

Spiritual Character

Part 010 - Living by the Gospel - Rejecting Self Reliance.



Leaders Notes

Lesson Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to help the church member see the importance of faith rooted in Christ as the means for spiritual growth.

Main Points

- The Gospel is central in personal spiritual growth
- We must reject depending on ourselves for our growth in Christ and our success in ministry.

Desired Outcomes

When the content of this lesson has been mastered, each church member should:

- Know how understanding the Gospel effects on-going Christian growth.
- Be more aware of his need for Christ and grow in humble dependence upon Him.
- Understand the difference between living by his own strength and living by faith in Christ and His accomplishments on the cross.

Introduction

Most Christians clearly understand that our justification before God is by faith alone. Last time we really delved into what that means and how we do nothing to earn our salvation.

But what does that doctrine mean in our lives from that point on? What should the Gospel mean to those who received it long ago? How does the Gospel effect long term Christians on a day by day basis. Does it have a day to day effect?

Many Christians are confused on these points.

Many consider concepts related to salvation such as justification by faith to be of little value once one has been a Christian for many years.

They may even be tempted to replace these very important teachings in ways that exalt rule keeping and self-reliance.

We are going to go deeper into that this week.

In this lesson, we will explore how the Gospel impacts even a mature Christian while looking at the biblical warnings against replacing the Gospel with anything else.

I. DISTRACTIONS FROM THE GOSPEL

One of the earliest epistles that Paul wrote was to the churches he planted on his first missionary journey in the region of Galatia.

That's an important point. A church founded on your very first missionary trip - that one means a lot to you. You care about it a great deal.

It's a wonderful letter - because it's just so angry. It makes Paul very blunt and to the point. He's so angry because in their misunderstanding, they've totally missed the whole point of what the Gospel is.

These Christians were confused about how they were justified before God, as well as about how they grew as Christians, also known as sanctification.

In addition, they had lost their sense of joy in Christ.

(GAL 4:15)

What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.

Now for Paul to say “I testify to you that” with something that harsh - that means’ he’s certain that would be the case. That’s how frustrated these guys were that they’d lost heir blessedness - lost their joy.

They were attacking one another.

(GAL 5:15).

But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

This isn’t a stand alone statement - this a response to what he’s heard has been going on. They were bickering, bringing each other down - probably as a result of their lost joy. Certainly Paul was sad about the condition of these newly planted churches. Paul opened his letter to them with a strong rebuke for what had happened.

He says:

(GAL 1:6-7)

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

Later, Paul wonders if he wasted his time on them.

(GAL 4:11)

I am afraid I may have laboured over you in vain

In Paul’s frustration, he even calls the Galatians “foolish”

(GAL. 3:1,3)

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.

Paul understood that the Galatians had stopped living in dependence on Christ. He says that they had become “bewitched”

This word expresses the idea of “being fascinated” with something. They had been led to believe that they were justified by observing the law. They had turned the Christian life into a stage performance rather than a living dependence on Christ (Gal 4:10-11).

It’s not that someone had put a spell on them - that’s not the “bewitched” Paul is using, but that they were totally obsessed with the law.

They had begun to seek God’s favour through obedience to the law and not through the Gospel. In doing so, they were cutting themselves off from their true source of strength. They had been drawn away from Christ.

This is the reason Paul rebuked the Galatian Christians. They were confused about how growth took place in their lives. They became “bewitched” by the rules and rituals of a religious life and their focus came off Christ and onto themselves.

They had turned to attaining justification through good works, which is really self-reliance, and thus they did not understand their ongoing need for Christ.

And in doing so - they had devalued the cross.

QUESTIONS

- **HOW HAD THE GALATIAN BELIEVERS FALLEN AWAY FROM THE GOSPEL?**
- **HAVE YOU EVER LOST YOUR SENSE OF JOY IN CHRIST? IF SO, WHY?**
- **HAVE YOU EVER STARTED TO PUT THE FOCUS ON THE LAW AND THE RULES RATHER THAN CHRIST?**

II. THE DANGERS OF SELF RELIANCE

Like the Galatians, we can be drawn away from Christ and the cross. It can happen so very easily. Our lives often reflect a lack of dependence on Christ coupled with an underestimation of the power of sin.

For example, we may turn the Christian life into a performance. We attend all the prescribed weekly church services and outwardly, everything looks good, at least in the eyes of others. But even as we participate in these activities, we can become bored with the preaching of God's Word and our worship can become mere lip service.

Inside, there is little faith and love for God, but what is really alarming is that we hardly notice this change taking place within us.

This is the subtle and fatal danger that Paul was directly confronting in Galatians 3. It is deadly, because our life becomes a surface Christianity in which we are concerned only about appearances while we are dying inside.

It is like a man who has cancer but does not know it, and the cancer cells are spreading and killing everything that they come in contact with. One day he starts to feel bad and he goes to the doctor only to find out that it is too late.

I know that is a harsh analogy - but that's how serious it can be. We can be slowly killing ourselves and not notice. And more than physically; but spiritually - which lasts longer.

Look, Paul said this - (this is the King James Version)

GAL 5:4

Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.

You don't want Christ to be of no effect to you. You don't want to be fallen from grace. Paul is using very serious terms here that there's no covering over.

That's a situation far more dangerous than any cancer or any illness because it can damage your eternity. That's serious danger.

Another example is wrongly thinking that we can handle sin in our own strength.

For example, a man may think that he can entertain lustful desires in his heart. "After all," he tells himself, "desires do not dictate behaviour." He convinces himself that lust is a minor offence that he can afford... unlike adultery, a sin he would never commit.

He believes that he has mastered the sin within him, but the reality is that entertaining a sin, any sin, separates him from closeness with God.

IN MATTHEW 5:28, JESUS CLEARLY STATES,

"But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Like cancer, sin is a deadly disease. We should not be foolish and think that we can ignore this disease or overcome it through self-effort or by outward conformity to the commandments we find in the Bible. If we continue to rely upon these weak means to overcome sin, it will kill us.

III. THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL IN PERSONAL SPIRITUAL GROWTH

It is through our failure to live the Christian life in our own strength that we discover our weakness and the importance of walking by faith in Christ.

Several times in Galatians 3:2-5, Paul uses the preposition "by" to express the means through which something is obtained.

GALATIANS 3:2-5

Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith

First, he refers to the beginning of the Christian life and the promise of the Holy Spirit, and he asks, "Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?" (Gal 3:2). In other words, how did we receive the Spirit? How did our Christian lives begin? According to Paul, it was "by faith" in the Gospel. That's what we are justified by - faith.

(GAL 3:8).

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."

So our Christian walk begins with faith - pure and simple. We don't receive by works, but by faith - every Christian life starts in the same way.

He then moves on to how the Christian grows, also referred to as the doctrine of "sanctification." He asks,

(GAL 3:3)

"After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"

In other words, if we could not begin the work ourselves but had to believe God and trust in the work of His Spirit, why do we think that we can now perfect the work by our own effort? Then he asks a final, very poignant question.

(GAL 3:5)

"Does God give his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?"

We must think about this last question carefully, because the Bible clearly teaches that in our obedience we experience God's blessings.

Notice the contrast Paul is making. He contrasts obedience with faith as the means through which God works.

We were not saved by obedience, but by grace through faith. Furthermore, not only is faith the means through which we are justified; it is the means through which we are sanctified.

We grow through faith in the Gospel and as we accept Christ's accomplishments for us and in us through faith. In both our justification and our sanctification we are called to live by faith.

Trusting in our own resources is perhaps the best practical description of unbelief, but we are called to stop depending on our own resources and to live by faith.

And that can be really hard - because it leaves us feeling out of control - we want to be able to DO something to get by. We want to rely on ourselves because we can easily measure that. But self reliance leads to religion and leads to us stepping outside of grace.

God calls us to abandon the pursuit of self- righteousness. We do not have any righteousness but that given to us through our union with Christ.

Faith humbly admits our need and looks outside ourselves to Christ and accepts the forgiveness and perfect righteousness He has to offer.

Example:

During the Protestant Reformation, Luther and Erasmus were debating about what best portrays our salvation and our need for grace.

Erasmus admitted that sin had made man sick, but he went on to say that our need for grace is more like a young toddler who is learning to walk. A person is able to take some steps to God, but sometimes he also needs His heavenly Father to catch him and help him along.

Luther was repulsed by such a little need for grace and told Erasmus that he was most assuredly wrong.

He said that our salvation is more like a caterpillar that is completely surrounded by a ring of fire. Unless someone reaches down and rescues the caterpillar, it will certainly perish.

What a wonderful analogy. Can you imagine anything more helpless than a caterpillar in a ring of fire.

There's nothing it can do - the situation is hopeless without help.

Our need for grace in salvation is absolute. God's perfect holiness demands justice upon man who is full of sin.

We must completely abandon any hope in our own righteousness and cling to Jesus Christ or we will surely perish. God must rescue us like the caterpillar.

We KNOW that's how our *Salvation* works.

But God also calls us to this same abandonment in our *Sanctification*. We have to keep going to the truth of the Gospel and finding our righteousness in Christ if we are going to draw near to God. This isn't just for our initial conversion. We need Him and only Him each and every day. As we walk through the process of sanctification, do things change and improve? Yes - and they should. But never to the point where we can rely on ourselves rather than Him and it's such foolishness to think we ever could.

His holiness will keep exposing our sin to the core, and if we don't believe that we stand justified before God because of our faith alone in the righteousness of Christ given to us, we will be devastated with God's holiness because what does any of our effort look like in comparison to that?

And if we think that we can cure this disease of sin inside of us by our own strength, we are deceived in measuring the power of sin and the subtle, destructive effect it has on us.

Faith is the complete abandonment of our own resources, because we see our woeful weakness. As we sense our great need, faith clings to Christ and all the benefits He alone can provide for us. The more we grow in faith, the more we will seek to attach ourselves to Jesus and seek the life and power which He alone can give.

QUESTIONS:

IN WHAT WAYS DO WE OR OTHERS TRY AND ADD TO THE FINISHED WORK OF THE CROSS AFTER WE HAVE RECEIVED SALVATION?

IV. THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL IN MINISTRY

How does this apply to the way God relates to you in terms of ministry to others? Many believers live with the idea that the results of their ministry depend on our how well they perform or how much of God's favour rests on them at any given moment.

Reasons for ministry success or failure are numerous. But because of the way that God loves us and because of the nature of the Gospel, success in ministry depends more on God's power than on our performance.

As an example, let's compare two days in your life:

One Saturday you get up and go to a prayer meeting as is your custom. On the way out of the house, you have a brief but pleasant conversation with your neighbour.

You go on to have a wonderful day in which God's presence is obvious in many ways. On the way home, you have an opportunity to share the Gospel with someone, and so you share Christ and His salvation with him.

The next Saturday is quite a bit different. You wake up late, miss the prayer meeting, and speak unkindly to your neighbour on your way out.

In general, the day is filled with confusion and God does not seem to be near. You begin to feel badly about what you have done, but to your surprise, you have another opportunity to share the Gospel with someone.

The question is, would you pass by the opportunity because you feel like you are unworthy to share the Gospel with this person?

Do you think that it is possible for God to bless you on a bad day?

If not, then why not?

We often think that while we are saved by grace, we either receive or lose God's blessing based upon our performance.

That tends to be our go-to thinking - our default. Even in little ways we keep reverting back to the law - back to performance.

But we must understand that if justification by faith in Jesus Christ is the basis of our relationship with God, our worst days are never so bad that we are beyond God's grace, and our best days are never so good that we are not in need of God's grace.

Imagine how different life could be if we really and truly grasped this.

We are always in need of grace - on the best days and the worst days.

QUESTIONS:

HOW DO YOU LET YOUR WORST DAYS EFFECT YOU? WHAT DOES THAT SAY ABOUT THE WAY WE VIEW GOD'S GRACE?

V. LEARNING TO ROOT OUR FAITH IN CHRIST

God's solution to our inability to please Him in our own strength is not that we try harder. That way only leads to either frustration and despair or pride and self reliance.

His solution is that we believe more strongly the truths of the Gospel. By believing these truths, we begin to root our lives in Christ.

Often, when we face a barrier in life or some difficult responsibility, we begin to strategise and think of ways in which we can accomplish the task.

We often avoid difficult situations, because we cannot imagine how we can do something. The whole concern here is with our own ability.

What happens to us when we are surprised one day with the true sinfulness of our heart? Although we may prefer that our sin remain concealed, God is working to expose our sin.

Now and then, even we are shocked by the greatness of our sin. What do we do when this happens?

We might want to do a couple of weeks of penance. Or we might start hating ourselves because of our sinfulness. Not until we have suffered a while do we go to God and confess our sin to Him.

Do you see what is happening? We are trying to atone for our sin through suffering. This is the principle behind penance. That if we feel bad enough about it we are deserving of forgiveness.

We try to make ourselves worthy of God's forgiveness. When we do this, we are resorting to our own resources.

Example:

On August 21, 1544, Martin Luther wrote to one of his faithful and trusted friends, George Spalatin.

Spalatin had given some advice that he later came to regard as sinful. When he reached this conclusion, he was immersed in grief and guilt. He was convinced that he should have known better and that he, of all people, should not have made this mistake.

He could not be consoled.

When Luther learned of his condition, he wrote to offer him comfort, saying,

"... my faithful request and admonition is that you join our company and associate with us, who are real, great, and hard-boiled sinners. You must not by any means make Christ to seem paltry and trifling to us, as though He could be our Helper only when we want to be rid of imaginary, nominal, and childish sins. No! No! That would not be good for us. He must rather be a Saviour and Redeemer for real, great, grievous, and damnable transgressions and iniquities, yea, and from the greatest and most shocking sins; to be brief, from all sins added together in a grand total..."

Have we become small sinners who only need a small Saviour or are we real sinners who need a real Saviour?

Faith connects us to Jesus, and to be connected to Jesus means that we are disconnected from everything else. We cannot add to what Christ has done for us.

As one man has said, "Anything we add to Christ's work pollutes it. It becomes like the smell of a skunk at a beautiful sunset. It is a nice scene, but you just don't want to be there."

Like we said last time - Christ + Anything = Nothing.

This is especially true for those with whom we live and who see our real selves. If we try to add our righteousness to Christ's, we become self-righteous and impatient with others. If we live by our own strength, our relationships are very self-serving. We never truly change.

CONCLUSION

The Gospel must remain central in our walk with Christ. Replacing the Gospel with some other system of justification destroys the value of our salvation.

Jesus Christ's accomplishments on the cross fully benefit only those who forsake all other systems of justification and become men and women of faith rooted in Christ. Shifting our confidence from Christ's accomplishment to our own accomplishments and rule keeping, or to anything else, only produces a false righteousness.

The problem is that we too often do not sense our need.

Where there is no sense of need, there is no faith. And where there is no faith, there is no dynamic connection to Christ, and His life in us begins to evaporate.

Our growth comes as we learn how to abandon our own resources and begin to walk with a faith that is rooted in Christ.

It is then that we discover what God so wants us to see: that we need Christ far more than we imagine. It is through our need for Christ that God stimulates our faith.

On our bad days we need Him. On our good days we need Him.

Self reliance gives us a small view of sin and a small view of God - it has to, because that's the only way self reliance can work.

But a Gospel life sees both of these things properly. That's the sort of life that sees the huge, catastrophic effect of sin and the massive, powerful grace of God.

Let's not be like the Galatian church and try to do it on our own. Let's not step outside of grace, but press into that wonderful - all powerful grace of God.

QUESTIONS

- **HOW DOES THE GOSPEL APPLY TO US AS BELIEVERS?**
- **WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SELF-EFFORT AND FAITH?**
- **HOW DOES LIVING BY FAITH IMPACT OUR DAILY THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS IN LIFE?**