

The Missing Gospel

READING 01 • J. D. Greear

Abridged from Gospel: Rediscovering the Power That Makes Christianity Revolutionary, chapters 1–2.

Condensed participant edition: selected and abridged for length; original argument and attribution retained.

Text by J. D. Greear; original copyright and publishing rights retained.

Is the gospel really missing? If so, where did it go? Most Christians have the facts straight: Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a perfect life, died on the cross in our place, and was raised from the dead. All those who place their faith in Him will be forgiven and have everlasting life. So, the gospel is not missing.

I mentioned in the introduction that there is a difference in knowing that honey is sweet and having that sweetness burst alive in your mouth. Being able to articulate the gospel with accuracy is one thing; having its truth captivate your soul is quite another.

The gospel is not just supposed to be our ticket into heaven; it is to be an entirely new basis for how we relate to God, ourselves, and others. It is to be the source from which everything else flows.

I don't mean that we have corrupted the gospel—no, we've still got those facts right. But the goal of the gospel is not just that we pass some kind of test by accurately recounting the importance of Jesus. The goal of the gospel is to produce a type of people consumed with passion for God and love for others. We certainly don't seem to have that right.

The gospel changes what we love

How, then, do we learn to love God? That's the dilemma of the "great commandment": "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). But how can true love be commanded?

Love for God is commanded in Scripture, but the command can only truly be fulfilled as our eyes are opened to see God's beauty revealed in the gospel. The Spirit of God uses the beauty of the gospel to awaken in our hearts a desire for God. "We love Him," the apostle John would say, "because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19 NKJV). Love for God grows out of an experience of the love of God.

In the last message Jesus gave to His disciples, He told them that the way to fruitfulness and joy—the "secret" to the Christian life—was to abide in Him. They wouldn't produce "abundant fruit" by reading books, intensifying their self-discipline, memorizing Scripture, or getting in accountability groups. Those things all have their place, but real fruit comes only from one place: abiding in Jesus.

"Abiding in Jesus" may sound like spiritual mumbo jumbo to you. It always did to me. I assumed that when you were "abiding in Jesus" you'd walk around with an ethereal glow in your eye and

inexplicably wake up at 4 a.m. strumming passion tunes on the golden harp you keep beside your bed. But the word abide is much more straightforward than that. The Greek word *meno* means literally “to make your home in.” When we “make our home in” His love—feeling it, saturating ourselves with it, reflecting on it, standing in awe of it—spiritual fruit begins to spring up naturally from us like roses on a rosebush.

So if you want to see spiritual fruit in your life, don’t focus primarily on the fruits. Focus on Jesus’ acceptance of you, given to you as a gift. Focusing on spiritual fruit will usually produce only frustration and despair, not fruitfulness.

Abiding in Jesus means understanding that His acceptance of us is the same regardless of the amount of spiritual fruit we have produced. Ironically, it is only when we understand that His love is not conditioned on our spiritual fruitfulness that we gain the power to become truly fruitful. Only those who abide in Him produce much fruit. In other words, those people who get better are those who understand that God’s approval of them is not dependent on their getting better.

The gospel is not only the beginning

Paul Tripp has said that most of the strategies for Christian growth amount merely to “rose-stapling techniques.” Give away more money. Be more serious about your sin. Be more disciplined in your life. Read your Bible and have accountability partners. Go to a small group.

Spiritual disciplines have their place (we’ll get to that later). But nothing can take the place of organic change in the heart.

The gospel, however, is not just the diving board off of which we jump into the pool of Christianity; it is the pool itself. It is not only the way we begin in Christ; it is the way we grow in Christ. As Tim Keller says, the gospel is not just the ABCs of Christianity, it is the A–Z; it is not the first step in a stairway of truths, it is more like the hub of God’s wheel of truth. All other Christian virtues flow out of it.

That’s why growth in Christ is never going beyond the gospel, but going deeper into the gospel. The purest waters from the spring of life are found by digging deeper, not wider, into the gospel well.

Always “begin again” with the gospel. Abide in it; swim in it; make your home in it. See more and more of your life through it. Be absolutely convinced at every moment of every day of the goodness of God in your life. That’s the only way you’ll ever really grow.

Why religious change does not work

I walked out into our backyard one Saturday and encountered my four-year-old daughter, Kharis, pouring water from a watering can into her sandbox. When I asked what she was doing, she replied, without looking up, “Daddy, I need the sand to grow. See? There’s not much left.”

I tried to explain to her sand does not grow by watering it, because, of course, it is not alive. The only way to increase the amount of sand in the sandbox is for Daddy to pour more sand in.

That's how religion changes you. Religion pours it on. It gives you a lot of stuff "to do": Bible studies to go to; new habits to add to your life; things to say and not say, etc. That's what some have called "mechanical" change.

That's fundamentally different from how a tree grows. A tree grows and bears fruit because it is alive. Fruits spring up naturally because of the life inside. This is how the gospel changes you. Your behavior changes because you change. This is an "organic" change.

The problem with mechanical changes is that they quickly become wearisome to you. That's not to say you shouldn't ever do things when you don't want to do, just that if the extent of your Christianity is achieving the right behavioral standard, you are setting yourself up for disaster. You are laying religion onto a heart that loves other things. And, whether you ever articulate it or not, you will resent God holding you captive to do stuff you wouldn't otherwise be doing if He weren't threatening damnation.

Functional gods and functional saviors

Our original sin was idolatry. You may have a hard time seeing that. "Idolatry? I don't see them bowing down or praying to an idol." That's because we sometimes fail to grasp what worship really is. You worship whatever it is you deem most essential for life and happiness. For Adam and Eve it was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Its fruit was so important they were willing to disobey God to get it. For us, it may be money, the praise of others, a good marriage, a healthy family, achieving a certain status at work, or experiencing some sensual pleasure.

When something becomes so important to you that it drives your behavior and commands your emotions, you are worshipping it. You are willing to say "no" to God to get it.

The Hebrew word for "glory" (*kabod*) literally means "weight." To give something glory in your life (or, to worship it) is to give it so much weight that you couldn't imagine doing life without it. An idol can be almost anything—even the good gifts of God. Family, friends, dreams, even church—these are all good things, of course. But they become idols when we assign them "God-type" weight.

Whatever those things are that we feel like we can't live without and that control our behaviors are "functional gods" to us. We may not prostrate our bodies before them, but we prostrate our hearts.

The first sensation Adam and Eve had after the thrill of eating the forbidden fruit was a sense of their own nakedness. Were they naked before eating the fruit? Yes. But only after they had eaten the fruit did their nakedness bother them. What had changed?

The early church fathers (guys like Gregory of Nazianzus and Athanasius) explained that prior to their sin Adam and Eve had been "clothed" in the love and acceptance of God, so their nakedness did

not bother them. Now having stripped themselves of God's love and acceptance, they were left with a sense of exposure, fear, guilt, and shame.

Adam and Eve did essentially the same thing. They made themselves “coverings of fig leaves” and hid from God. Their clothes made them feel more acceptable.

We have all been on the same quest ever since. We try to cover the shame of our nakedness by establishing our worthiness in some way. We find something that sets us apart from others: we're smarter; we got into a certain kind of school; we have a good job and make lots of money; we're a good parent; we're more faithful in our religion than others. We'll use just about anything to establish our worth. People who aren't religious at all do this just as much as religious people. Atheists feel like they are fair-minded and good citizens. Hollywood stars pride themselves as social activists. Tony Soprano says, “I may kill lots of people... but I'm a good son.” Everybody looks for things to justify their worthiness.

The things we use to establish our worthiness, can be called “functional saviors.”

The root of outward behavior

At its root, our sins are driven by the fact that we desire something more than we desire God. Religious change targets the acts of sin without addressing the idolatry that prompted that sin in the first place. In fact, a lot of times, religion becomes simply another way to get hold of that thing we most desire.

True religion is when you serve God to get nothing else but more of God. Many people use religion as a way of getting something else from God they want—blessings, rewards, even escape from judgment. This is wearisome to us, and to God. But when God is His own reward, Christianity becomes thrilling. Sacrifice becomes joy.

The exposure of our nakedness implanted in us a deep sense of fear. We sensed that we were not acceptable as we were (which is true), so we felt driven to do something to make ourselves more acceptable to God.

But whatever we think makes us better than others, we feel proud about, and that leads us to more sin. Pride gives rise to violence, impatience, intolerance, judgmentalism, and many other vices.

While performance-based acceptance thrusts us into a cycle of pride and despair, acceptance by God's grace produces exactly the opposite fruits. The assurance of God's presence and approval takes away our sense of nakedness and our craving for their approval. We are complete in Him. We are even free to let others see our faults, because we know we already have the absolute approval of the only One whose opinion really matters anyway. We become gracious and kind toward others, because we are aware of how much we've been forgiven. We are not afraid to lose all we have, because in Him we have all that we need.

When our salvation depends upon our righteous behavior, our righteousness will be driven by a desire to elevate ourselves in the eyes of God. This is not love for God; it's self-protection.

The gospel turns religion upside down. The gospel assures us of God's acceptance, given to us as a gift earned by Christ's worthiness, not ours. In response to that gift, we are moved to obey. Love for Him grows in response to His love for us.

The gospel reawakens us to the beauty of God and overwhelms us with mercy. Our behavior changes because we change. Until that happens, all religious changes will be superficial. Even if you force yourself to act right, your heart will be going the other direction. This is the doctrine of total depravity.

The gospel reaches our deepest motivations

Let me explain how this plays out in my life. I have certain sins I struggle with, but behind those sins are some deeper sins that usually go unnoticed.

Anger. My wife pointed out that I get most angry when I either (a) feel like I'm losing an argument or (b) someone is making me look stupid. That is because, we determined, I need people to admire me, and I feel (however right or wrong) that my intelligence is a key component to gaining their respect. Behind my flashes of anger is an idolization of the admiration of others. I need the admiration of others in order to have happiness and value. The approval of others is my functional god and functional savior. God's presence and love are not sufficient for me.

My insecurity makes me fearful. It makes me be short-tempered. It makes me willing to bend the truth for personal advantage. And even if I could discipline myself not to get angry or worried or lie, I would have only covered up the real problem: I delight more in the approval of others than I do in the approval of God. I am an idolater. That is my depravity.

The "laws" of God (i.e., commands like, "J.D., don't lie, be depressed, worry, or get angry") tell me what to do, but don't really give me the power to do them—at least to obey them from the heart.

What religion is unable to do, God does for us in the gospel. The gospel shows me a God who is better than the approval of others and a God more valuable than their praise. The gospel shows me that God's presence and approval are the greatest treasure in the universe. The gospel reveals God's mercy toward me, and that makes me more merciful with others—not because I have to be so to gain God's acceptance, but because I am so overwhelmed by His mercy that I can't help but extend that to others.

We must saturate ourselves, therefore, in the truths of the gospel.