

The Gospel as Gift-Righteousness

READING 02 • J. D. Greear

Abridged from *Gospel: Rediscovering the Power That Makes Christianity Revolutionary*, chapters 3–5.

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How does God feel about you, right now? And how do you determine that? Do you base your answer on what kind of week you've had? How consistent your quiet times have been? Whether you've been nice to your children? For many years qualifications like these drove my response.

If I hadn't done a good job at being a real Christian, I felt pretty distant from God. If I'd fallen to some temptations, been a jerk to my wife, dodged some easy opportunities to share Christ, was stingy with my money, forgotten to recycle, kicked the dog, etc... . well, on those weeks I felt like God wanted nothing to do with me. When I came to church, I had no desire to lift my soul up to God. I was pretty sure He didn't want to see me either. I could feel His displeasure—His lack of approval.

That's because I didn't really understand the gospel. Or, at least I had forgotten it.

The gospel: righteousness received as a gift

The gospel is that Christ has suffered the full wrath of God for my sin. Jesus Christ traded places with me, living the perfect life I should have lived, and dying the death I had been condemned to die. Second Corinthians 5:21 says that He actually became my sin so that I could literally become His righteousness. Saint Athanasius called this “the great exchange.” He took my record, died for it, and offers me His perfect record in return. He took my shameful nakedness to clothe me with His righteousness. When I receive that grace in repentance and faith, full acceptance becomes mine. He lived in my place, and died in my place, and then offered to me a gift.

Theologians call that “gift-righteousness.”

That means that God could not love me any more than He does right now, because God could not love and accept Christ any more than He does, and God sees me in Christ. God's righteousness has been given to me as a gift. He now sees me according to how Christ has lived, not on the basis of what kind of week I've had.

Christ's salvation is 100 percent complete, and 100 percent the possession of those who have received it in repentance and faith. That's what we confess in the first part of The Gospel Prayer:

“In Christ, there is nothing I can do that would make You love me more, and nothing I have done that makes You love me less.”

Just let that sink in for a moment. Right now, if you are in Christ, when God looks at you—regardless of your situation—He sees the righteousness of Christ. If we really believed that—not only with our heads but also with our hearts—it would change everything in our lives.

Christ's obedience is so spectacular there is nothing we could do to add to it; His death so final that nothing could take away from it.

Scripture says that we are not to come into the presence of God timidly or apprehensively but with "boldness" (Heb. 4:16 hcsb). The boldness that comes from knowing that God sees us according to the accomplishments of Christ.

For most of us, that is completely counterintuitive. Martin Luther said that our hearts are hardwired for "works-righteousness"—that is, the idea that what we do determines how God feels about us. Unless we are actively preaching the gospel to ourselves daily, we fall back into "works-righteousness."

Living from the Father's verdict

Do you know who loves to push us to evaluate ourselves according to how well we've done? Our enemy, Satan. Satan, believe it or not, loves to convict us of our sins. That's one of his names—the "accuser of our brethren" (Rev. 12:10 nkjv). One of Satan's most effective weapons, I believe, is making us forget the identity the Father has declared over us in Christ and basing our sense of approval on how well we've done.

You can actually see that played out in the life of Jesus. When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he tried to redirect Jesus' attention from the Father's declaration on to other sources of validation (Matt. 4:1–7).

What was significant about that was the Father had just declared over Jesus in the previous chapter: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). Rather than feasting on the Father's declaration, the enemy wanted Him to look to other forms of validation for His divine Sonship. Jesus told the enemy that He did not need bread or protection to prove He was the Father's Son; the Father's declaration was sufficient.

So get this clearly: both Satan and the Holy Spirit will point out your sin. But they do so in entirely different ways and for entirely different purposes. I've heard it said like this:

Satan starts with what you did, and tears down who you are. The Holy Spirit starts with what Christ has declared over you, and helps you rebuild what you did.

Think of what Jesus said to the woman caught in the act of adultery, He said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" (John 8:11 nkjv). What is most significant about His statement is its order: promise first; command second. "Neither do I condemn you" precedes "go and sin no more." We almost always try to reverse those. We say, "If you can manage to go and sin no more, then God will accept you."

God, however, motivates us from acceptance, not toward it. Jesus' affirmation would give this woman the security that could free her from her destructive relationship with sex. Without that, she'd never truly break free. God's approval is the power that liberates us from sin, not the reward for having liberated ourselves.

Changed without a command

Hopefully you're beginning to see that dwelling on that simple truth of the gospel leads to organic, natural outgrowth. Perhaps you've already experienced how doing so has changed your life.

The Bible gives us several case studies in how this works. One of my favorites is the story of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus went from being one of the most selfish men in ancient Israel to the most generous—instantaneously, without being commanded to.

In other words, Zacchaeus' substantial wealth came from selling out his family and friends to an imperial foreign power. Zacchaeus evidently didn't care, however. He loved money. That's the only way you would ever consent to being a tax collector. Money had to be worth more to you than everything.

But then the unexpected happened. Jesus looked up into Zacchaeus's tree and said, "Zacchaeus, come down. I'm coming to your house for dinner."

What exactly was said at that dinner party we don't know, but we do know the effect it had on the Zacchaeus. He said, "I will pay back anything I've stolen four times." On top of that, he gave away 50 percent of his treasures to the poor.

He's bubbling over with giddy generosity. He's tipsy on giving. He's not giving away money because he has to—he's giving away money because he wants to.

Zacchaeus went from being a man who sold his soul to the god of money to a man who got a buzz from giving it away. What caused that change? The focus of the story is on how Jesus treated Zacchaeus, the sinner. Jesus called Zacchaeus down from the tree when everyone else shut him out.

We also know that Jesus went to eat with Zacchaeus before he repented. In that day, to share a meal with someone was a sign of acceptance, even of intimate fellowship. To eat with someone meant that you were embracing them.

But Jesus produced in Zacchaeus, in that moment, something the Jewish law had not been able to. Jesus looked at a wee little bad man in a tree—who was there because he was despised, an outcast, and rightfully so—and gave him an invitation of acceptance and intimacy.

That experience changed Zacchaeus forever. Every other religion in the world would have said to Zacchaeus, "If you change, you can find God. If you change, you can find acceptance and salvation."

But the gospel is the opposite of religion. Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Zacchaeus, salvation has come to you. You didn't go out and find salvation. It has found you."

Zacchaeus was not changed by a command of Jesus, but by an experience with Jesus.

When Zacchaeus tasted of God's grace, he was transformed from a man of greedy exploitation to one of lavish, exuberant, bubbly generosity.

Like Zacchaeus, we will not be transformed by the command of Jesus; we will be transformed by an experience with Jesus. As I'll explain in part 3, obedience to commands is an essential part of the Christian life, but the power for transformation doesn't come from them. The power for transformation comes from the gospel. We are changed not by being told what we need to do for God, but by hearing the news about what God has done for us.

Gospel change is the Spirit of God using the story of God to make the beauty of God come alive in our hearts. Having our eyes opened to see our part in that story creates in us a love for God that is strong enough to finally drive out our attraction to other idols. The gospel cures us of fear, dissatisfaction, and pride.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people... who are zealous for good works. (Titus 2:11-14) That's a pretty exhaustive list of righteous living, isn't it? "Renouncing ungodliness and worldly passions"; "living self-controlled, upright and godly lives"; "waiting" eagerly for Jesus to return... But how does Paul say we develop these things? What is it that trains us to do them? Bible memorization? Accountability partners? Being baptized in the Spirit? Radical devotion?

Not that they don't have their place, but Paul points to none of those here: It is "the grace of God," Paul says, that trains us to "renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives." Think about, Paul says, how the grace of God came into the world for you, pursuing you to the cross. The God of the universe "gave himself for us," made us His own, and will appear again to take you home with all the glory and splendor and power that brought Him out of the grave.

The gospel of God's mercy, however, creates longing for God. Because we know we are safe before Him, and we know the love He showed to us in the gospel, we long to see Him.

Threats, commands, and action steps will only change our behavior externally. Getting caught up into the story of Jesus changes our hearts.

God is better

What do you really feel like has to be present in your life for you to be happy? For life to be worth living?

Is it God? Is He what you most desire and want? Is His presence the one, indispensable thing you could not live without?

The first part of The Gospel Prayer reflects on our assurance of God's acceptance of us in Christ. The second part of the prayer moves us to reflect on how great a treasure that acceptance is. How important is God's approval in your life? It's one thing to know that God has accepted you fully in Christ; it's another thing for that to become the weightiest and most defining reality in your life.

"Your presence and approval are all I need for everlasting joy."

An idol is whatever takes the place of God in our lives. An idol is whatever we feel like we could not live without; it is what we think is an absolute necessity for life and happiness.

Idols are the things that we give the most "weight" to. They become so heavy that we can't imagine our lives without them. An idol is not necessarily a bad thing. It's usually a good thing that we've made into a god-thing that then becomes a bad thing to us.

In Exodus 20:1–5, God says that an idol is something that (a) we "bow down to," which means it commands our obedience. It is something that (b) we "serve," which means we pursue it because we feel like we couldn't live without it. As such, it controls our emotions. We are terrified at the prospect of not obtaining it. Finally, it is something we (c) love more than God. God is jealous for our love, and if possessing something brings us more joy than God does, it has become an idol. Tim Keller has said that an idol is behind our loftiest dreams, our scariest nightmares, and our most unyielding emotions.

John Calvin said that the human heart is an "idol factory," constantly latching god-like weight onto created things.

What thing have you sacrificed most for? Sacrifice and worship almost always go hand in hand. What have you worked the hardest for? To get the scholarship? To obtain the perfect body? To land the job? To be the best in your field? To get to a certain income level?

Ultimately idols leave us empty because our hearts were created for God. To use the words of the seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal, God created our hearts with a vacuum. We search for something to fulfill our deepest cravings, but nothing on earth works because the vacuum was created by the absence of God. Anything we substitute for God in that place leaves us still yearning. Or, as St. Augustine put it, "You have made us for Yourself, Lord. Our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in You."

Whatever idol you choose, the result will still be the same. Idols promise fulfillment but deliver disillusionment. And that's just the beginning.

Idolatry also produces anxiety and fear in our hearts. We live afraid, knowing that if our idol is taken from us, life will be miserable. The economy might crash again, wiping out what little is left in our retirement. We might never get married. Our business might fail. A loved one might get cancer.

First John 4:18 says that only “perfect love” casts out fear. Idols can’t love perfectly, but God can. God’s love is perfect in (a) its intensity toward us (God could not love us more than He already does); (b) its ability to satisfy us (we are created to be satisfied fully by the love of God); and (c) its control of all things in our lives (we know that the God who controls all the universe loves us and will never leave us and is controlling every molecule in the universe to work out His good and perfect plan for our lives). Resting in His perfect love drives out any fear and worry. No idol can ever give you that, because no other idol is that loving, that fulfilling, or that powerful.

Jesus is the one essential thing that we must have. He is life itself.

Jesus is better than human love. You and I have never experienced tenderness and affection like God showed to us when He took us in His arms at the cross.

Jesus is better than any earthly pleasure. God is the fountain of all pleasure. Earthly pleasures, C. S. Lewis famously said, are supposed to function like rays of the sun that direct us back to their source. As the ray warms our face, we look back up along the ray to its source. Marriage, sex, money, children, friends, good food are all shadows and reflections of true goodness. For a while, some “cloud” may obstruct a ray from hitting our face. We might remain single when we’d like to be married. We might be poor when we’d like to be rich. Death may take one of our children. The rays of the sun will at times be shielded from our eyes, but the sun itself remains.

Free to enjoy the rest

Learning to be satisfied in Jesus will free you to enjoy everything else. Being fulfilled in Christ means that you no longer depend on other things for life and happiness. That means you can enjoy them, because you are no longer enslaved by them. The prospect of losing them doesn’t terrorize you. And you can say “no” to them when they are not God’s will.

The great irony is that you can really only begin to enjoy money, romance, and sex when you don’t depend on them for life. C. S. Lewis said it like this: In life, there are first things (God) and second things (everything else). If you put first things first, you’ll also get the second things. If you put second things first, you’ll not only lose the first things but you’ll lose the second things too. When Jesus is your life, you can start to enjoy the rest of your life.

It is a revolutionary, liberating truth: in Christ, you have all you need for everlasting joy. His approval and presence are all that you need for life and happiness.