

GOSPEL DYNAMICS I: THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL

INTRODUCTION

We recognize that there are several kinds of folks sitting here—those who have already heard our Gospel presentations before because they previously went through the Counselor Training Program, those who have heard of the Gospel at Camp as campers in years past, or those who are fairly new to this discussion about the Centrality of the Gospel.

For those who have gone through CTP before, you probably thought to yourself, “I didn’t know the depth and breadth of the Gospel as I had thought.” If that was the case back then, could that not be possible right now (again)? For those who are relatively new here, if virtually all of the previous Staff members have been transformed in *their* understanding of the Gospel, and its importance in their lives, long after they became Christians, couldn’t it be possible for you to be primed now, and in the position to experience the same type of transformation in *your* life?

Why does the Apostle Paul write about the depth and breadth of the Gospel to those who already knew it, who have already been transformed by it? For Paul, the Gospel was the power for justifying sinners (once for all), *and* for helping believers from the power of sin. Although believers (and nonbelievers) continually have a problem with sin, we do not go to the Gospel as our cure. Why? Possibly because we understand it too narrowly, and as a result, apply it too briefly. All in all, in essence, we face the possibility of *missing* the Gospel—thinking that we already know it, understand it, have heard it before, and are applying it, all the while missing the Gospel, altogether.

THE JOY OF THE BELIEVER

The Apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Galatians, addresses a tremendous controversy that existed among the church in Galatia; evidently, some of the Jewish Christians (the first Christians were converted Jews) were imposing Jewish traditions (particularly, the rite of circumcision)¹ on Gentile converts, misleading the church to ‘add’ a ritual to the Gospel [that had already transformed them] as a means to salvation.

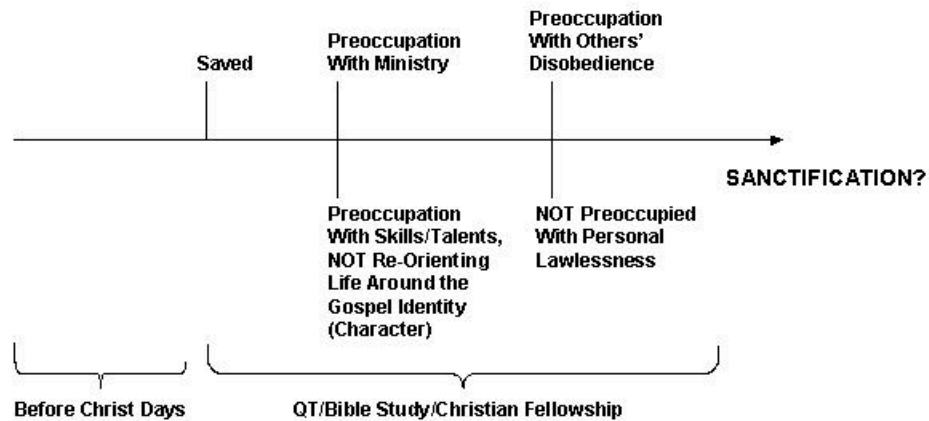
What does Paul ask? Galatians 4:8-15:

⁸Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. ⁹**But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?** ¹⁰You are observing special days and months and seasons and years...

...¹³As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the Gospel to you. ¹⁴Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. ¹⁵**What has happened to all your joy?**

As Christians, we treat the following diagram almost as a matter of fact:

¹ Circumcision, if you refer to the Gospel 3 document portion that pertains to this act, was a sign of being a part of God’s covenant; Paul was trying to convince Jewish converts that to go back to circumcision would be to deny the power of, or at the least, minimize, the work of Jesus Christ.



In fact, most of us would agree that the immediate joy of becoming believer is juxtaposed, sometimes in short time, by the pressures of our preoccupations with involvement in ministry (in the local church, in missions trips, in urban campaigns, in community service projects, in the choir or worship team, and in the daily struggle of relationships in a Christian fellowship, etc.) and the growing internal struggle we have with judging other believers (and nonbelievers). After a while, as we continue on in this struggle, we run out of motivational 'gas'; although we are Christians (meaning, we are saved), we functionally have no joy left to offer, and our hearts are hardened: to change, to the work of God in others, and to the love of our Father.

To counter our lack of joy, what do we often turn to? Exactly what the Apostle Paul addresses in the above passage: we turn back to weak and miserable principles, as a means to hide, or shelter, our feelings of guilt and shame, as a means of 'saving ourselves' [in a functional way](#). For some time, this may work for us, because it makes us feel better [about ourselves](#) if and when we are good at abusing these things to define our spiritual growth/character; what we forget is that it continues to harden our hearts against what the Lord did for us (diminishing the power of the Gospel). We begin to live as though the Christian life is about relying on *our* work, as opposed to trusting in the Spirit of God that applies the work of Christ for our assurance of grace.

After a while, our preoccupation with gifts and talents wears us out, and we become more preoccupied with the flaws of others' characters, while we continue to hide our personal flaws (deep-rooted sins, desires, inadequacies, insecurities, etc.). This disconnectedness with grace, along with a growing indignation toward others and their law-breaking: this often serves as the 'norm' for our lives as Christians ([one of the reasons why Christians are often criticized as hypocrites or as judgmental people](#)).

We must remember that, whether we feel like we are at our best, or whether we are at our worst, our assurance of grace does not come from our homemade measures of 'success' in the Christian life (which are really more a sign of spiritual immaturity rather than a sign of Christian growth).² How are our hearts softened? How do we return to the love of the Father? We must trust that God will not leave us as orphans. What does the Apostle Paul remind us? Galatians 4:4-7:

⁴But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵to redeem those under law, **that we might receive the full rights of sons.** ⁶**Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts,** the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." ⁷**So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.**

Paul calls us to remember the Gospel to heal us of our focus on works righteousness, our indignation towards others and their sinfulness, our guilt from living as though we are trapped by our desires, ultimately, ourselves.

It's not that we ignore the significance of the Gospel in our past (as an event, salvation definitely saved us); we ignore its growing significance in our lives even now (salvation, repentance, and forgiveness are all events and processes which need to take place in our lives). The implication of a smaller view of the Gospel over time is a growing immunity to the work of the Holy Spirit; this results in a loss of freedom, a loss of joy. A true son knows that God took us from eternal wrath and brought us to Himself. Therefore, we must preach this Gospel to ourselves; we must see the historical reality of the Gospel in our hearts, and set it to music. Otherwise, we will live as orphans, people who lost touch with the gentle grace of God.

Galatians 4:4-7 uses legal terminology; God calls us His sons; it is our *right*, "sonship", because Jesus paid for that right. *When you buy something on behalf another, the gift belongs to them. The cashier cannot withhold the right simply because the payment didn't come from the recipient; the purchase was made and recorded. In the same way, our salvation, and right as sons of God, was purchased for us in full by Jesus; the resurrection is our assurance (our receipt) of the purchase having been made.*

Everyday, as we get older, it is inevitable that we will see more sin in others. True maturity in the Christian life is revealed when we are able to see more sin in ourselves (which causes us to be less confident in our own abilities outside of the Gospel), and yet live more confidently because of our place in the Kingdom (as sons). Notice in this passage that the Apostle Paul doesn't say *sons and daughters*; he uses legal terminology to describe that all Christians, male or female, have rights as *sons*. This is because the daughter had very little standing in New Testament times; the son had *all* the rights, the inheritance, *and* the family glory. What Paul is trying to persuade the Christian is this: in Jesus, all of us, regardless of where we have been, who we are, how much money we make, what color we are, what type of family background we have—all of us, are *given rights as sons were given in Paul's day (that is a radical statement that the people of Paul's day would easily relate with).*

² Isn't it ironic to think that the very things that are helping you grow, and that growing Christians need in their lives, could be the very things holding you back from maturity in Christ? Inward change must happen in order for outward change to be helpful.

In order to begin to re-orient our lives around the work of Jesus for our sakes (sanctification), we need to have a severe honesty about ourselves; in other words, the way to get this power of the Gospel is to be honest about who we really are. If you go your own way, you will ultimately be surprised by your limitations, and you will lose yourself (you will die in your limitations). This will be the cause of much suffering in life. However, if you preach the Gospel to yourself, you will never be surprised by your limitations, but you will be surprised by grace, and the immensity of God's grace for you; this will bring transforming joy, a joy that changes you from someone who lives out of inadequacy to someone who lives confidently in the power of an active Spirit working in their lives. This is a life of faith.

THE GOSPEL: WHAT IT IS

It is the *substitutionary* sacrificial redemption of our sinfulness (the cause of our longings, our attachment to our desires, our propensity to 'save' ourselves, our inadequacies, our insecurities, etc.) brought about by God through Jesus Christ on the cross. The Gospel says this: Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, traded in all of His rights as God's Son (the imputation of Jesus' righteousness on His people), on the cross, for your sins (the imputation of our sins on Him). Our guilt was transferred to Him on the cross, and His righteousness was passed onto us fully; this is the theological process called *double imputation*.

This truth is the centerpiece of the Christian's new life; we live in Christ. When we err in sin, our repentance is a renewing of our covenant relationship with the Father by re-orienting our lives around Jesus' Gospel: for our forgiveness, but also for our transformation: hating our sin, when we once loved it, mourning our sin, when we once enjoyed it without restraint, and turning from our sin and its deep-rooted idolatry, when we once were slaves to it. All of Scripture is sufficient for us to clearly recognize our need for such a Savior, for the purpose of salvation unto Jesus. When we forget these truths, we resort to our own methods of 'saving' ourselves: through the pursuit of our desires (hedonism) to provide us with an earthly wealth, security, status, meaning, purpose, or through the pursuit of religious success (legalism) to provide us with status, security, meaning, purpose, etc.

Jesus took our place on the cross. Another way of saying that is this: He lived the life that we should live, and then died the death that we should die.³ This satisfied and removed God's wrath (propitiation), which we deserved since Jesus atoned for our sins.

Reflect on this passage (Ephesians 1:3-14):

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. **In love** ⁵**he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will**—⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷**In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace** ⁸**that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.** ⁹And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰to be put into effect when the times will have

³ I first heard this from Dr. Timothy Keller in 1998 (based on tapes I owned for years prior, how ironic), who, I believe, heard this from Jack Miller, during his ministerial days in Philadelphia.

reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

¹¹In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹²in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³**And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit** ¹⁴who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

The Gospel assures us that, in Christ, we are *sons* (Paul uses the word *adopted*) of God—and this is not as a result of our own merit (thus, the phrase *through Christ*); rather, it is the work of Jesus applied to us on the cross, trading in His righteousness for our sin, that redeems us. **In fact, the Holy Spirit's work is, partly, to continue to apply the work of Jesus to our lives and our hearts, which is why there is conviction of sin, and a desire to return to the Father when we do (as opposed to running away in fear of an angry God).** The result: we have new life, we have reconciliation and fellowship with our heavenly Father (we have the love of the Father in our lives and do not need to hide from Him out of guilt or shame), and we have an empowering Spirit that revives us from our spiritual deadness, empowers us for ministry, convicts us of our sin, sanctifies us in the present world through our struggles and life experiences, helps us to connect with Jesus' suffering and the Father's love, and glorifies us.

Because of Jesus' work, we receive the **embrace** of the Father (because He received God's wrath). Do you live as though you and the Father are in restored harmony and rest together? Do you live as one whom the Lord delights in (and not because of your own merit)? Most of us, although we cognitively would agree with this truth, we live functionally as one who tries to earn God's love. As a result, although we can admit to labor for Jesus, we would be hard-pressed to declare that we delight in Him. We must repent of that, since in our hard-heartedness, we failed to open up the lavish grace that God has for us. We must come to grips with God's delight in us, even when we are at our *worst* (since His love is not a result of our living up to His standards—for we know that by nature we cannot live up to them even when we are at our *best*).

When we do not trust in the work of the Spirit to apply the work of Jesus in our lives, we resort to our own methods of defining ourselves, and to our own sense of morality, to preserve our sense of self-worth. What is the Christian life? A lifestyle of repentance⁴ that calls us to see the Gospel in all aspects of our lives (all the of the areas of our lives that we see as a result of our pursuit of human methods to preserve our sense of self-worth, as opposed to trusting in what Christ has done for our personal sakes), compel us to turn to Jesus (and depend on His work), and to surrender our lives so that we can live as sons of God.

Tim Keller's **method, again, of illustrating** the Gospel: (a) Jesus lived the life that we should live; (b) Jesus died the death that we should die. **Another** of Jack Miller's ways of illustrating the Gospel: (a) we are more sinful than we could ever imagine; however, at the same time, (b) we **are more loved than we ever dared dream (in Jesus)**.

> Refer to Jack Miller's "Cross Chart" (World Harvest Mission)

⁴ We will cover this more thoroughly in Gospel Dynamics 4.

Then, here is the Christian life in line with the Gospel (maturing in the Christian life): that we get better and better at looking at our sins (confessing, repenting, putting off our sinful selves, etc.), while at the same time, looking at the Father's provision in Christ (gazing on Jesus, becoming like Him, following, putting on the clothes that are Christ).

THE GOSPEL AND OUR WORKS

If it is not because of the Gospel, then the life of service that God calls believers to obedience would become a burden. When we serve without having in mind the Gospel (our redemption from sin by God's grace through the Son), we will serve God and others to show "how great we are", to prove ourselves, to gain acceptance or approval, to preserve our self-worth, etc. Our moral goodness is used to gain God's favor (gaining merit) when the Gospel is misunderstood. **Thus, part of our repentance involves departing from our tendencies to rely on our own means to get a sense of worth for ourselves; this is at the heart of works-righteousness. When we rely on works-righteousness,** we do not rely on God's grace; character maturity and good works become the justification for our righteousness rather than a result of our transformation (we act like we deserve God's favor). We begin to convince ourselves that we are not *that* bad (that our sin isn't that bad)—that we are good enough to do good works and merit God's favor **on our own. The power of the Gospel in our lives is minimized.**

Eventually, we will lose the passion (the motivation) to serve God or others. Such performance will lead to self-righteousness before God (comparing ourselves to others), and then judgment on others who cannot perform.

Performance without the Gospel is legalism (moralism). If it isn't Gospel-love that empowers us, it is mere human self-will, self-determinism, good intentions, good actions and behavior (all coming from a heart that has not been transformed by the Gospel). When we err in the Gospel as legalists, we think that we are able on our own; we run from our need for a Savior. We do not recognize God's sovereignty and sovereign administration of grace through Jesus Christ. Our change is merely at the surface, and our deep-rooted sins are not addressed.

If the Gospel is not the source of our change, then we will be driven by feelings of guilt, or fear of not performing well, or pressures to serve well as a believer. These will lead to despair and disregard of what God has already done (what the Gospel is supposed to remind us). When we are in despair, our hearts will wander, leading to (many times) a self-centered life and to self-gratifying sins.

Why do I (we) struggle in life as a believer?

We must be convinced (broken) that **our Christian performance counts for nothing**. Even for Christians, the remaining sin in our lives (until we die) indicates that **we are unable to live the perfectly sinless life**. We still fall short of the glory of God.⁵

The Gospel is meaningful for us only to the extent that we realize and acknowledge that we are still sinful. Although we are new creations in Christ, we still sin every day in thought, word, deed, and in motives. To benefit from the Gospel every day, then, we must acknowledge that we are still sinners. Thankfully, He has performed perfectly on

⁵ Jerry Bridges, *Discipline of Grace*, p.21.

our behalf, and we gain such righteousness by placing our faith in what He has done for us in life and death (the Gospel).

THE APOSTLE PAUL'S GOSPEL AND DESIRE

Romans 1:8-15:

⁸First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. ⁹God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you ¹⁰in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. ¹¹I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—¹²that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. ¹³I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles. ¹⁴I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. ¹⁵That is why I am so eager to preach the Gospel also to you who are at Rome.

Romans 1:8-15 appears to be written to people who already have responded in faith to the Gospel—in essence, Paul was writing to Christians. What does Paul long for and pray for? What is he eager to do? He wants to meet up with the Christians in Rome, to impart a spiritual gift to make them strong. And what would be this spiritual gift that makes believers strong (and nonbelievers into believers)? It is the Gospel that will make them strong: for believers, nonbelievers, Greeks, non-Greeks, everyone. Paul continues to write for sixteen chapters on the nature of the Gospel, to grow the church in Rome prior to his going there. Why? The startling conclusion: It is possible to actually miss the Gospel after being saved (to minimize our need of it, thus, reducing its power); we need to preach the Gospel to ourselves daily.

THE POSSIBILITY OF MISSING THE GOSPEL

It is possible even for Christians to miss (or forget, or neglect) the essence of the Gospel. Is it possible, then, to preach the wrong Gospel? Certainly. In fact, whenever we miss the Gospel, what we evangelize (to ourselves, and then to those around us) is a different Gospel, altogether.

Consider Galatians 1:1-12:

¹Paul, an apostle – sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead – ²and all the brothers with me, To the churches in Galatia: ³Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. ⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different Gospel – ⁷which is really no Gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! ⁹As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! ¹⁰Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ. ¹¹I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. ¹²I did not receive it from any man,

nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

Consider also 2 Corinthians 11:1-4:

¹I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. ²I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. ³**But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.** ⁴**For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different Gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.**

Throughout the journeys of the Apostles (Acts onward), the theme of “returning to the Gospel” comes up again and again. The controversy in the ancient church, thus, remains the same as in the church today: we easily dismiss the possibility of missing the Gospel and its centrality in our lives.

WHY CHRISTIANS NEED TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THEMSELVES

Through a study I did on the book of Galatians, there are at least six reasons why we need to preach the Gospel to ourselves [daily](#):

I. Because **we can quickly desert** the Gospel of grace, Galatians 1:6-7.

⁶I am astonished that you are so **quickly deserting** the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are **turning to a different gospel**—⁷which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are **trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.**

II. Because **we can be deceived**, Galatians 2:11-14.

¹¹**When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.** ¹²Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. ¹³The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

¹⁴**When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel,** I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

III. Because **we are prone to rely on our own human effort**, Galatians 3:1-3.

¹You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. ²I would like to learn just one thing from you: **Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?** ³**Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?**

IV. Because **we can lose our joy**, Galatians 4:15.

¹⁵**What has happened to all your joy?**

V. Because **we can fall away** from the principle of grace, Galatians 5:4.

⁴You who are trying to be justified by law have been **alienated from Christ**; you have **fallen away from grace**.

VI. Because **we can begin to boast** in our works, Galatians 6:14.

¹⁴**May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ**, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

The Gospel should have a power that you did not think it had. The promises of the Gospel are as such: justification (a clean record), adoption (the full rights of sons), and the gift of the Spirit (the ability to change into Jesus' likeness, in obedience, in love, in fellowship).

REDISCOVERING THE GOSPEL PERSONALLY

To provide a personal context for growing in understanding of the Gospel, I share my [testimony](#), in brevity: I grew up in a Christian Presbyterian (although atypical, at the least) home. I took pride in knowing the Bible well, but also in exegeting it as a college student, too. I believed I was well-educated (Brandeis BA/BS and was on my way to an MLA at Harvard), well-read, and well-dressed (and each contributed to different sides of my growing self-confidence and simultaneous insecurity). I was well-respected in my local church (being groomed as a future elder), considered among the most eligible of bachelors, had lots of friends everywhere I went, made good money in respectable practices (at Dana-Farber, at an AT Kearney subsidiary-spinoff, and an IBM-endorsed private firm). I was the only layman (non-pastoral, non-seminary-educated) Director of Christian Education with 250 college students and 150 young adults (and growing at the time) under my care in a city where only the strongest survive. My Bible study class boasted over 40 people each weekend. I went to early morning prayer most Sundays. I was selected to read Scripture and provide intercessory prayer almost monthly. This was in 1998-2000. I was just beginning to live my life, from a worldly standpoint. Pretty soon, it would all [come crashing down](#).

Since 1998, I (much credit to JunKyung Fuji Kim's explicit case for the Gospel early on in [my days as part of the Genesis Staff, the pioneering ministry that started CTP](#)) experienced a process that [Fuji called](#) (with regard to his experience) as a "rediscovery of the Gospel." A number of things were pivotal to bringing that about prior to 1998: my growing inadequacy as a Bible study teacher (and the pressure to keep 40 people interested each week), my growing resentment for early morning prayer, and the amount of time I spent in church during a given week, my growing dissatisfaction towards the social community of our local church (*guilting* people into attending prayer meetings and conferences, using positions and titles to distinguish between those who were spiritually mature and those who were not, etc.),⁶ and the growing resentment of the leadership staff towards my own questioning and challenging (without reasonable answers—by the way, my explicit challenging of the leadership was driven more by sinful pride than by anything that could be considered noble, and I would not advise anyone to follow the same course of action—I only share this to illustrate the context in which I came to the Gospel, as a prideful, scared, works-oriented individual).

⁶ We used to have a running joke among my other well-respected friends, addressing one another as "Elder" in Korean, slightly mocking the criteria for being called an Elder in my parents' generation, while at the same time, desiring the same kind of distinction.

Somewhere during my study of the books of John (1997-1998) and Hebrews (1998-1999), as I struggled through each teaching, questioning myself if my lessons were really transforming those I taught (and my inevitable conclusion was “no”, as I watched *Dead Poets’ Society* 5-7 times during that period of introspection), I concluded that what was most important in a study was to emphasize the center of the text of both books: Jesus Christ, and what He came to do. [This changed my ministry, but my heart was still far from what was about to happen in the coming years.](#)

Between the years 1998-1999, I [myself](#) rediscovered the Gospel.⁷ I realized that I am a *recovering* Pharisee (although I didn’t use those words exactly back then), and that I also use my legalistic goodness to justify my hedonistic pursuits. I lived life fending for myself, disregarding the lavish grace of God through Christ, living a cultural form of Korean Christianity in present-day pluralistic Boston, as a narrow-minded, conservative believer, who spent time using status, knowledge, and success (worldly and church-wise) to ‘prove’, or justify, myself; I was running from my need for a Savior.

At this point, I emphasize (and will continue to emphasize) the writings and teachings of Dr. Timothy Keller (whose last name will bear the middle name of my first child, [and I called it first, so please honor me in that](#)), since his teachings have influenced me throughout the initial pick-axe crystallization of the Gospel in my life, and the following process of the rediscovery. [Tim Keller has had such a profound impact in my life, especially with regards to the Gospel, that we rely on much of his preaching and teaching for our own CTP Listening Requirements.](#) I knew that these *discoveries*, though not yet crystallized, were defining lessons in my spiritual life, but they were very new (and their implications were scary and challenging for a guy like me, living in a very socially legalistic community). And then I realized how foolish I was to think that these were new thoughts, as I came across Tim Keller’s article “Centrality of the Gospel” (written in 1989) on the Internet.⁸

[Bear in mind, life was not perfect once I came to the Gospel. I am still a recovering Pharisee, and also a great hedonist. Life has not gotten easier, but one thing is for sure: I am so much more confident of the truth that I cannot produce goodness on my own \(despite the fact that I love being called “good”\), and the Person and Work of Jesus Christ is larger and more central in my life: the last 5 years have been filled with suffering, anxiety, betrayal, emotional drama, confusion, depression, failure, heartbreak, over-working, fighting, discouragement, anger, pride, resentment, spiritual dryness, worldly cravings, and dissatisfaction. Life is much harder today than when I first came to the Gospel \(either when I was 9 or 24, or somewhere in between\). Nevertheless, my life and ministry today are more joyful, and my leadership more resilient and characterized by change than ever before, not because I had grown so much, but because I am more repentant today, recognize my need for Jesus’ Gospel as the motivational center of my life more than ever, and have been more compelled to die to myself than ever before.](#)

THE GALATIAN CONTROVERSY

Here is the problem in Galatians (From “The Centrality of the Gospel,” Tim Keller):

⁷ I credit partners such as Fuji, and other friends in Boston who fed my hunger for the Gospel at the time, for playing a large role in such “rediscovery”.

⁸ I first shared this document with the Genesis Staff in 1998 or 1999; it has become a staple for our ministry ever since.

In Galatians 2:14, Paul lays down a powerful principle. He deals with Peter's racial pride and cowardice by declaring that he was not living "*in line with the truth of the gospel*."⁹ Paul is correcting Peter, the leader even among Jesus' own disciples. The Gospel is not just for the nonbeliever, but for the believer.

From this we see that the Christian life is a process of renewing every dimension of our life—spiritual, psychological, corporate, social—by thinking, hoping, and living out the "lines" or ramifications of the Gospel. The Gospel is to be applied to every area of thinking, feeling, relating, working, and behaving. The implications and applications of Galatians 2:14 are vast.

In Keller's "*Centrality of the Gospel*", we are reminded of the Apostle Paul's confrontation of the Apostle Peter; he challenged that Peter had forgotten the Gospel in his dealings with Gentiles, and in his dealing with Jewish traditions as the cultural fabric of the church was beginning to change. Peter was the recognized Apostle among his peers. His relationship with Jesus was well recorded in the Gospel accounts. Paul, however, initially appears in the biblical accounts at the execution of Stephen, after Jesus' resurrection. Paul's relationship with Jesus began with an appearance of Jesus, confronting Paul (then Saul) while Paul was headed to persecute more believers. Paul, thus, was a latecomer to the Gospel. However, in this case study with the Galatians, Scripture providentially records Paul rebuking Peter for having forgotten the Gospel of Jesus.

If the above could be the case, that even Peter, the man who lived with, was taught by, and loved Jesus (John 21), the man upon whose name Jesus would build His church,⁹ the man whose ministry was chronicled for the first entire half of Luke's Book of Acts, might have missed it, or misplaced the message of Gospel from his life, then it could easily happen to any of us (this was the case for me). As a result, we are called to suspend our trust in our own knowledge and past experience of the essentials of the Christian life. We need to humble ourselves before God, and His Word, and reconsider the Gospel again, just as Peter was called to do so.

But, of course, because of the sinful pride of our self-assuming hearts, you could be thinking, "Yeah, right," and dismissing your need to look into this again. **Thus, we ask, would you be willing to suspend your assumption that you know the Gospel?** It is an audacious thing when we say that we understand the Gospel. You, after all, may be a skeptic towards anyone who says that they now have the real answer, since we have heard many claims from many leaders over the years. We have experienced enough times, both in the church as in the infomercials, sellers claiming, "What we have will change your life." You may be turned off to our claim that *we* have the true understanding of the Gospel (or that our understanding of the Gospel is more well-rounded), and *you* may judge us. (And we are not saying that we have the best understanding. We have been engaged by the Gospel in such a way that we cannot help but talk about the Gospel, to the point where it has become the core value among all core values in our ministry.) Can you suspend your judgment of us (at least for now)? Allow us to present the Gospel that has saved us all along, and is apparent in Scripture.

⁹ We will cover that statement in detail in *Gospel Dynamics* 5.

THE APOSTLE PAUL'S GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE:
THE GOSPEL AS ALL-IMPORTANT, AND THE GOSPEL MISUNDERSTOOD

Although we desire to be excited about Camp and its Program, the central focal point of our Program is not about programs, or any particular idea, or any "Christian secret" we heard from another person. (Confession: We used to be about programs, trusting in "cool" ideas, or our ability to engage with campers.) Although we hold to the doctrines of the Reformation, our focal point has not been about teaching systematic doctrines, **either**. And our current concern is not centered around "new ideas", nor "ways to keep people motivated," nor a new management ideology (**despite many of our leaders' backgrounds in Management, Business, Strategy, or Consulting**), nor new ministry restructuring, nor techniques on witnessing/evangelism, nor a better discipleship program, etc.

We hold the Gospel as utmost in importance, and we desire to talk about the Gospel and its implications: in Scripture, in life, in counsel, and in program.¹⁰ Why? The Gospel saves us from sin, drives our lives, motivates us, and transforms us from our lives of sin. The Christian life **began with** the Gospel, when you first placed your faith in Jesus, (Romans 10:9-13). The four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John contain one story of Christ, the Son of God coming to dwell with sinful people, dying for sinful people, and rising again for those who would place their faith in Him. **The Gospel, then, is a narrative, a story, that unfolds to encompass you into it; our chief objective in life is to find our story, and mesh it into the revealed, yet unfolding purpose of the Gospel of Jesus Christ into our lives.**

The Gospel saved us. Hence, every Christian knows and has experienced the Gospel. It is this knowing and experiencing the Gospel that separates a Christian and a non-Christian, a believer from a nonbeliever. What is so intriguing about that statement is that if a Christian is asked, "What separates Christians from non-Christians," for many (but not all), the Gospel message will probably not be part of the response." The response could be many and varied: prayer, church, faith, and/or lifestyle. The response to the above statement might be: "Well, we all know what the Gospel is," or, "We have the Gospel as the 'basics' of what we are talking about." In essence, the Gospel is assumed to be part of the discussion, and hence, **is often neglected**.¹¹ If every Christian knows the Gospel, why mention it, right? For now, the answer to the question of "why mention the Gospel all of the time" is answered with the following: because the Gospel is all-important. **The Gospel is my "True North"**.

After all, the Gospel was all-important to Jesus, **yet all of His disciples misunderstood for years**. Each and every time Jesus spoke about His suffering and the cross (the Gospel), the disciples misunderstood Christ's humility and suffering on behalf *human sin*, with Christ's work to serve their own personal **and** cultural glory (so that they would rise to political and military power with Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah King). We witness this in various passages throughout Scripture, where Jesus reveals His mission, and the disciples misunderstood:

³¹He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³²He spoke plainly about this, and Peter

¹⁰ This is our Core Value among core values. All of our other values stem from this.

¹¹ It's like when we share about the type of spouse we want: we merely assume, and require, that they are "Christians", but what does that really mean? What does being a Christian mean to you?

took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." ³⁴Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. **For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the Gospel will save it.**¹²

The Gospel teaches that we are in sin, in weakness, and quite unable to help ourselves—no matter how able we believe we are. Salvation is given to us through Christ—who denied Himself by taking up the cross of shame, which is our acceptance and life. The Gospel is not about self-glory, self-fulfillment, self-achievement, self-performance, but rather receiving Jesus' work **accomplished (His righteousness)** for us (so that we will worship and glory in God). The Gospel is about Christ's work for our redemption for God's glory. That is the graciousness of free grace, what the disciples were to experience; Jesus and His Gospel are what we are to place our faith in. God's grace is best embodied in the Gospel, His plan for redemption.

Jesus gave up His life for the sins of **His people**, to redeem believers. He, the greatest, the very first of the firsts, will become the last, for our sake. *This is good news for us because* this is what saves us. What is the immediate result of experiencing the Gospel? **A life once characterized by selfish pursuits and self-worth is made confident in the grace of God; as a result, we can turn our attention from deep-rooted sins, and turn to others.** The worship of God and the service of others **is the result.**

This is the fruit of the Gospel-centered life: loving God and loving others, which incidentally, are the two greatest commandments, and a sum of the 613 laws and the 10 Commandments. Matthew 22:37-40, the words of Jesus Himself, states, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."¹³ What is the fruit of the Spirit (the result of the Gospel working in your life)? Paul says it is the counter-intuitive way of the sinful nature: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23)."

Summary: **What is the life of faith?** Faith is trusting in the work of Jesus for our righteousness; it doesn't come naturally. Something has to happen in us for us to begin trusting in Christ's work. Faith is putting your life's weight and worth on this trust: that Jesus died, with absolute, eternal effect, for you. When this happens, we are able to look into our lives daily for the things that we worship apart from that which Paul says is to be central to our lives (Jesus' Person and Work); the more we center our lives around the Gospel, the more we shed ourselves of idolatry (other former, weaker "gospels" in our lives that often have presence, still). This is a lifestyle of repentance. The more we truly and deeply repent, we are restored in the Gospel back to a covenant relationship with the Father; this is called true worship in spirit and truth. We are doing what we had been created to do: bear the image of the Father, in intimacy, and live in His Son's likeness. Our daily practice and works merely point to the Gospel fulfilled already, and point continually to our greater need of Him (because we so often fail); this is what

¹² Mark 8:31-35.

¹³ In fact, the entire law, fulfilled by Christ, and now purposed for us, can be summed up with one word: LOVE.

results in consistent humble repentance, and also points us to greater, genuine love (because we were not saved out of merit any more than the next person, no matter how popular, wealthy, good-looking, intelligent, sociable, or acceptable we appear). The life of faith and service are tied intimately to the Gospel.

The Gospel and the Gospel-centered life is what Jesus desires for us: to deny our selves (our sin as well as our goodness), and to pick up our cross and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34). Jesus calls His disciples to experience and live out the Gospel. Why? Because the Gospel saves us from sin, and then sanctifies us to be like Him; no other truth in the world will change your character [like this](#).

The Gospel was important to Jesus. But the problem is that humans (in sin) think fundamentally different than the Gospel (our lives and our drives are upside-down, counter to the Gospel). So when we misunderstand the Gospel as being about us (our glory, our comfort) and our flesh, rather than who Christ is, and what He has done, we will *constantly and consistently* err in faith and life. We will miss it [again and again](#).

Though everything was a working out of the Gospel, the problem is that we have not sought to understand the Gospel more deeply, nor do we dwell in it richly. When we stop seeking to know the Gospel (and assume that we have the Gospel working in our lives), our problems of wrong thinking and wrong belief seep back into our lives (For the non-Christian, a correct understanding and belief in the Gospel will bring true redemption.).

OUR ASSUMPTIONS WHICH FEED THE "CONTROVERSY"

Having heard the term Gospel so many times by now, we do not live in the security that the Gospel brings. How do we diminish the power of the Gospel in our own lives? There are various ways in which we miss the Gospel:

- **We think that Gospel is mainly for evangelism (converting unbelievers), but not the stuff of everyday Christian discipleship (sanctifying believers).** We think that we are "saved by grace and blessed by works."¹⁴
- We profess our commitment to the Gospel, but **we then turn our Christian attention to something else.**
- **We confuse that everything that we have done in the past is the Gospel;** pride keeps us from admitting that we had not been as centered around the Gospel as we thought. **We assume that everything Christian is the Gospel.** As long as it has something to do with the church (particularly our church), it is about the Gospel.
- **We assume that every message is the Gospel.** (It is not our intent to undermine the preaching ministry of preachers, but only to point out the possibility that there can be "Christian" messages that contain little, to none, of the Gospel.)
- **We assume that everything we teach is in line with the Gospel.** Simply because it sounds good, or was useful for us in our walks, we easily assume that our subjective experience of its benefits proves that it is of the Gospel.

¹⁴ Bridges, *Growing Your Faith*.

IMPLICATIONS OF SUCH "ASSUMPTIONS": THE DANGERS

What do we teach and preach [in our ministries](#)? After hearing a sermon, consider the very bottom-line of what was taught. At the risk of oversimplification, the bottom-line of some messages are as follows: "Christians, do this; do not do this; now go, and do this. Jesus did this, so we should do this." The law that is present in the message reveals man's sinfulness, his inability to please God on his own. What is missing from such a message? A few of the things missing are the *motivation* for change (from sin), the *power* to make that change a reality in our lives. Rather, the change comes from either the guilty feeling evoked (from having the sin pointed out), or the challenge for us to try harder or be different from the world.

As aptly described by Jerry Bridges, Christians operate as though "we are saved by grace, blessed by works." The Gospel saved us, but afterwards we often place ourselves into the position to have to work real hard for spiritual blessings.

Fuji once insightfully noted in prior versions of this document, "I have heard some preachers say, 'I do preach the Gospel, but we don't need it everyday,' as if we don't need it in every message, in every devotion. 'The Gospel is surely there as a foundation, but do we need to say it every time? It is good to go back to the basics to remind ourselves, but we got to move on from spiritual milk to meat.' The issue here is that the 'Gospel is assumed as the underlying foundation and not deeply incorporated into what is *actually said*.' This is the first step of the slippery path toward forgetting, misplacing, neglecting. Assumed-and-not-said suggests that the solution, issue, how to change, etc., is *beyond* the Gospel, may not be related to the Gospel (an extreme statement), or the Gospel is not relevant at this particular moment."

Peter speaks about "forgetting" [the Gospel](#). He says it explicitly in 2 Peter. "Forgetting" is a way of not trusting the truth of the Gospel because Peter's task in his letter is to remind them, help them to remember, refresh them, etc. Consider the words of 2 Peter 1:9, 12-15:

1:9 But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and **has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sin...**
12 **So I will always remind you of these things**, even though you know them *and* are firmly established in the truth you now have. 13 **I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live** in the tent of this body, 14 **because** I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me.
15 **And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.**

When we forget the Gospel of Christ (its power and promise), we will follow cleverly invented stories (2 Peter 1:16) and spiritually fall (1:10). As Christians, we fall when we forget the grace and truth of Jesus—the Gospel. [What is grace and truth? In John 1:14 and 1:17, we have the answer: it is in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, the Gospel embodied in Jesus' perfect character and in His perfect work.](#)

Consider the words of 1 Corinthians 15 (the entire chapter):

1 Now, brothers, **I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.** 2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 3 **For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried,**

that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. ...⁵⁵ **"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"** ⁵⁶ **The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.** ⁵⁸ Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Why do we not believe? Why do we forget? Because our sinful hearts cannot (as non-Christians), and sometimes does not (as Christians) want to believe. We forget because it is not the most important thing to us. What other things become important (the Gospel ceases to become of first importance)? Here's a few: (a) Other "neat" things about the Christian life; (b) Our performance in the Christian life, and not what God has already done for us in Christ; (c) We want to disregard the Gospel because of the call of the Gospel (it scares us): it compels us to sacrifice, love, give of ourselves, etc.; (d) The desires of this life (our idols), which choke our faith (Mark 4:19).

THE SOLUTION TO THE "CONTROVERSY"

We need the Gospel everyday. Everyone needs the Gospel **all the time**. The Gospel is for both our justification and sanctification.

Here is the Gospel presented again:

- (a) Jesus lived the life that you should live,
- (b) then died the death that you should die.

Here is the Gospel presented another way:

- (1) You are more sinful than you could ever imagine,
- (2) But God's grace is greater than you could ever dream.

If you live life focused only on the top half of each statement only, (a) or (1), and forget about the second half, (b) or (2), then you will inevitably fall into despair in your sinfulness, and see how high the "standards" are that Jesus lived by. Your Christian life will resemble Jerry Bridges' *performance treadmill* in the beginning of his book *Transforming Grace*. This will wreck your view of God (God is a terrible, wrathful, angry God that may seek you out to punish you, which is why you **have** to pray, do QT, go to church, and be good), and you will fall further away from the Lord.

Similarly, if you live life focused on the bottom half of each statement only, (b) or (2), and forget about the top half, (a) or (1), then you will "take advantage" of the Gospel, and see Jesus' sacrifice as a license by which you can always sin, and "get away with it". You also will be driven, not by religion, but by your pursuits, and still fall slave to other things ruling your life: wealth, power, and sex, etc. You will eventually develop your own morals and codes to live by (your own law), and judge yourself according to your own definition of worth and acceptance.

The Gospel is not becoming more of a legalist, if you were once a hedonist, nor becoming more of a hedonist because you were a legalist. That is actually counter to the Gospel, altogether (you are merely oscillating from one side of the pendulum to the

other, and still going further away from the motivational center that makes things spiritually “still”). The Gospel is to see Jesus’ life and righteousness covering over your spiritual, moral, and worldly failures, yet paying the cost of your failure with His own death; He got everything you deserved, so that you could get everything He deserved. This is what moves us in faith; this is what melts our hearts. If you trust in this, then repentance is freeing; why? Because you can turn from your reasons for seeking after a religious or moral life (which only makes you more proud when you succeed, or resentful when you fail), or for seeking after a selfish pursuit (which only makes you more proud when you succeed, or resentful when you fail).

The Gospel is not the middle of the road of those two life-styles, nor is it the oscillation between the two lifestyles; it is an entirely third road. It is seeing Jesus’ righteousness clothing over your own failed attempts at perfection (according to however you define it), and it is the freedom of living in the Father’s embrace as a result (you have the rights as sons). This enables you to take joy in seeing that the Gospel you have cannot be taken away by anything you do, because you did nothing to receive it in the first place. This makes you humble, but joyful, and confident and bold to take bold steps to change without fear of failure. You start to question the difficult questions in your life: what is your worship? What are the motivational centers of your life? All other worldly centers force you to earn worth by working hard for them (wealth demands a cost, power demands a payment, intimacy also demands hard work, etc.); the Gospel is the only center that actually works for you because you cannot earn the approval of the Father on your own. This is the very reason why it results in joy.

“Why is the above so important? (1) Because the Gospel is not just for the non-Christian to become a Christian, but also the power for the Christian to grow in obedience and faith. (2) There is no other thing you need to do except to learn and grow in the Gospel. (3) You don’t have to search for all the “cool” spiritual things, “secrets” to spiritual mysteries, or figure out all the how-to’s of the Christian life to grow. (4) The Christian life becomes simpler, and yet more profound: a pursuit after the Gospel and doing ministry that flows from the Gospel. (5) To become like Christ is a work of the Gospel, and not your personal work. (6) If the Gospel is the solution for non-Christians *and* Christians, then when we understand the depth and breadth of the Gospel, we would be able to engage with the world of the Christian *and* the non-Christian. (7) The Gospel is so much more powerful than we had once thought...

The Gospel of Christ is both specific and broad. It is easy enough for a child to understand (and become saved), and yet deep enough to keep adults thinking of it for a lifetime. It can be captured in one verse (Rom. 1:16 “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.”). The Gospel is so big that the whole of Scripture exudes it. The Gospel is the short way of describing all of the drama of redemptive history (Genesis to Revelation).

The Gospel of Christ is everywhere in Scripture. We know that Scripture is sufficient for all of life and faith (Westminster Confession of Faith). If that is the case, then, the Gospel that is the main storyline of Scripture is sufficient for all of life and faith. How do we know this? Because, *everywhere you look in Scripture, it speaks of man’s responsibility for sin. Always. And everywhere you look, there is the sovereign provision or the promise of the provision of redemption by God (and ultimately in the Son), that is, His grace.*”

The Gospel of Christ makes sense out of the Sovereignty of God. John Calvin, the great Reformation thinker, noted that there are two truths that are always apparent in

Scripture, but it never apologizes nor feels ashamed that it does not provide an explanation for them:

- (1) Human responsibility for sin; and
- (2) God's sovereignty.

Why is this so important? Because, for many (Christians and non-Christians), the above two statements contradict one another. In fact, this problem seems to be the apparent problem for many nonbelievers. The problem is classically described as "the problem of sin". "If God is so sovereign, then why should man be held responsible for sin? God was in control of man. God should be held responsible for sin." (And we become resentful toward God.) On the other hand, "If man is responsible for sin, then God is not all sovereign." (And we question God's control.)

Scripture is never sheepish about these two realities—human responsibility for sin and God's sovereignty. Another way to put these two realities is "the total depravity of man in sin" and "God's sovereign administration of grace." Or my sin, and God's plan for redemption that was designed by His sovereign will. The [reconciliation](#) of the two seemingly opposing truths is found in the Gospel. The Gospel knows that man is sinful. Yet, the solution for *man's sin* is the Gospel, which applies God's *sovereign* administration of grace through the Son.

CONCLUSION

The Gospel is both a way, a truth, and a life. The Gospel is the truth that God saved sinful man, through Jesus for all of life. The Gospel is the way God saved sinful man through Jesus. We are to hear the gospel and experience and live it.

Notice, once again, the two main components of the Gospel is (1) our sin and (2) God's grace through Christ. Or, if you break it down into three components: (1) our sin, and (2) God's sovereign grace, (3) through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel is so much more than *simply* the four Gospel accounts in the New Testament, what we use to evangelize, the good news that nonbelievers need to believe, etc. The Gospel is deep and wide. But let us not generalize the Gospel to the point that we cannot discern it— by thinking that the "Gospel = everything we do in Church," or "Gospel = Scripture," or "Gospel = the Christian life." For some things we do in the church are not that 'Christian', nor even in line with the Gospel.

GOSPEL LESSON

Read Luke 15:1-2, 11-32.

Who was the parable intended for (15:1-2)? The parable was intended for two types of people: (1) tax collectors and sinners, and (2) Pharisees. The first type was a conventional hedonist by description; the second was a cultural/religious legalist (judging the sinner, and those who 'dined' with sinners, since to dine with someone in the ancient Middle Eastern culture was a sign of closeness or intimacy. Jesus intended for both the 'sinner' and 'saint' to hear this parable. In essence, since this was not a private teaching; the intention is for all to hear (hedonist or legalist).

The parable. A Jewish father sometimes divided up his estate among his sons (primogeniture culture), but continued to use the income from the whole estate until his

death. It was extraordinary for a son to request his share along with its income before his father's death; it was equivalent to wishing the father dead.

The younger son (15:11-16) was a hedonist. The younger son went far away from the father, squandering his wealth on prostitutes (mentioned later) and wild living. Then, a famine hits, and he began to be in need. The son lost all that he had; he placed his treasure in the things of the world, and once the famine struck, he went hungry.

The younger son's flawed view of repentance (15:17-19): to become a legalist. The younger son first came to his senses, an amazing thing: he remembers who he is, a son of a wealthy estate-owner. He decides to return to the father, saying, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." In essence, this hedonist, upon coming to the realization of who he is, figures that the only way he could return to the father would be to offer himself as a hired man, working his way back to earning a place in the father's house. Isn't this how we view our Father in heaven? We think that when we are far from the Lord, the only way we can return to the Father's favor is with our tail between our legs while we work (through good deeds, moral correction, etc.) to earn His acceptance again.

The younger son left home to find himself, only to lose himself. In his attempt to *find* himself, he had placed his search and identity in things outside the father. The only way to find your true identity is to come to your senses in the midst of your sin, and return and be with the Father. Home is a place where you belong and are accepted. The younger son sought a home where there was no home. He came to his senses and realized that. Many of us have run from home and made homes for ourselves in places where we do not belong. What's going to happen when the 'famines of life' hit your area? Keller: anxiety is an example of 'leaving home'; something unheavenly has gripped you, and worry is the tool that it uses to control you (since we look for alternative measures to calm our anxieties – we become frustrated, we take things out on others, we seek for desperate attention or help, sometimes resorting to immoral means). True repentance is the way to turn from, not just the object, but its control over your heart.

What is sin, and what are its consequences (15:13-16, 28-30)? Sin is being far from the Father. Sin is finding a home in places where we do not belong. The consequences are 'lostness', being in a foreign place where we were not intended to be, alienation, a sense of inadequacy when the famine hits, feeling low and unclean (as with the feeding of the pigs).

How can we imagine/see the grace of the father (15:20-24) as the son returns (the 'run' to the son, for example)? The head of a family normally lived in the center of the village, rather than on the edge. Therefore, such a father could have seen his son a long way off only if he had intentionally been waiting on top of his roof, or waiting by the gate everyday and night. This was unheard of, since it was an undignified act for a father toward his children (very humiliating). Furthermore, the run, in itself, was also an undignified act by the father, especially in greeting someone; important people with the upper hand always walked, or waited. Can you imagine the reactions of those who were listening to this parable? What an invitation to the hedonist – that the Father proactively waits for the return of His children in greater lengths than the father represented in this parable.

The son, upon his return, begins his practiced speech to the father. In 15:21, he begins, "Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." However, the father does not even allow his son to continue with his

proposition. The father responds, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found (15:22-24). The father embraces the son, intimately, as if the son had done something good, and celebrates the return of the son. Again, what an invitation the hedonist! Our Father in heaven is so much more willing to embrace, and is proactive to bring about our redemption; even greater than the man in this parable, our Father is not waiting by the gate, tapping His feet, with a frown on his brow, awaiting our return, ready to exact punishment and prepared to throw us into indentured servitude. Our Father is ready to embrace us with loyalty and celebration.

Who pays the cost of the younger son's sin? Everything that the father had remaining in his estate technically belonged now to whom? Whose robe was placed on the younger son? Whose ring? Whose sandals? Whose calf? Whose money paid for the feast and celebration? The remainder of the estate belonged to the elder son; at the cost of the elder son, the younger son was able to find joy in the house again as an acceptable member.

However, in this parable, the elder son was not a very loving son; in fact, the elder son (15:25-30) was a legalist. He was resentful of his younger brother, and more significantly, was angry towards the father. He lost any joy, as he worked the field for his father. He lived at home all his life, but never heard the music of the father's love. When the celebration took place, he refused to go in. In fact, as his father pleaded with him, the son's response was, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you will the fattened calf for him!" In other words, the elder son felt as if he deserved the father's love. He had lived at home, and never disobeyed his father (never left home), yet he was still far from his father's heart; although he always had his father's love, he was determined to work to earn his father's acceptance. In some ways, it is even more difficult for the legalist to return to the Father's house because the legalist never left home; he feels deserving, and he makes assumptions about himself; especially when comparing himself to the hedonist.

How is this text an invitation to both the 'sinner' and 'saint'? The father's invitation to the saint is obvious, "Come inside." He desires his son to share in the celebration, to feel the joy of the music of salvation. The sinner need not fear returning to the Father's house; what is awaiting is joy and celebration, true acceptance (everything that he was looking for when he was far away from the heart of the Father). The legalist need not work for the acceptance of the Father; all that the Father has also belongs to the son. What an invitation to both types of people!

How does Jesus Christ pay our cost as our true Elder Brother, with an invitation from the Father? The true Elder Son, Jesus Christ, didn't just sacrifice a robe, ring, and sandals unwillingly. Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 shed light on His willingness and joy in seeing His brothers returning to the Father. He sacrificed all royalty (Philippians 2) and power and authority and riches, humbling Himself even to death on a cross. The incarnation shows us Jesus' humanity, but also reveals His emptying Himself of all that He had in heaven; on the cross, thus, Jesus was stripped naked. On the cross, Jesus became the sacrifice, paying the ultimate price for our sin. On the cross, our guilt was transferred to Him, and His righteousness was transferred to us (2 Corinthians 5:21). This is the Gospel. When we trust in the Gospel, we wouldn't have to leave the Father; we would trust (this is faith) that everything we need (security, acceptance, riches, love, joy, etc.) is found in

Jesus; we would desire to die to our sin, and give up our hope in finding ourselves in the things of the world. Similarly, we would relinquish our goodness as well, since our goodness is just another way of working to earn acceptance from the Father without seeing His embrace. Jesus was disowned on the cross so that we could be owned by God. We are His people, His sons, His belongings. No matter what. You don't have to compare yourself with others, show your frustration towards others, nor be angry at God because you are already acceptable to the Father; He loves you with an everlasting love.

INWARD APPLICATION OF THE GOSPEL LESSON

- (1) How do/have you often "miss" the truths of the Gospel in your Christian life?
- (2) How can we trust that we are invited to the Father's banquet, to restored joy? What does the Gospel do for you today? When is it most critical in your personal life, to preach the Gospel to yourself?
- (3) Memorize Galatians 4:4-7.

OUTWARD APPLICATION

- (1) Complete the "Orphans / Children of God" chart (Gospel Reflection I, CTP 1). Use this as something to remind yourself of daily. Pray through this chart. When you pray, remember to address God as "Father".
- (2) Select a prayer partner that you can trust, confide in, for regular conversation and prayer. Make sure that this person is someone you can share deeply with about what you will be reflecting about throughout CTP. This person's sole goal will be to hear you and pray on your behalf, to support your growth this summer.
- (3) Prior to the next Gospel Dynamics session: The "Tongue" Assignment. For one entire week, do not do the following:

DO NOT **COMPLAIN** ABOUT ANYTHING (GIVE THANKS TO GOD).
DO NOT **BOAST** ABOUT ANYTHING (BOAST IN CHRIST'S WORK).
DO NOT **CRITICIZE** ANYONE/ ANYTHING (COMMEND OTHERS).
DO NOT **DEFEND YOURSELF** (APOLOGIZE QUICKLY).
DO NOT **MAKE EXCUSES** (CONFESS QUICKLY).
DO NOT **GOSSIP** (SPEAK DIRECTLY TO PEOPLE).
DO NOT **LIE** (TELL THE TRUTH).

The goal of the tongue control assignment is to help you discover and use the language of Sons – to let Christ's love control your tongue by faith (Galatians 5:6b). This assignment is a practical way of showing you how you always need to return to Christ. It won't take too long to see how much you need Christ: the blood of Christ, the teaching of Scripture. This assignment will also be very humbling to you, which is one of the first steps in helping others. You cannot minister to someone, nor restore a brother or sister if you think that you are not prey to the indulgences of the flesh. In your journal book, keep track of instances when you violated this assignment. Ask the Lord to show you why you complained, boasted, defended yourself, etc.

REVISION HISTORY

Date	Version	Description	Author
Prior to 2006	1.0	Initial Draft and Major Revisions	JunKyung Fuji Kim
Spring, 2006	2.0	Re-Organization, Major Revisions, and Major Additions	Donny Cho
5/10/2007	3.0	Major Revisions and Major Additions	Donny Cho