



THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL: PART 2

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IMPLICATIONS

We have seen that the gospel is the way that anything is renewed and transformed by Christ--whether a heart, a relationship, a church, or a community. It is the key to all doctrine and our view of our lives in this world. Therefore, all our problems come from a lack of orientation to the gospel. Put positively, the gospel transforms our hearts and thinking and approaches to absolutely everything.

A. THE GOSPEL AND THE INDIVIDUAL.

1. Approach to discouragement. When a person is depressed, the moralist says, “you are breaking the rules--repent.” On the other hand, the relativist says, “you just need to love and accept yourself”. But (assuming there is no physiological base of the depression) the gospel leads us to examine ourselves and say: “something in my life has become more important than God, a pseudo-savior, a form of works righteousness.”

The gospel leads us to repentance, but not to merely setting our will against superficialities. It is without the gospel that superficialities will be addressed instead of the heart. The moralist will work on behavior and the relativist will work on the emotions themselves.

2. Approach to the physical world. Some moralists

are indifferent to the physical world--they see it as “unimportant”, while many others are downright afraid of physical pleasure. Since they are seeking to earn their salvation, they prefer to focus on sins of the physical like sex and the other appetites. These are easier to avoid than sins of the spirit like pride. Therefore, they prefer to see sins of the body as worse than other kinds. As a result, legalism usually leads to a distaste of pleasure. On the other hand, the relativist is often a hedonist, someone who is controlled by pleasure, and who makes it an idol. The gospel leads us to see that God has invented both body and soul and so will redeem both body and soul, though under sin both body and soul are broken. Thus the gospel leads us to enjoy the physical (and to fight against physical brokenness, such as sickness and poverty), yet to be moderate in our use of material things.

3. Approach to love and relationships. Moralism often makes relationships into a “blamegame”. This is because a moralist is traumatized by criticism that is too severe, and maintains a self-image as a good person by blaming others. On the other hand, moralism can use the procuring of love as the way to “earn our salvation” and convince ourselves we are worthy persons. That often creates what is called “codependency”-- a form of self-salvation through needing people or needing people to need you (i.e. saving yourself by saving others). On the other hand, much relativism/liberalism reduces love to a negotiated partnership for mutual benefit. You only relate as long as it is not costing you anything. So the choice (without the gospel) is to selfishly use others or to selfishly let yourself be used by others. But the gospel leads us to do neither. We do sacrifice and commit, but not out of a need to convince ourselves or others we are acceptable. So we can love the person enough to confront, yet stay with the person when it does not benefit us.



4. Approach to suffering. Moralism takes the “Job’s friends” approach, laying guilt on yourself. You simply assume: “I must be bad to be suffering”. Under the guilt, though, there is always anger toward God. Why? Because moralists believe that God owes them. The whole point of moralism is to put God in one’s debt. Because you have been so moral, you feel you don’t really deserve suffering. So moralism tears you up, for at one level you think, “what did I do to deserve this?” but on another level you think, “I probably did everything to deserve this!” So, if the moralist suffers, he or she must either feel mad at God (because I have been performing well) or mad at self (because I have not been performing well) or both. On the other hand, relativism/pragmatism feels justified in avoiding suffering at all costs--lying, cheating, and broken promises are OK. But when suffering does come, the pragmatist also lays the fault at God’s doorstep, claiming that he must be either unjust or impotent. But the cross shows us that God redeemed us through suffering. That he suffered not that we might not suffer, but that in our suffering we could become like him. Since both the moralist and the pragmatist ignore the cross in different ways, they will both be confused and devastated by suffering.

5. Approach to sexuality. The secularist/pragmatist sees sex as merely biological and physical appetite. The moralist tends to see sex as dirty or at least a dangerous impulse that leads constantly to sin. But the gospel shows us that sexuality is to reflect the self-giving of Christ. He gave himself completely without conditions. So we are not to seek intimacy but hold back control of our lives. If we give ourselves sexually we are to give ourselves legally, socially, personally--utterly. Sex only is to happen in a totally committed, permanent relationship of marriage.

6. Approach to one’s family. Moralism can make you a slave to parental expectations, while pragmatism sees no need for family loyalty or the keeping of promises and covenants if they do not “meet my needs”. The gospel frees you from making parental approval an absolute or psychological salvation, pointing how God becomes the ultimate father. Then you will neither be too dependent or too hostile to your parents.

7. Approach to self-control. Moralists tell us to control our passions out of fear of punishment. This is a volition-based approach. Liberalism tells us to express ourselves and find out what is right for us. This is an emotion-based approach. The gospel tells

us that the free, unloseable grace of God “teaches” us to “say no” to our passions (Titus 2:13) if we listen to it. This is a whole-person based approach, starting with the truth descending into the heart.

8. Approach to other races and cultures. The liberal approach is to relativize all cultures. (“We can all get along because there is no truth”.) The conservatives believe there is truth for evaluation of cultures, and so they choose some culture as superior and then they idolize it, feeling superior to others in the impulse of self-justifying pride. The gospel leads us to be: a) on the one hand, somewhat critical of all cultures, including our own (since there is truth), but b) on the other hand, we are morally superior to no one. After all, we are saved by grace alone. Christians will exhibit both moral conviction yet compassion and flexibility. For example, gays are used to being “bashed” and hated or completely accepted. They never see anything else.

9. Approach to witness to non-Christians. The liberal/pragmatist approach is to deny the legitimacy of evangelism altogether. The conservative/moralist person does believe in proselytizing, because “we are right and they are wrong”. Such proselytizing is almost always offensive. But the gospel produces a constellation of traits in us. a) First, we are compelled to share the gospel out of generosity and love, not guilt. b) Second, we are freed from fear of being ridiculed or hurt by others, since we already have the favor of God by grace. c) Third, there is a humility in our dealings with others, because we know we are saved only by grace alone, not because of our superior insight or character. d) Fourth, we are hopeful about anyone, even the “hard cases”, because we were saved only because of grace, not because we were likely people to be Christians. d) Fifth, we are courteous and careful with people. We don’t have to push or coerce them, for it is only God’s grace that opens hearts, not our eloquence or persistence or even their openness. All these traits not only create a winsome evangelist but an excellent neighbor in a multi-cultural society.

10. Approach to human authority. Moralists will tend to obey human authorities (family, tribe, government, cultural customs) too much, since they rely so heavily on their selfimage of being moral and decent. Pragmatists will either obey human authority too much (since they have no higher authority by which they can judge their culture) or else too little (since they may only obey when they know they won’t get caught). That means either authoritarianism or



anarchy. But the gospel gives you both a standard by which to oppose human authority (if it contradicts the gospel), but on the other hand, gives you incentive to obey the civil authorities from the heart, even when you could get away with disobedience.

11. Approach to human dignity. Moralists often have a pretty low view of human nature--they mainly see human sin and depravity. Pragmatists, on the other hand, have no good basis for treating people with dignity. Usually they have no religious beliefs about what human beings are. (If they are just chance products of evolution, how do we know they are more valuable than a rock?) But the gospel shows us that every human being is infinitely fallen (lost in sin and infinitely exalted (in the image of God). So we treat every human being as precious, yet dangerous!

12. Approach to guilt. When someone says, "I can't forgive myself", it means there is some standard or condition or person that is more central to your identity than the grace of God. God is the only God who forgives--no other "god" will. If you cannot forgive yourself, it is because you have failed your real God, your real righteousness, and it is holding you captive. The moralist's false god is usually a God of their imagination which is holy and demanding but not gracious. The pragmatist's false god is usually some achievement or relationship.

13. Approach to self-image. Without the gospel, your self-image is based upon living up to some standards--whether yours or someone's imposed upon you. If you live up to those standards, you will be confident but not humble. If you don't live up to them, you will be humble but not confident. Only in the gospel can you be both enormously bold and utterly sensitive and humble. For you are both perfect and a sinner!

14. Approach to joy and humor. Moralism has to eat away at real joy and humor -- because the system of legalism forces you to take yourself (your image, your appearance, your reputation) very seriously. Pragmatism on the other hand will tend toward cynicism as life goes on because of the inevitable cynicism that grows. This cynicism grows from a lack of hope for the world. In the end, evil will triumph--there is no judgment or divine justice. But if we are saved by grace alone, then the very fact of our being Christians is a constant source of amazed delight. There is nothing matter-of-fact about our lives, no "of course" to our lives. It is a miracle we are Christians,

and we have hope. So the gospel which creates bold humility should give us a far deeper sense of humor. We don't have to take ourselves seriously, and we are full of hope for the world.

15. Approach to "right living". Jonathan Edwards points out that "true virtue" is only possible for those who have experienced the grace of the gospel. Any person who is trying to earn their salvation does "the right thing" in order to get into heaven, or in order to better their self-esteem, etc. In other words, the ultimate motive is self-interest. But persons who know they are totally accepted already do "the right thing" out of sheer delight in righteousness for its own sake. Only in the gospel do you obey God for God's sake, and not for what God will give you. Only in the gospel do you love people for their sake (not yours), do good for its own sake (not yours), and obey God for his sake (not yours). Only the gospel makes "doing the right thing" a joy and delight, not a burden or a means to an end.

B. THE GOSPEL AND THE CHURCH.

1. Approach to ministry in the world. Legalism tends to place all the emphasis on the individual human soul. Legalistic religion will insist on converting others to their faith and church, but will ignore social needs of the broader community. On the other hand, "liberalism" will tend to emphasize only amelioration of social conditions and minimize the need for repentance and conversion. The gospel leads to love which in turn moves us to give our neighbor whatever is needed--conversion or a cup of cold water, evangelism and social concern.

2. Approach to worship. Moralism leads to a dour and somber worship which may be long on dignity but short on joy. A shallow understanding of "acceptance" without a sense of God's holiness can lead to frothy or casual worship. (A sense of neither God's love nor his holiness leads to a worship service that feels like a committee meeting.) But the gospel leads us to see that God is both transcendent yet immanent. His immanence makes his transcendence comforting, while his transcendence makes his immanence amazing. The gospel leads to both awe and intimacy in worship, for the Holy One is now our Father.

3. Approach to the poor. The liberal/pragmatist tend to scorn the religion of the poor and see them as helpless victims needing expertise. This is born out of a disbelief in God's common grace or special



grace to all. Ironically, the secular mindset also disbelieves in sin, and thus anyone who is poor must be oppressed, a helpless victim. The conservative/moralists on the other hand tend to scorn the poor as failures and weaklings. They see them as somehow to blame for their situation. But the gospel leads us to be: a) humble, without moral superiority knowing you were “spiritually bankrupt” but saved by Christ’s free generosity, and b) gracious, not worried too much about “deservingness”, since you didn’t deserve Christ’s grace, c) respectful of believing poor Christians as brothers and sisters from whom to learn. The gospel alone can bring “knowledge workers” into a sense of humble respect for and solidarity with the poor.

4. Approach to doctrinal distinctives. The “already” of the New Testament means more boldness in proclamation. We can most definitely be sure of the central doctrines that support the gospel. But, the “not yet” means charity and humility in non-essentials beliefs. In other words, we must be moderate about what we teach except when it comes to the cross, grace and sin. In our views, especially those that Christians cannot agree on, we must be less unbending and triumphalistic (“believing we have arrived intellectually”). It also means that our discernment of God’s call and his “will” for us and other must not be propagated with overweening assurance that your insight cannot be wrong. Against pragmatism, we must be **MISSIONAL TEAM LEADERS**: Love the lord willing to die for our belief in the gospel; against moralism, we must not fight to the death over every one of our beliefs.

5. Approach to holiness. The “already” means we should not tolerate sin. The presence of the kingdom includes that we are made “partakers of the divine nature” (II Pet. 1:3). The gospel brings us the confidence that anyone can be changed, that any enslaving habit can be overcome. But the “not yet” our sin which remains in us and will never be eliminated until the fullness of the kingdom comes in. So we must avoid pat answers, and we must not expect “quick fixes”. Unlike the moralists, we must be patient with slow growth or lapses and realize the complexity of change and growth in grace. Unlike the pragmatists and cynics, we must insist that miraculous change is possible.

6. Approach to miracles. The “already” of the kingdom means power for miracles and healing is available. Jesus showed the kingdom by healing

the sick and raising the dead. But the “not yet” means nature (including us) is still subject to decay (Rom.8:22-23) and thus sickness and death is still inevitable until the final consummation. We cannot expect miracles and the elimination of suffering to be such a normal part of the Christian life that pain and suffering will be eliminated from the lives of faithful people. Against moralists, we know that God can heal and do miracles. Against pragmatists, we do not aim to press God into eliminating suffering.

7. Approach to church health. The “already” of the kingdom means that the church is the community now of kingdom power. It therefore is capable of mightily transforming its community. Evangelism that adds “daily to the number of those being saved” (Acts 2:47) is possible! Loving fellowship which “destroyed...the dividing wall of hostility” between different races and classes is possible! But the “not yet” of sin means Jesus has not yet presented his bride, the church “as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish” (Eph.5:27). We must not then be harshly critical of imperfect congregations, nor jump impatiently from church to church over perceived blemishes. Error will never be completely eradicated from the church. The “not yet” means to avoid the overly severe use of church discipline and other means to seek to bring about a perfect church today.

8. Approach to social change. We must not forget that Christ is even now ruling in a sense over history (Eph.1:22ff). The “already” of grace means that Christians can expect to use God’s power to change social conditions and communities. But the “not yet” of sin means there will be “wars and rumors of wars”. Selfishness, cruelty, terrorism, oppression will continue. Christians harbor no illusions about politics nor expect utopian conditions. The “not yet” means that Christians will not trust any political or social agenda to bring about righteousness here on earth. So the gospel keeps us from the over-pessimism of fundamentalism (moralism) about social change, and also from the over-optimism of liberalism (pragmatism).

SUMMARY

All problems, personal or social come from a failure to use the gospel in a radical way, to get “in line with the truth of the gospel” (Gal.2:14). All pathologies in the church and all its ineffectiveness comes from a

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failure to use the gospel in a radical way. We believe that if the gospel is expounded and applied in its fullness in any church, that church will look very unique. People will find both moral conviction yet compassion and flexibility. For example, gays are used to being “bashed” and hated or completely accepted. They never see anything else. The cultural elites of either liberal or conservative sides are alike in their unwillingness to befriend or live with or respect or worship with the poor. They are alike in separating themselves increasingly from the rest of society.