

The Cross Centered Life

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"If there's anything in life that we should be passionate about, it's the gospel. And I don't mean passionate only about sharing it with others. I mean passionate about thinking about it, dwelling on it, rejoicing in it, allowing it to color the way we look at the world. Only one thing can be of first importance to each of us. And only the gospel ought to be."

C.J. Mahaney, The Cross Centered Life, pg. 20-21

Introduction

There is nothing more important in the Christian life than the Gospel. There is no truth, no symbol and no event more important than the cross. On the cross, God took on Himself the punishment rightly due for our sins. That is just a important in our lives today as it was the day we first believed. The cross is complete. There is nothing you add to it and nothing that is lacking in the work of Christ on the cross. God is infinitely pleased with you, if you trust in His Son.

"Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace, nor are your best days ever so good that you are beyond the need of it."

Jerry Bridges, Disciplines of Grace, 18

This guide will help you and your Life Group read through and discuss C.J. Mahaney's little book, *The Cross Centered Life*.

Discussion questions come in three forms.

1. Questions about the text: *What does it say?* These questions are answered by pointing to the words on paper. The answers can be found in black and white. Put your finger in the book and point to your answer when discussing this type of question.
2. Questions from the text: *What might that mean?* These questions are answered in light of the text but could go in multiple directions, but will always come from what the author wrote.
3. Questions because of the text: *What can or should be different in my life because of what we just read?* These are intentionally subjective questions and can only be answered personally. Answer them personally, from your heart.

The questions in this guide will take all three forms so that this great and yet simple little book serves to drive us to truly evaluate our hearts before God. May we be a Gospel people, a people who are cross centered, to the glory of God.

Preach the Gospel

Understanding Gospel Basics

The message of the Gospel *is* the story of God's glory. It is the unfolding drama of the Creator rescuing His fallen creation. The physical world becomes the backdrop for the theater of God's redemptive work to be most gloriously displayed. As we consider the essential declarative truths of God's Gospel, see it through the lens of the greatest story ever told, the story that makes sense of all of human history and every human life. The Gospel is a rescue drama, and those who have been rescued are the greatest storytellers.

As we identify these elements in the Gospel story that are essential to embrace, please don't see these as merely a formula of five points to cover, rather understand them as the Gospel plotline that with any one of them left out tells a story other than the Biblical story of Redemption.

God: before the beginning

Before the world began or was even a thought, God was. He did not begin with creation nor does He exist in creation. We say that He is transcendent or separate from His creation and completely satisfied in Himself. He lacks nothing in His holy perfection, and is the only one worthy object of worship. He is not a distant Creator, but everywhere present in His creation. He exists for Himself and His own glory. We believe in the eternal Godhead, one God existing in three persons, each fully God. He is completely satisfied in the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit. He is Love, and desires communion with those He created. God is truth, the revelation of truth, and the great communicator of truth to the world. This one true God is the standard for every Law, expecting perfect obedience, and judging rebellion. It is His one purpose to get glory for Himself through the rescue and restoration of a fallen world.

Man: in the beginning

In the Garden of Eden God created mankind, male and female, as image-bearers of the Triune Godhead. Man was created as the highpoint of all creation to rule over the creation. In man's work he reflects the creative attributes of God, able to imagine, invent, and advance the purposes of God in the world. While mankind has intrinsic value as the object of God's creative purposes, he is created to be a worshipper. This is where things go tragically wrong. Satan, a fallen angel, convinced mankind that it was better to be worshipped than to worship. Why settle for worshipping God, when you can be like Him? Why be God-centered when you can be self-centered? Through the self-glorifying choices of all of mankind's father and mother, sin entered the human race, and with sin death. This fall is complete and ultimate, it effects every human and has no escape clause. Unholy, self-

worshipping man is forever separated from holy, glory-seeking God. Sin has no human remedy, and earns only heavenly wrath. And now, sad but true, everyone rebels against his Creator, exchanges truth for lies, and desires only that which pleases his sinful flesh. It is the one purpose of man to get glory for himself, through human achievement and self-love. This stands squarely in the way of God's agenda, and the reason for which God created the world and man himself. And the sad reality is that man at his most wicked worst and man in his most noble efforts come to the same tragic end – the eternal judgment of God.

Jesus: at just the right time

God, in His unique wisdom, devised a plan that displays His glory and delivers mankind from eternal wrath. His answer – the God-Man Jesus! God the Father sent the second member of the Trinity, the Son, to earth as the only acceptable sacrifice for sin. Taking on humanity and living in perfect obedience, the man Jesus became the sin-bearer for all who believe. In the place of sinful men, who deserve the full weight of judgment for their rebellion, Jesus became the substitute consequence taker. In his life and death, he diverted the wrath of God from deserving sinners to himself, a flawless Savior. Through the life, death, burial, and miraculous resurrection of Jesus, life was made secure for those who believe. In the life of this one man, God's holy wrath is satisfied, sin is punished, and the fallen are rescued, restored to relationship with the Father, and clothed in the righteousness of Jesus with whom the Father is pleased. Not only is this the most glorious and agonizing solution to the problem of the human race, bought it is the only solution. Jesus came to save sinners!

Respond: today

No one chooses God. No act of the will or reasoning of the mind can independently decide to follow Jesus. Dead men don't walk; much less embrace their sinfulness and desperate need for a Savior. The story of the Gospel is the story of God's doing in the hearts of His children. He gives life to those He chooses. He grants faith based entirely on His own predetermined plan, not the goodness or vileness of the soul involved. We glory in an independent God, not swayed nor manipulated by the emotions of men. And in the same breath we tell men everywhere to repent. The Gospel story demands a response – declare your hopelessness, turn from your sin, and believe in Jesus! This kind of belief goes far deeper than intellectual acknowledgement of Bible facts; far deeper than a fear of hell. Biblical belief is a gracious gift of God that softens the rebel's heart, transforms from the inside out, and places ones allegiance behind the glory of God and God alone - this is saving faith, this is Biblical belief! Repentance and faith are not only the starting blocks to following Jesus; they are the daily building blocks to a life lived in the Gospel. The Spirit of God enables the child of God to respond to the Gospel, and by His grace he never stops responding.

Glory: one day

The story ends in glorious triumph. The King returns in royal splendor, His loyal followers celebrating His victory, all creation rescued – declaring the glory of God, and every enemy of the cross of Christ put down once and for all. The resurrection of Jesus three days after His crucifixion is a guarantee of the final resurrection of all people – some to eternal bliss and others to eternal punishment. All the promises of God are fulfilled in His final appearing. Every knee that previously disobeyed Him will bow, every tongue that mocked Him will declare that the story of the cross was true and Jesus is the victor! The hope of glory is for every follower of Jesus the great motivator to a life well lived. This produces the call to missional living. It is the great inheritance of a life lived in a foreign land. The Lord in His glory abiding with His people without sin, suffering, or decay forever celebrating this greatest story ever told – this is our reward!

Unless this story is our story and it rolls of our tongues and flows from our lives, Leroy Chapel will have no effect in the world we live in. To the degree we flee wrong notions of the Gospel and embrace the glorious plan of God’s glory for the nations, is the degree our lives will matter in these short days in which we live. Let us know one story and one story alone!

“When salvation is clearly seen as God’s work of sovereign grace, grace is no longer emaciated, weakened, colorless. Dwelling on divine supremacy in salvation magnifies a grace-exalting God and humbles us. Saving grace means that God is neither coerced nor constrained by our value as humans. He is not obliged to save, but still He does ... We aren’t seeking just “decisions for Jesus” but awe-inspired worshippers, people who have tasted and seen that the Lord is full of grace and who can’t hold back their joy!”

Will Metzger, Tell the Truth, pg. 151

Questions about the Gospel

How does this Gospel presentation describe God's relationship to God before He created the world? Did God have any need? Who was the recipient of God's divine love?

If God created the world out of the overflow of His goodness, rather than out of need, what does our sin say about how we view His goodness?

How do you see God's law and commands to be related to His character?

Instead of coming to punish the world for disregarding His will and His value, the second person of the eternally satisfied Trinity goes to the cross to die in our place. What debt remains to be paid for sin, that is, what sin is Jesus' death not sufficient to pay?

What kind of response to this Gospel do you need to make today? Are you finding you happiness in the happiness of God? Are you trusting Jesus as your all sufficient savior or are you solving life's troubles yourself? Have you ever trusted the death of Christ to pay for your God's dishonoring sin?

What difference does it make that God will restore all things in Jesus? What difference does it make for the injustice in the world? For the pain you suffer from your family, marriage, failed career?

What is the mission of the church in light of living between the cross and the future restoration? How, then, do we participate in the restoration of all things in Christ?

Restating the Obvious

Chapter 1

Reading The Cross Centered Life: Chapter 1

Read chapter 1 of *The Cross Centered Life* with a pen or pencil in hand. Write your thoughts, questions or responses as you go. They will be important in the discussion to follow.

Questioning The Cross Centered Life

The Message

C.J. Mahaney points out that Paul does not feel the need to offer a new truth to Timothy just before he dies, the message he had already provided would be sufficient. What does Mahaney then describe as the centerpiece of Paul's theology?

On page 11 D.A. Carson is quoted as saying that joy, ethics and doctrine all center on the cross. What else about the Christian life centers on the cross?

What difference would it make in your life if specific things, like your marriage or career, were centered on the cross?

Never Forget

Why does the author find living in his home town to be a gift from God?

What does never forgetting the past also remind him about God?

Have you forgotten that you have been cleansed from your past sins? Is the guilt of past sin still burdening you today? Or do you sometimes forget that you were a sinner and act as if the mercy of God was for yesterday instead of today? What difference would it make if you “preached” the Gospel of forgiveness to yourself more often?

We All Need This

What is the most important thing the author wants to teach his son?

How do you feel about this? Does it sound harsh to you? What are the implications of giving our children another message?

If your children are well behaved and well educated but never come to understand the bad news that they are deserving of punishment, what good is that? What difference would it make in your life and the life of others if you spoke about immoral behavior in terms of sin and forgiveness?

The Only Essential Message

Quoting Jerry Bridges, the author not only calls the cross the centerpiece of theology, ethics and joy, but it is the *only*...

If the Gospel is the only essential message in all of history, how does your story fit into the story of God's rescue and restoration of all things in Jesus? Does He serve your story or do you serve His?

What would be lost from the story of the Gospel in the world today if you were not here?

In Conclusion

The Gospel is the only essential message in all of history. It is not only the message needed for salvation, it is the overarching story under which all the rest of life fits, either in obedience or in rebellion. This is God's world and we all live in the place where God has poured out his hatred of sin on Jesus. Reestablishing this message as the most important truth in our lives should call us to respond. Will you trust in Jesus' death as the full and final payment for your sin? Will you stop trying to be your own functional savior? Will you refuse to be the hero of your own story?

What's Your Life Centered On?

Chapter 2

Reading *The Cross Centered Life: Chapter 2*

What a great question to ask, "What's Your Life Centered On?" This question, if asked honestly, can be life transforming. You *must* ask it honestly. While reading this chapter, let it read you. If there is a center of your life other than the Gospel of Jesus Christ, then take the time to root it out and talk through it with the brothers and sisters of your Life Group. As risky as this sounds, they love you and your repentance will bring glory to God and joy to your own heart.

Questioning *The Cross Centered Life*

The Matter of First Importance

When Mahaney is discussing Christian activities on page 19, to what is he setting them in opposition? What Christian/ church activities do you participate in? How much time do they take? How do they serve the Gospel?

What are you passionate about? What do you think about when you can think about whatever you want? What do you love to talk about?

How would your relationship to that thing be different if the cross were the centerpiece of your life? How can your passion serve the big picture story of God's Gospel in the world? How can it aid in the restoration of all things in Jesus?

"Only one thing can be of first importance to each of us. And only the gospel ought to be."

C.J. Mahaney, *The Cross Centered Life*, pg. 21

The New, The Better...or The Best?

What is the danger that Mahaney attaches to advertising in our culture?

How does advertising draw our hearts away from satisfaction in the Gospel? What promises of self, health or wealth are you most attached to?

How do good Christian issues draw our hearts away from satisfaction in the Gospel? Which ones draw you away?

How might you better focus on the Gospel as the center and defining point of your life? Then, with a right focus, how do you return to live with these good issues or the lures of advertising?

Our Daily Challenge

Rewrite the definitions offered of legalism, condemnation and subjectivism. Do any of these strike you right off? Are you responding viscerally? Take note for later discussion.

In Conclusion

The Gospel is the only appropriate center of our lives. It is not as if the rest of life becomes evil or unimportant. But the rest of life, marriage, children, career, leisure all change if they are aimed towards the goal of the Gospel. Honestly, some will simply need to change because we established those areas of our lives to satisfy our own prideful sense of self or because they actually distract from the work of the Gospel through us. What is your life centered on?

Breaking The Rules Of Legalism

Chapter 3

Reading The Cross Centered Life: Chapter 3

Are you a legalist? If you quickly answered “no” then please keep reading and let this chapter sink deeply into your soul. “The legalist isn’t just someone with higher standards or more rules than you.” Don’t miss the clear and careful definition of the legalism by Mahaney, it points the finger squarely at every human heart, not just those with their lists of “do’s and do not’s.” This is serious business, because what many may have praised you for and called “discipline” or “faithfulness” in your life may in fact be the very thing that is insulting the cross and practically treating the cross as insufficient. *Any* act, thought, or behavior done to seek greater acceptance by God is trusting self over the completed work of Christ. Flee legalism my friend with all you heart!

Questioning The Cross Centered Life

How does Thomas Scheiner describe legalism on p. 25? What does self have to do with legalism?

How does legalism make the death of Christ on the cross as either unnecessary or insufficient? How do your works invalidate and insult the work of the cross?

Do you know how to discern legalism in your life? Where does it creep up for you?

“Legalism claims that the death of Jesus on the cross was either unnecessary or insufficient.”

C.J. Mahaney, *The Cross Centered Life*, pg. 25

Spinning Plates ... A Spinner Names Stuart

What comparison is Mahaney making between plate spinning and the Christian life?

How does legalism make life frenetic?

What plates are you currently spinning? Why are you spinning them? Are they helping or hurting your spiritual life (not are they good or bad)? What might a “wobbling” plate mean?

How does legalism undermine your confidence in the Gospel? How does it tweak your perception of what God think about you? How has your thinking gone wrong due to a legalistic spirit?

Justified: The Finished Work ... Sanctified: The Ongoing Work ... Don't Confuse The Two

What does Mahaney say is the key to “doing the good things” without plate spinning?

What does it mean to be justified? How do you get righteous?

If you are righteous already, why do you still sin? How does your work and the power of the Gospel work together?

Describe the difference between justification and sanctification. How will a right understanding of these help defeat legalism?

The Legalist's Mistake ... Put Down Your Plates

How does the legalist confuse justification and sanctification?

How might the statement, "we're never more saved or more loved by God" change your approach to God?

What do you need to consider in your own life to battle legalism?

In Conclusion

Legalism is one of the most effective weapons of Satan to subvert your attention away from the main thing, away from the cross. My friend, you can do nothing to gain greater access, love, or approval from God than what Christ has done through the cross. Your “good things” become your god when you fail to rest in the all-sufficient, glorious work of Jesus on your behalf. The honest question is not *are* you a legalist, it is *where are* you the legalist?

Unloading Condemnation

Chapter 4

Reading The Cross Centered Life: Chapter 4

“But you don’t know what I’ve done, God could never forgive me!” So many who call themselves Christians are weighed down by the baggage of guilt and shame. Past sin, repented of, and yet tossed into the backpack of life feeling somehow that if they bear it themselves God will think them noble or really sorrow for what they did. When in fact they dishonor the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. They consider His payment for their sin incomplete and in need of help ... their help. Oh believer, unload the backpack, run to the cross and find the freedom from condemnation that only the Gospel can offer ... and comes through on!

Questioning The Cross Centered Life

Check Your Bags ... Low-Grade Guilt

What is the great baggage so many carry around? How does Mahaney say you can unload this “crippling burden?”

What is the common element in condemnation according to Mahaney on pg. 38?

Read through the questions on pg. 39 and consider which question you most identify with. Why?

“It’s impossible to resolve issues of yesterday by doing better tomorrow. Our promises of future obedience, however sincere, do not resolve condemnation for past sin.”

C.J. Mahaney, *The Cross Centered Life*, pg. 43

Do you believe you are completely free of all condemnation? Why or why not?

How is wallowing in shame for sin you've repented of stealing the glory from God and putting it on you?

An Uninvited Guest ... Our Many Sins

What most stands out in the Luke 7:36-50 event about Simon's behavior and the woman's behavior? What does Mahaney believe we are to see from this event in Scripture?

How do you distinguish between tears of condemnation and tears of joy?

What is the connection between loving much and having been forgiven much?

Lose Your Luggage ... Beating Condemnation

How will the Christian who is living the cross-centered life face his or her own sin? Do you face your sin this way?

What does your flesh want you to believe about your sin and Jesus' sacrifice? What commitments will you in the flesh want to make that aren't helpful?

What is the proof that God accepted Jesus' sacrifice for sin?

How does recognizing your own unworthiness and the depth of your sin go hand in hand with rejoicing in the cross? How will you practice these two things in your life?

In Conclusion

Condemnation cripples the believer from living a joy-filled, grace-transforming life. To not understand and embrace the full payment for sin accomplished at the cross is to reject the love of God and choose to live in the house of guilt. It's not what God wants for you! No sin you have committed, or will commit, no matter how great or small, can separate you from the love of God through Jesus. His payment is complete, so stop trying to pay some of it yourself ... you can't!

What You Feel vs. What Is Real

Chapter 5

Reading The Cross Centered Life: Chapter 5

It's so easy to go through life passively, reacting to the events of life and your interpretation of those events in a way that is based purely on how you feel. Feelings aren't evil mind you, they are a wonderful gift from God to bring your worship to sweet expression, they just aren't the final authority in your life. Mahaney encourages you to talk to yourself, be active in informing your mind of the objective truth of the Gospel so that you keep the cross central and self off the throne.

Questioning The Cross Centered Life

Describe the difference between "listening to yourself" and "talking to yourself." Where does each response take you?

Bad Advice

Where does the cross-centered life start?

Sinclair Ferguson's words on pg. 48 describe the faulty inward, subjective orientation to life. What does he mean? What is the proper perspective over this inward self-focused orientation?

"When we look inward, we live by the subjective, the temporal, the ever-changing, the unreliable, the likely-to-be-false. When we look outward, to the gospel, we live by the objective, the never changing, that which is perfectly reliable and always completely true."

C.J. Mahaney, *The Cross Centered Life*, pg. 51

The Cross Centered Life

What should have the final authority in your life? What does?

The Power Of Looking Outward

What are some characteristics of listening to yourself that you observe in Mahaney's coffee spill on the laptop episode?

What might be some of the possible sins that caused Mahaney's outburst?

How did reviewing the Gospel provide the remedy to his heart condition?

Extolling Jesus Christ

What does it mean that "the gospel exists independently of us," and that "the gospel is objective?"

Where are you listening to yourself too much? Where have you built your life on the subjective over the objective?

What needs to change in your thinking?

In Conclusion

Subjectivism is letting your circumstances and feelings have the final authority in your life and decision making process. You let your emotions speak to you and inform your attitudes and behaviors rather than speaking to your emotions, talking to yourself, taking your thoughts captive and running them to the cross. The Gospel is objective truth, it happened and it has ongoing ramifications, no matter what circumstances bring or what you feel about the truth. Let the cross be your source of confidence and stability in the midst of the uncertainties of life.

The Cross Centered Day

Chapter 6

Reading The Cross Centered Life: Chapter 6

The Gospel is practical! We can't leave the great depths of the cross behind in the category of non-applicable theology, or good only for evangelism. We must learn how to live the cross-centered life by living cross-centered days. Days filled with focus, passion, and purpose around the one thing that matters – that Jesus Christ died for you sins, and you are His! May the days God grants you be consumed in thinking and living the Gospel to the glory of God.

Questioning The Cross Centered Life

How do our habits reflect our true selves? How do our habits reveal our priorities and passions?

Preach To Yourself ... Passion In The Midst Of Drizzle

Who does Mahaney say is the audience of your sermon? What is the message?

How does Jerry Bridges explain preaching the Gospel to yourself?

“Never be content with your current grasp of the Gospel. The Gospel is life-permeating, world-altering, universe-changing truth. It has more facets than any diamond. Its depths man will never exhaust.”

C.J. Mahaney, The Cross Centered Life, pg. 67

Is this habit new to you? Do you preach to yourself regularly? How have you practiced that? Why is it important?

Drawing Near To The Sparks Of The Cross

Are these five ways to draw near to the sparks of the cross formulas for earning spiritual favor with God? How ought you approach them?

Which of the Gospel verses Mahaney cited most stood out to you?

What is the connection between the Gospel and prayer?

Share a favorite hymn or chorus. How does it direct your heart to the cross?

How does an ongoing awareness of sin keep us dependant on grace?

Never Move On

Chapter 7

Reading The Cross Centered Life: Chapter 7

We love new things. It's so easy to be excited about something for a time only to lose interest and move on to the next best thing. Unfortunately, that soon becomes the old, boring, "tried that" thing, and on and on the cycle goes. Far too many Christians have treated the Gospel this way, moving on from it for a new technique, a new book, a "sure-to-work" method. My friend, never move on from the Gospel! Fight to stay put and work out all your issues, pains, and disappointments inside the greatest gift ever given – Jesus Christ delivered up for you. This is life indeed.

Questioning The Cross Centered Life

It Really Is Enough

Why are we so prone to ask, as Mahaney points out, "But don't I need more than that?"

How do you pursue the "more" without leaving the cross (pg. 75)?

What does J. Knox Chamberlin mean when he writes, "the Spirit does not take his pupils beyond the cross, but ever more deeply into it"?

"The Gospel isn't one class among many that you'll attend during your life as a Christian – the Gospel is the whole building that all the classes take place in."

C.J. Mahaney, *The Cross Centered Life*, pg. 75

Yeah, But What About ...

Why do we tend to keep the Gospel in one category and the “practical issues” in a separate one? How do we keep these together?

What “good” subject tends to be your distraction from keeping the Gospel the main thing?

How can prayer so easily slide away from the cross and into a man-centeredness?

What do you do in your personal pursuit of holiness that needs to change because its not rooted in Gospel thinking?

How does the Gospel guide us in relationships and a real loving pursuit of others?

*“What I hope you see is that the cross centered life isn’t just one option among many that God offers. It is **the** life that every Christian is called to.”*

C.J. Mahaney, *The Cross Centered Life*, pg. 82

When You Suffer ... Better Than I Deserve ... Only Yesterday

How do you prepare theologically for suffering?

What does the Gospel offer to the one who is suffering?

How are you “better than you deserve?”

Jerry Bridges says, “everyday of our Christian experience should be a day of relating to God on the basis of His grace alone.” Where does this truth need to be reflected more evidently in your life? What needs to change for you?

In Conclusion

Is the Gospel your greatest delight? Do you find all your thinking within the classroom of the cross? Do the priorities of your life demonstrate a value on the completed work of Christ above all other things? Don't move on, don't run away ... Endure to the end with the joy that *only* the Gospel offers. You will suffer, but you'll never be disappointed.