

## A GOSPEL-SHAPED LIFE

*“Taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central [part of you] either into a heavenly creature or into a bellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. . . . Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.”* (C.S. Lewis)

### I. THE GOAL OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

- A. Become a Better Person
- B. Believe the Right Things
- C. Live Out others’ Expectations
- D. Gain a Moral Understanding/Education
- E. Have a Good and Fruitful Life

Almost all of us are this way functionally even if not by direct belief. If these are the “goals” of Christianity, then how do I grow or change? How do I better relate to God? My goal is to please God. The only way is to take a good hard look at myself, analyze problems and sins (which are almost always external behaviors) and work hard to change those issues. Let’s take some examples:

- |                                  |                                   |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| -Angry Outbursts                 | -Overworking                      |
| -Telling Lies                    | -Speak when I should be listening |
| -Envious of or stingy with money | -Discontent with being single     |
| -Gluttony                        | -Pornography                      |
| -Anxious and Controlling         | -Defending myself                 |

Of course we would want to conceal these things from any other Christians because if I am doing these things, I am a complete failure at the entire purpose and goal of the Xian life. So, I resolve/endeavor to work hard in isolation to “fix” these issues. This will usually involve Bible study and prayer but mainly just “trying hard.” Depending on the person and the circumstances, there will be varying degrees of success and failure with the resulting emotions of pride in success and despair in failure. Usually though a cycle begins of trying hard, succeeding for a time, losing willpower, failing, then starting over again. This is how you get a church characterized by what Richard Lovelace calls a *dead goodness*, full of nice people who try hard but are not seeing the power of God at work in their midst. Why is this?

### II. A PROFOUND UNDERSTANDING OF MY SIN

It happens because we do not really understand sin, its depth, and certainly not its solution. “A church with a weak understanding of sin will inevitably be a place where the flesh is alive and spiritual vitality is dampened (Richard Lovelace).” In the model above, I am central; I am making myself the point of the Christian life; I am making myself central even to my growth. All these things seem like good ideas, i.e. to roll up our sleeves and get to work. But remember what Paul said: *“These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Colossians 2.23).”* We are ever the individualists and the bootstrap theologians who believe that we have it within our power to do anything, but listen to the words of John Flavel: *“We are more able to stop the sun in its course or make rivers run uphill as by our own skill and power to rule and order our hearts.”*

## A. The Real Goal of the Christian Life

**WSC:** What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever (I Cor. 10.31, Romans 11.36, Matthew 22.37). The point of the Christian life is to know, love, enjoy, and glorify God. This changes things significantly because if this is the goal of all the world then sin is something deeper, it has something to do with God; it means something is broken as we relate to Him. Suddenly I'm not at the center anymore; God is. Now instead of just looking at external behavior or outward emotions we can ask what is driving them.

"The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks (Luke 6:45)."

"We sin because we believe the lie that we are better off without God, that His rule is oppressive, that we will be free without Him, that sin offers more than God (Tim Chester)." **Back to our list of sins.** Before, we were merely skimming grime from the top of the polluted stream, and all the skimming day in and day out would never make the stream clean but it would exhaust us. Now we can go to the source, the place from which the pollution is coming.

See how all this relates fundamentally to our relationship with God? Psychologists will tell you that the most dysfunctional relationships are those that have no certainty, no foundation, no root, so that there is always uncertainty surrounding where you stand. Love is given and withdrawn, affection is present then absent, approval comes with goodness and retreats with immorality. How much more is this true of us in our relationship to God? If we believe that He is constantly giving then withholding approval, it will lead to all sorts of distortion. We need the Gospel everyday and for everything! (Gal. 2.14)

## B. The Gospel in the Christian Life

"Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? (Lloyd Jones)." Speak the truth to yourself over and above the lies about God. We are bombarded from the moment we wake up with desire, hope, commercial, distraction, etc. so we have to talk above the noise. The Gospel preaching always starts with Jesus—He is my hope, my desire, my satisfaction, my joy, my purpose, my Savior and in Him there is no condemnation (Rom. 8.1). **Gospel is liberation!** One big problem we have in walking with God and relating to Him is that put the imitation of Christ before our union with Christ.

"Holiness is nothing but the implanting, writing, and realizing of the Gospel in our souls (John Owen)." **Two Examples: Eph. 5.22-32 and II Cor. 8.9.** Illust → Odysseus vs. Jason

Run John, and work, the law commands, Yet finds me neither feet nor hands;  
But sweeter news the Gospel brings, It bids me fly and gives me wings. (John Berridge)

## III. PATTERNS OF GRACE FOR GROWTH

Only after all this do we actually have a foundation on which to pursue spiritual disciplines. I am calling them patterns of Grace both because they are based on and inherently about grace and because the term 'discipline' tends to conjure up unnecessarily negative language for many people. Every pattern of grace in our lives should come down to what we said above about preaching the Gospel to ourselves and apprehending Jesus by faith whether Scripture, prayer, fasting, worship, etc. But we do have to "make space" for this because as John Stott said, "*Holiness is not a condition into which we drift.*"

Much of this is a result of technology today. Of course this is a good gift but in many ways it has subverted the natural rhythms of life. It has promised us salvation in many ways, that it would free us and connect us across the globe, that it would give us convenience beyond measure, efficiency and productivity unimagined. But for all its good, I think it has also blurred all the normal boundaries in life because technology is with us everywhere. It's possible to have 1000 friends on FB and still be lonely. Many times I can be watching TV, on the computer, using my smart-phone, and talking to my wife all at the same time! The more disconnected we become from God and others, the more we need to fill that void. That's why it's important to have purpose about our patterns.

The problem is that spiritual disciplines can easily become the end and not the means. This happens when the disciplines become cross-less rituals and routines rather than cross-centered resources for renewal. Too often I settle for going through the motions of Bible reading or prayer, making them merely empty activities on my daily agenda. Or I turn the disciplines into idols, functional "saviors" that I depend on more than Jesus, somehow believing they will sanctify me apart from the gospel. As we practice these disciplines we must keep in mind that "In themselves they do not make you holy; they draw you into fellowship with Christ, the True Vine, who makes you holy as you abide in him." (Jimmy Davis, *The Cruciform Life*)

"I don't practice these disciplines to get God to love me, but to hear him say it."

"We are not to practice Bible reading, fasting, solitude, prayer, and other disciplines to make God happy with us but to make space to hear how happy God is with us because of Jesus. When I have a quiet time in order to get God to love me, I am a legalist who "slaves away" to earn the favor of God, not a loved son who enjoys fellowship with his Father... The purpose of spiritual disciplines is to make room in my life to "repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15), to forsake my broken cisterns and drink again from "the fountain of living waters" (Jeremiah 2:13)." (Jimmy Davis).

Starting at 4 wrong places with the Bible—these really apply to every pattern: prayer, fasting, and worship.

1. We read it to give to God rather than to get from God.
2. We read it to learn truth rather than love truth, (Bible and phone book are both true) The Spirit makes it alive and beautiful. Paul says that "Love *rejoices* with the truth (I Cor. 13.6)." The are "perishing because they refused to *love the truth*. (II Thess. 2.10)."
3. We begin as the master of the text rather than its recipient. What we need is to hear a Word from God, not analyze a text, not build a system of doctrine, not prove our already ingrained assumptions, not recall facts but to hear a living, active, breathing, Word from the God of the universe that will stick inside your mind and heart and shape your hour, day, and life. The Word of God is bread, it is water, it is precious jewels, it is living water b/c it points to and testifies about the One who is living water.
4. We begin by trying to find ourselves in the text rather than Jesus. This is instinctively wrong because Jesus tells us that every single part of the Bible is about Him: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me yet you refuse to come to me that you might have life (John 5.39-40)."

In every part of this we are seeking to not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12.1-2) and that always comes not through legalism but through believing the Gospel of Jesus by faith.