

FINDING THE RIVER THAT
NEVER RUNS DRY

Part 3 of 4: *FAITH – HOW TO START DRINKING THE LIVING WATER*

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Resources For Christ-Centered Discipleship

A few years ago Jerry Bridges, a major leader and author with the Navigator's ministry organization, spoke to a group of hundreds of Christians. "Imagine", he said, "drawing a time line of your life. A dot on the extreme left represents your birth; a dot on the extreme right represents your death. Picture a cross in the center. The cross symbolizes the point in time when you received Christ as your Savior. That", he said, "is the most important point on the line."

Then he said: "What one word would summarize your greatest need from the day of your birth to the moment of your conversion?" He responded, "The answer would be the gospel, the good news of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Christ. Before coming to Christ the gospel is what you needed the most." Then He asked, "What about from the time of your conversion to the end of your life? What is the thing you need most?"

He asked, "How about discipleship?" Most of his hearers agreed with that, but he went on to explain that is what he used to believe. He is now convinced that what we need most from the time of our conversion to faith in Christ until the very last breath we take is still the gospel. Not because being a disciple and a follower of Christ is not important, but because it is only by continually going back to the truths of the gospel, believing them to be true, and taking them to heart that we water the roots of spiritual growth that enable us to be true followers, disciples of Jesus.

I find that many Christians have a hard time believing that they are completely loved, accepted, and forgiven through faith in Christ. They struggle with their understanding of God's love and acceptance of them. The tendency is to base their feeling of God's love and acceptance on their perception of their own performance.

As a result, instead of resting in God's love for them they struggle to gain God's acceptance by their own works or accomplishments. When we base our feelings of acceptance on our spiritual achievements, our joyful confidence in and enjoyment of God's love and acceptance is undercut by the continual awareness of our sins and weaknesses. In our heart of hearts we know that nothing but perfection can satisfy an infinitely perfect God, and we know that we are not perfect. So, if we are going to enjoy the water in the well, if we are going to straighten up into Christ we need to get absolutely clear about the gospel and we need to learn to preach the gospel to ourselves!

Preach The Gospel To Yourself

Romans 1:7-8 To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.

Romans 1:14-17 I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. ¹⁵ That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome. ¹⁶ I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹⁷ For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith.

Romans 3: 19-24 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. ²¹ But now righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and

fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

(1.) The righteousness we need is entirely a gift of grace that comes through faith alone because of the cross of Christ. It is "imputed righteousness" (Romans 4:3-8).

(2.) Faith in the gospel sets aside the reality of our sins and our performance, and focuses what Luther called, "the wholly alien righteousness of Christ".

(3.) Faith in the gospel looks away from our imperfection--sins committed and righteous works neglected--and fixes its attention on the sinless life and saving death of Jesus.

"I am accepted"--accepted as though my life displayed the spiritual perfection of the Messiah himself - ought to be the automatic response of our hearts whenever we wake, like the compass needle that always points north. This is a response that is always relevant to our current spiritual condition. We never make such progress in sanctification that we can depend on it for acceptance. And our continuing record of sin and failure never expands beyond the limits of the love of Christ, who has covered our debts for all time, past, present.

-- Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Renewal*

"This truth of the Gospel is the principle article of all Christian doctrine... Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually." -- Martin Luther, *Preface To Galatians*

I am uncertain about the value of "Christian mantras", which attempt to build up spirituality by the repetition of phrases like the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner"). But I do think we can benefit from deeply fixing in our hearts this fourfold description of what we inherit through faith in the Messiah. At the outset of each day we should hear God saying YOU ARE ACCEPTED, because the guilt of sin is covered by the righteousness of Christ; YOU ARE FREE FROM BONDAGE TO SIN through the power of Jesus in your life; YOU ARE NOT ALONE, but accompanied by the Counselor, the Spirit of the Messiah; YOU ARE IN COMMAND, with the freedom to resist and expel the powers of darkness.

-- Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Renewal*

"The faith that ... is able to warm itself at the fire of God's love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness..."

-- R. Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*

Psalms 42:5-6a Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

Colossians 2:6-7 & 13-14 So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him,⁷ rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

John 7:37-39, Romans 1:8, 14-17

Luke 7:36-50 esp. 7:47 "He who has been forgiven little loves little."

Understand the significance of true Christianity as a “third way”

"Just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so this doctrine of justification is ever crucified between two opposite errors." -- Tertullian

Tertullian meant that there were two basic false ways of thinking, each of which "steals" the power and the distinctiveness of the gospel.

1. The "Truth over Grace" Approach. "Just repent." A very typical approach to personal change among conservative Christians can be called the "moralizing" approach.

- Basic approach according to this view is: You are doing wrong, so stop it.
- Primary focus: Behavior.
- The problem with this view is it doesn't go deep enough -- Why am I doing wrong? Why do I find I want to do the wrong things? What inordinate desires are drawing me to do so? What are the idols and false beliefs behind them?

2. The "Grace over Truth" Approach "Just rest"

- Basic approach according to this view is: You don't feel right so cheer up.
- Primary focus: Feelings.
- The problem with this view is it doesn't go deep enough - - Why don't I feel right? Why do I have such strong feelings of despair (or fear, or anger) when this or that happens? To simply tell an unhappy person (or yourself) "God loves you--rejoice!" is insufficient, because the unhappiness is coming from a belief that says, "Even if God loves you, but you don't have this, then you are still a failure."

3. The Third Way of "Grace and Truth". "Repent and Believe" (Rejoice)

- Basic approach according to this view is: Your problem is that you are looking to something besides Christ for your happiness. Repent and rejoice! This confronts a person with the real sin under the sins, and behind the bad feelings to the real solution to the deeper problem.
- Primary focus: Behavior and Feelings.

Remember the story of my experience in my first church. The turn around came when I realized I needed to repent and believe the gospel! Being hard on myself didn't work because it simply told me I could change if I really tried. The fact is I did try but even Bible memory and moral effort brought little change. Going easy on myself didn't work either. If I told myself "We're all sinners anyway. No one's perfect in this life and God loves us unconditionally so why worry about anger, discouragement, etc. What would have happened is I never would have had to recognize the idolatry in my heart that made change and growth so difficult.

The key issue in the whole struggle was repentance and faith. I had to repent of my idolatrous desire for the approval of people and believe in the amazing grace and approval of God, which is more than approval it is delight. Repentance and faith did not bring sinless perfection, but it did bring a life-changing breakthrough.

Straighten up in the presence of God

In her book *The Healing Presence* Leanne Payne develops an interesting image of repentance and faith that comes from C. S. Lewis

Spiritually and psychologically, to use C.S. Lewis' telling image of fallen man, man is "bent." The unfallen position was, as it were, a vertical one, one of standing erect, face turned upward to God in a listening speaking relationship. It was a position of receiving continually one's true identity from God. But fallen man is bent toward the creature and trapped in the continual attempt to find his identity in the created rather than in the uncreated. When I pray with someone who is seeking wholeness, one of the first things I do after invoking the Presence of the Lord is look to see in whom or in what this person is attempting to gain his or her identity. From what person or thing (money, status, professional degree, accomplishment, sexual prowess, etc.) is he or she demanding, "Tell me who I am"? We then know what the person's idol is, what "loves" need either renouncing or setting in perspective and right order.

In the absence of finding our identity in God, we fallen ones love selfishly. The drive to dominate, possess, or manipulate persons and things in order to meet our own needs taints (or replaces altogether) the healthy, satisfying relationships we are designed to have and by which we are to be nurtured. The key to healing these bent ones is simple but profound, and the same for all: It consists in renouncing and utterly forsaking the "bent" posture toward the creature, and "straightening up" into Christ (emphasis mine)

There, standing upright in the vertical position, fully focused on God, our bonds from the old bent position fall off. With ears alert to catch His every word, we are brought into the place of becoming. It is the free state of listening-obedience where we find healing, completion, and our true identity.

In this posture, our arms are stretched straight up to the Father, our palms are opened wide to receive all that is good all, in other words, that really is and therefore completes us spiritually, psychologically, and physically.

In Leanne Payne's quote there is a powerful picture of both repentance and faith.

She says: "The key to healing these bent ones is simple but profound, and the same for all: It consists in renouncing and utterly forsaking the "bent" posture toward the creature, (That's repentance) and straightening up into Christ". (That's faith).

One of the problems that people run into at this point is inadequate understanding of the gospel makes it hard to have the faith to really straighten up, with assurance, into Christ. So get clear about the gospel, preach it to yourself, and straighten up into Christ.

A sampling of gospel verses:

Romans 5:1 -2 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

2 Corinthians 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Galatians 3:26-27 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "{Abba}, Father."

Colossians 2:6-7 & 13-14 *So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, 7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. ¹³ When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.*

Hebrews 10:14 *Because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*

When we really believe the gospel it will affect not only our joy in God, enabling us to “straighten up into him”, but it also impacts our relationships with people.

If someone picks your pocket of a hundred dollars and you have a billion in the bank it's like a prick of a finger. If you've got 200 dollars to you name and someone steals a hundred dollars it is like a knife in the heart. It's the same crime but one is felt like a prick in the finger and the other like a knife in the heart.

Now imagine two people. They are both Christians and they are both in situations where they are being criticized. As you watch and listen it is clear that one person is able to listen and sort through the criticism, think about it, and admit to what is true while kindly and patiently explaining the areas where maybe the criticism is unfair. You can tell that the criticism he's receiving is no more than a little irritation, a prick in the finger. Why? Because that person, believes in the truth of God and knows how rich he is in the Father's love because of his faith in Jesus Christ.

You see the other person faces the same kind of criticism and they are angry. They hate criticism and so they shift the blame or spiral into a sort of unhealthy self-hatred. It's clear that what they are experiencing is not a prick in the finger but rather a knife in the heart. Why? Because they do not believe the truth about God's love and the riches of grace they have in Him. There is a kind of humility that comes from believing the truth about the overflowing wealth of God's love that is ours through Jesus Christ.

When we believe in the gospel people can still hurt us but they cannot dominate us and we cannot disregard them. When we see and believe how deeply Christ loves us in spite of our many flaws and how fully he can fulfill us, we are liberated not only to get along with others but also to love them in Christ.

A popular saying is “take time to smell the roses”. What does this mean? To enjoy the rose it is necessary to focus on it and bring the rose as fully before our sense and mind as possible. To smell a rose you must get close, and you must linger. When we do so we delight in it. We love it.

This simple illustration contains profound truths. If anyone is to love God and have his or her life filled with that love, God in his glorious reality must be brought before the mind and kept there in such a way that the mind takes root and stays fixed there.

Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 323-324