always confused me in times past in Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 2, verse 12,13. It says, "...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling..." Paul seems to be very explicit here: there is effort to be extended in living the Christian life. And not just lazy effort either, it is work done with fear and trembling. Our individual in question can never be allowed to misunderstand the gospel as being the end of all effort in his Christian life. We are an evangelical culture that repels from the thought of the spiritual disciplines in life. We are wrong to cry, "Legalism" every time someone mentions effort which we must extend in living our Christian lives.

But Reformed Christians are continually charged with just such a thing. Simply because Reformed believers would like to emphasize the rest of the passage in question, "...for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." The real work of our sanctification takes place by God's effort, we say. After all, God is sovereign, so even my sanctification is in his hands.

"Yes," the question comes back, "so does that mean that we don't *do* anything?" Far from it. What Reformed theology has been zealous to emphasize is that tiny word that precedes this part of the verse... "FOR... it is God who..." That is, the word does not say, "AND... it is God who..." There is no contradiction between God's working in my life in sanctification and my striving to work it out also. Prof. John Murray put it this way in his wonderful little book *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied*, the chapter on "Sanctification":

And no text [Philippians 2:12,13] sets forth more succinctly and clearly **the relation of God's working to our working**. God's working in us is not suspended because we work, nor our working suspended because God works. Neither is the relation strictly one of co-operation as if God did his part and we did ours so that the conjunction or co-ordination of both produced the required result. God works in us and we also work. **But the relation is that because God works we work**. All working out of salvation on our part is the effect of God's working in us, not the willing to the exclusion of the willing, but both the willing and the doing. And this working of God is directed to the end of enabling us to will and to do that which is well pleasing to him. We have here not only the explanation of all acceptable activity on our part but we have also the incentive to our willing and working. What the apostle is urging is the necessity of working out our own salvation, and the encouragement he supplies is the assurance that it is God himself who works in us. The more persistently active we are in working, the more persuaded we may be that all the energizing grace and power is of God.

I am indebted to Scot Sherman, pastor of the Village Church, PCA in Greenwich Village, NYC for his wonderfully helpful illustration of what John Murray has just said. Sherman says that the effort (the doing) in the Christian life can be compared to a walk on a path through the woods. At one point on your journey, you encounter a huge tree that has fallen in the way. At this point, there are really only four options for you to get the tree moved (only one of which really works).

First, there is the notion that you have to move it. This is the faith of our grandparents. "Just buck up, be a man, and do it," they say. "If you don't want to be sinning in your life, then just stop. Nobody's holdin' you back, now get crackin'." We can throw this conception of the Christian life right out, since one's relationship to God never comes to bear on this struggle with sin.

Second, there is this strange "Let Go, and Let God move the log in the path" notion that has plagued Christianity of late. What is this? No one can tell me what it is, because it doesn't exist. If you are going to wait in your life waiting for God to "do it all" in your life, you'll be waiting for quite some time.

The third option is the option that I feel many professing Reformed believers suffer from. These are those who say, "Well, the answer, obviously, is that BOTH of you move the log. You get on one end, Jesus gets on the other, and the two of you move it together. Simple as that." This type of thinking has more things wrong with it than I can mention. First, we know enough of ourselves to know that even if Jesus "gets the other side" then we couldn't lift the log. We couldn't even live up to our end of the bargain.

But this is exactly the conception that many Reformed believers have of the relationship of God's sovereign control over our sanctification ("...it is God who works in you both...") and our efforts that must be extended in that sanctification ("...work out your salvation..."). I have heard it put this way by one very popular Bible teacher in the South. "God's sovereignty and your responsibility are like two train tracks. If you emphasize one side over the other, then you are bound to derail the train. They must be kept in balance."

This is nothing more than more bondage. Only now we have replaced the drudgery of work's righteousness with the drudgery of keeping ourselves in "balance." The problem is: God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are not "like two train tracks." Borrowing a phrase from C.S. Lewis, God's actions and man's actions are not "on all fours." They are altogether different in their nature. The proper relationship between the two is that the one is foundational to the other. One, God's sovereignty, is transcendent, the other is imminent, our responsibility.

To go back to the illustration, it is not that I move the log, nor that God moves the log, nor that God and me move the log. It is rather that I move the log, because it is the power of the Lord Jesus working in and through and to me that moves the log. "I work," says Murray, "*because* God works."

This is a far different thing from the other. They are night and day. For in the one, I am still trying to get the power of God *into* my life. In the other, my life is *the very display* of the power of God.

And so this discussion shed light on the ever present charge which is constantly leveled against Reformed believers that if God's sovereignty over all of salvation is really true, then there would be no evangelism. Believers would simply sit back and wait for God to "fill up the roll of his elect" with no help from believers. But we respond again, "So far from *negating* my evangelism, God's sovereignty *establishes* my evangelism efforts. Because I know that he uses means to do his holy will, and he has gone before me in my efforts, so the battle is his. It doesn't negate my evangelism, it spurs me on to be that much more bold. I can't lose."

Therefore, so far from removing my efforts in sanctification, it turns out that God's grace is the very thing that propels me into just that much more zealous service to him. In the words of Hal Farnsworth, former RUF campus minister, "We are not struggling to be free from sin, but we are free to struggle with sin." Grace has not negated my wrestling with sin, it has established my ultimate victory over it, and thereby redoubling my efforts at resisting it.

Does this discussion not make verses like Philippians 3:12-16 leap off the page?

"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, **but I press on** to take hold of **that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me**. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and **straining** toward what is ahead, **I press on** toward the goal to win the prize **for which God has called me** heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. **Only let us live up to what we have already attained.**" (emphasis mine)

Martin Luther once said that we should learn what the gospel says and "beat it into our heads every day." How true! This is not a one time act. Learning to live by the gospel is a day to day apprehending afresh of the truths which we hold to be so precious.

CONCLUSION

There is so much more we could say. As I left my high school auditorium some weeks ago, my heart broke for the fear that there would be more fallen saints or Pharisees produced from what happened. There has got to come a time when students are seriously challenged in their relationship to Christ. And not in terms of their emotional response to a message. Nor in terms of some kind of vague commitment to "do better." When will we produce Christians?

The hard truth that the Bible teaches is that the so-called "carnal Christian" is NO CHRISTIAN AT ALL. He never was. I John says that he departed from us because he never was OF us. And, likewise, there are few types of people who received more condemnation from Christ than the Pharisees. *We are so comfortable with them, though.* We think that it is not so bad because at least they are doing what they are supposed to be doing. Friends, Pharisees are going to hell. There is no other way to say it. My fear is that we will see more students who on that fearful day will cry, "Lord, Lord..." and He will say, "Depart from me, I never knew you.... The only people that I know are those who love me and keep my commandments." It is as simple, and as frightening, as that.

It is my prayer and my life work that we would see students come to know and love the Lord Jesus, plain and simple. This is my prayer for myself, and all of us as well.