

The Abiding Importance of the Gospel

It is very common in Christian circles to assume that “the gospel” is something just for non-Christians. We presume that the gospel is a set of basic “A-B-C” doctrines that Christians do not need to hear or study once they are converted. Rather, they should move beyond the gospel to more “advanced” doctrines. But the great declaration of the gospel of grace in Galatians was written to believers who did not see the implications of the gospel for life-issues confronting them. Paul solves the disunity and racial exclusivity not with a simple exhortation to “be better Christians,” but by calling them to live out the implications of the gospel. So Christians need the gospel just as much as non-Christians do. **Their problems come because they tend to lose and forget the gospel.** They make progress only as they continually grasp and apply the gospel in deeper ways.

The gospel shows us that our spiritual problem lies not only in failing to obey God, but also in *relying* on our obedience to make us fully acceptable to God, ourselves, and others. Every kind of character flaw comes from this natural impulse to be our own savior through our performance and achievement. On the one hand, proud and disdainful personalities come from basing your identity on your performance and thinking you are succeeding. But on the other hand, discouraged and self-loathing personalities *also* come from basing your identity on your performance and thinking you are failing.

Belief in the gospel is not just the way to enter the kingdom of God; it is the way to address every obstacle and grow in every aspect. The gospel is not just the “ABCs” but the “A-to-Z” of the Christian life. The gospel is the way that anything is renewed and transformed by Christ- whether a heart, a relationship, a church, or a community. All our problems come from a lack of orientation to the gospel. Put positively, the gospel transforms our hearts, our thinking, and our approach to absolutely everything.

The gospel of justifying faith means that while Christians are, in themselves still sinful and sinning, yet in Christ, in God’s sight, they are accepted and righteous. So we can say that *we are more wicked than we ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted in Christ than we ever dared hope- at the very same time.* This creates a radical new dynamic for personal growth. It means that the more you see your own flaws and sins, the more precious, electrifying, and amazing God’s grace appears to you. But on the other hand, the more aware you are of God’s grace and acceptance in Christ, the more able you are to drop your denials and self-defenses and admit the true dimensions and character of your sin.

This also creates a radical new dynamic for discipline and obedience. First, the knowledge of our acceptance in Christ makes it easier to admit we are flawed because we know we won’t be cast off if we confess the true depths of our sinfulness. Second, it makes the law of God a thing of beauty instead of a burden. We can use it to delight and imitate the one who has saved us rather than to get his attention or procure his favor. We now run the race “for the joy that is set before us” rather than “for the fear that comes behind us.”