

# GOSPEL DYNAMICS 2: LEGALISM AND HEDONISM<sup>1</sup>

## “THE TWO THIEVES OF THE GOSPEL”

### THE GOSPEL IN CTP READINGS

At times, the readings and required listening may seem redundant. Yet, they are all important to provide you with the fullest presentation of the Gospel that we want you to receive:

- The “Centrality of the Gospel” article (and message by Tim Keller).
- For Rookies and Second-Years: Jerry Bridge’s *Transforming Grace* and *Discipline of Grace*.
- And messages/seminars on the Gospel by various preachers/teachers.

Can the Gospel be “programmed” into us? Well, we cannot “program” but we can try to persuade and convince you of the whole of the Gospel.<sup>2</sup> What we can do is provide the Gospel in various forms, from a variety of folks, and provide personal testimonies of how deep and broad the Gospel impacts us, and how we must work at having more of the Gospel in our lives. More importantly than any sharing of personal experience or any illustration or story about how the Gospel gripped someone, we desire to provide the *content* of the true Gospel. The truth of the Gospel is presented in various forms (required listening, books, articles, etc.), and from various persons who can provide different perspectives and angles, even using a variety of terms. We want the power and the force of the Gospel to bear on us. We hope you will cooperate with (be sensitive to) the Spirit who can work that truth into us.

*Why the repetition and seeing it from various perspectives?* Because we sometimes don’t get it; and we always need to preach it to ourselves again and again. Right now, as we speak, as you are reading this, you may be risking the possibility of “missing it”. As mentioned previously, we have a natural born (sinner’s) intent-in-the-heart to avoid (run from the need of), or circumvent, the Gospel. In our natural born selves, in our intelligence and knowledge, we have this tremendous knack of avoiding the whole Gospel. We have tremendous dexterity of forgetting it in day-to-day life. And we have this fantastic skill in thinking, and assuming, that we understand it, but the reality of it is that the Gospel’s centrality is not evident in our lives (we’ve overlooked it, and given ourselves way too much credit). We had a grasp of it last year, but misplaced it this past year.

### THE GOSPEL: A SCRIPTURAL REVIEW OF THE LAST SESSION

Romans 5:8, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: **While we were still sinners, Christ died for us**...For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be **saved through his life!**”

We can describe the Gospel from Ephesians 2:1, “As for you, **you were dead** in your transgressions and sins, **in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world** and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. **All of us also lived among them at one time**, gratifying the

<sup>1</sup> Much of this document is a mere revision of the original document written by JunKyung (Fuji) Kim. I credit him because at least 70% of this document is derived from his original work, and much of the content of his work remains the same. I added the Gospel Lesson, and provided some additions (and also deleted some of the “stray” content) to Fuji’s insights.

<sup>2</sup> That is what Apostle Paul tried to do: Acts 18:4, 2 Corinthians 5:11.

cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, **made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.**"

>Review Jack Miller's "Cross Diagram" (the version by World Harvest Mission)

#### THE GOSPEL: REVIEW OF THE CONTENT

*Common elements in the Gospel presentation* is the great **depth of sin** (which is why a sinless God had to die, since the dimension of our sin is immense). We couldn't do anything for it because of the immensity of sin, and our current slavery to sin. Also common in the Gospel presentation is the saving (redeeming, rescuing) from sin, which requires the sovereign intrusion of God into history.

Another way of saying the above is: We are unable in our sin to save ourselves; God was fully able (sovereignly) to administer His grace (and that through Christ), to save sinners.

Thus, we have two facets to our salvation—**our radical depravity in sin**, and God's tremendous, **radical grace in Christ**.

*The effect in us, when we hear and take our stand on the Gospel*, when we come to an effectual knowledge (true, transforming knowledge) of Christ, is that we are convinced that—

- a. **We are more sinful** than we think we are. (man's radical, total depravity), **and**
- b. **We are more loved** and graced than we dared hope, in Christ. (God's sovereign, radical administration of grace).

#### WHERE THE PROBLEMS CREEP IN

Christians have experienced the Gospel. Non-Christians live without the Gospel; or another way of saying that is this: they are looking for *something* to be their good news. However, because it is a "kingdom hidden in a field", the Gospel is the last place one would look to find good news worth banking your identity on. As a result, the Gospel is neglected.

*Knowing this, can a Christian who has the Gospel, over time, neglect<sup>3</sup> the Gospel?* If the answer is, "Yes," the following paragraphs apply to both the Christian and non-Christian.

For a Christian, some odd reason, there is a propensity to believe that we are not that sinful. It all starts with us as a child: not taking the blame, but always desiring to take the credit. **We generally believe that we are nice people who happen to make mistakes and at times commit bad things.** "In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have become a tolerant people." (Recall the first chapter of *Transforming Grace*, Bridges.) **In a mistaken view of the Gospel, grace is overemphasized without the truth of who we are (we are sinners since birth).** And our impression of God's grace seems something very nice for a positive outlook in life. However, this is not the intrusive grace that cracks the light into our depressing darkness at the end of a terrible week.

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<sup>3</sup> Neglect, forget, displace, be confused about, etc.

As a result, the Christian life, because we minimize our deep-rooted sins that drive us, becomes a series of “lifestyle strategies to become even better than we are”. Of course, we would never admit to that (we like to talk about ‘how sinful we are’ generally, but never specifically), but functionally, that is how we live. As religious people and Christians, we may have been saved by Jesus, but afterwards, along the Christian journey, we find that the church’s message is many times about **making our own effort** in the Christian life. (See Bridges’ *Transforming Grace*.) “God helps those who help themselves.” We think that, given the opportunity, as Christians, it is possible to make right choices on our own, to do the right thing on our own, to seek the good, to be moral people, and to make sacrifices for another, as well as pursue piety and holiness, experience true spirituality, and true morality. **We think that we are able to obey the truth on our own volition, but we do not take into account our constant need for the application of grace.**

So we tend *not* to recognize God’s sovereignty and sovereign administration of grace (via the Gospel) on a regular, daily basis. This is a limited view of the Gospel where no real presence of Jesus in the life is sought. Subsequently, our enthusiasm for Jesus is diminished. **Jesus was important for our salvation, but He is not someone we are close to on daily basis.**

If we believe that we are not that sinful, *or* believe that God’s grace can be easily attained (earned), then there could be two sets of problems (at the two poles):

**If you believe (even the slightest bit):**

- (a) That you are **not that sinful**, then you can continue to live the way *you* want, for your good, your desires. That returns the person to a self-gratifying life of sin (even *after* being saved).
- (b) **God’s grace is cheap, or easily attained**, then you will try to *achieve* righteousness by working at it. You will strive for goodness, for self-righteousness.

**The main problem: as sinful people, our attempt at righteousness will be tainted with sin.** Thus, it is an error to think that you are not as sinful as you are, and is an equally grave error to think that you can earn righteousness.

#### THE CHRISTIAN ROLLER-COASTER RIDE

For the Christian, the above can wreak havoc in our lives; it results in a roller-coaster spiritual lifestyle (ebbing and flowing between spiritual highs and doubts). After being saved (experiencing justification), if we think that we can become as holy as God demands, trying to do, putting much effort into doing good [legalism], then we are diminishing the character (extent) of God’s holiness; God is so much holier than we could ever achieve on our own. Otherwise, we wouldn’t need Jesus, and we could become God on our own power!

In addition, that doesn’t explain why we sometimes fail spiritually. We easily lose joy, peace, fellowship, while discouragement sets in, and we can easily fall prey to being disappointed in ourselves, in God, and in others. Our attempt at Gospel ministry falters. We fall back to our desires [hedonism-license], as we neglect our sinfulness, and we become entrapped by sin. We neglect God’s presence in our lives. We lose intimacy with God, but increase intimacy with the world, becoming enculturated into the world. In

time, self-gratification will take its toll on the body. Whatever once satisfied the heart, at some point, will feel empty.

Then, you hear a sermon (a sermon that is emotionally uplifting, motivationally kicking, psychological massaging, or behaviorally modifying, etc.). You immediately are back to trying to do good again, making the effort not to sin. We are “speed skating,” back and forth, from trying to be good on our own, to living for self, and back again. When we are up, we try hard on our own (self-effort). When we are down, we live for ourselves (self-gratification). What a vicious cycle. In the Christian life, when we try to get away from legalism (without the Gospel) we tend to swing to hedonism as a result. And then back to legalism.

*Example:* The perennial issue of doing Quiet Time. You hear a sermon that “good Christians do Quiet Time.” You determine to do it; there is some initial joy in actually doing quiet time. The behavior becomes ritualistic. You are trying to be a faithful Christian. The joy quickly wanes, and is replaced by the physical rigor of keeping up with something. This is truth without grace. Quiet time gets skipped a few times (few weeks, or months). During that time, your life becomes preoccupied with other things that always seem more important than fellowship with God, you are following your own agenda, and God seems absent from the day-to-day living. Quiet time is soon replaced by many other priorities. One may slip into wrong thinking that “God wants me to be free; have a good time; once saved always saved. So, I can skip Quiet Time today.” This is grace without truth. Few months pass, and you hear another message on the importance of having personal worship (studying God’s word; getting back into it), and you are convicted (which is often a Christian’s way of saying that they feel guilty).

The above is given as a sample of how the Christian life swings back and forth from legalism (a sense of doing right based on what one does) and hedonistic /license-living (living according to selfish desires, despite the revealed will of the Father).

This is why we need the Gospel. We need a Gospel that pricks<sup>4</sup> the religious person from their self-driven, moral performance (being ‘religious’ has already failed them because of his sin, which cannot be overcome no matter how successful he is at being ‘good’ or ‘religious’). The **religious person needs to be convinced of their sinfulness, despite their efforts** (If there is no Gospel that convinces us of God’s sufficient grace, then we will try to merit God’s blessings by performance. And performance will lead to self-righteousness, and judgment on all who cannot perform, which is the result of a legalistic life.). Inevitable failure will result in feelings of guilt for not performing well as a Christian, which will lead to despair and disregard of what Christ has done (justification). This causes us to forget our sonship to God through Christ.

The Gospel is also needed for the **irreligious (relativist), who needs to be convinced of their sinfulness**, despite the attempt to make God a spiritual Santa Claus who gives them gifts despite their naughtiness (because grace is free, and assumed to be cheap, and because God loves them no matter what). We need a Gospel that can reclaim the irreligious person from a self-gratifying approach (which has already failed them because of their intent is to find self-worth, which cannot be attained on their own). If there is no Gospel that convinces us of our sinfulness, then **we will not take our sin seriously**, there is no need (motivation, impetus) to change. “I’m fine the way that I am. A few mistakes here and there.” Or, “That’s just how I am.” Or, “The lifestyle and worldview I have isn’t that bad. I’m not that bad.”

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Keller used this word somewhere to describe the effect of the Gospel.

**If it is not the Gospel-grace that empowers the Christian (and for the non-Christian), to believe, then it is mere human self-will, self-determinism, good intentions, good actions, good feelings, and good times**, all possessing little power of change, or lasting power.

Therefore, we see that **the Gospel saves us from two big areas of sin**, two general areas of sin:

**Legalism**: self-righteousness, self-performance

**Hedonism**: self-gratification, self-worth

Again,

**Legalism**: "I am able, I can be like God on my own."

**Hedonism**: "I am not sinful, I can make it on my own."

The legalist diminishes the depth and extent of his sin, and ultimately believes that he needs to do something to make up for what he feels is lacking spiritually in his life (to earn God's love). He places higher emphasis on his ability, and not enough emphasis on his cosmic inability to make things right with God; in essence, in his lifestyle, the legalist is really diminishing the need for the Gospel, lowering the worth and power of the Gospel for his life.

The hedonist diminishes the depth and extent of his sin, and ultimately believes that his ability will get him the self-worth he seeks, to make up for what is lacking spiritually in his life. Ability is also his emphasis, the ability to attain to his pursuits (money, power, sex). In essence, the hedonist does not place an emphasis on his cosmic failure to ever 'feel right' about himself, and his lack of trust in the Gospel to give him that sense of self-worth causes him to lower the worth and power of the Gospel in his life.

Both case studies are very similar, just coming from different vantage points of the Christian life, in essence.

#### A SCRIPTURAL EXAMPLE

Read the Colossians 2-3 passage.

#### ANOTHER EXAMPLE: BIBLICAL COUNSELING

Recall the classic Powlison diagram, since it may help to visually illustrate the above. We start out on the vicious cycle of folly, the right side of the visual diagram. When we don't take sin seriously (and we are blind to the fact that we are blind), we will continue in our foolish hearts, responding foolishly, producing bad fruit and exacerbating the situations. Our blindness prevents us to even see the possibility of our particular sin; we become defensive, abrasive, and we tend to point to others to deflect our sin. Many times, even when we joke, we try to turn the tables, get defensive, and shift blame. We live trusting in our aberrant definition of grace and truth. We won't look to the cross of Christ because we don't need one. This is applicable to the non-Christian all of the time, and to the Christian who "lives in foolish rebellion." [Hedonism/Irreligion]

If we believe we can achieve goodness on our own, then we are living out the left side of the visual diagram (without the cross and the new heart): the moral heart that tries to do

good things, to 'make' good fruit. How quickly that fruit will spoil and fade because it doesn't come from a 'good' tree (root), because the tree is not firmly rooted in a 'good' heart (fruit-stapling, according to Tripp), because that heart doesn't have the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9) flowing into it. This, too, avoids God's sovereign administration of grace through the *lordship* of Christ: mainly we are living in nice-looking, newer version of rebellion, Rebellion 2.0. [Legalism / Religion]

#### THE TWO ERRORS: THE THIEVES OF THE GOSPEL (TERTULLIAN VIA KELLER)

> Refer to the "Centrality of the Gospel" article by Tim Keller.

As can be deduced from the discussion above and of the Biblical Counseling diagram, and using the terms in Keller's article, there are 'two thieves' that 'rob' believers of the Gospel (and misrepresent the Gospel to nonbelievers):

Since Paul uses a metaphor for being "in line" with the Gospel, we can consider that Gospel renewal occurs when we keep from walking "off-line" either to the right or to the left. The key for thinking out the implications of the Gospel is to consider the Gospel a "third" way between two mistaken opposites. However, before we start we must realize that the Gospel is not a half-way compromise between the two poles—it does not produce "something in the middle", but something different from both. The Gospel critiques both religion and irreligion (Matt.21:31;22:10). Tertullian said, "Just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so this doctrine of justification is ever crucified between two opposite errors." Tertullian meant that there were two basic false ways of thinking, each of which "steals" the power and the distinctiveness of the Gospel from us by pulling us "off the Gospel line" to one side or the other. **These two errors are very powerful, because they represent the natural tendency of the human heart and mind.** (The Gospel is "revealed" by God (Rom.1:17)—the unaided human mind cannot conceive it.) These "thieves" can be called moralism or legalism on the one hand, and hedonism or relativism on the other hand. Another way to put it is: the Gospel opposes both religion and irreligion. On the one hand, "moralism/religion" stresses truth without grace, for it says that we must obey the truth in order to be saved. On the other hand, "relativists/irreligion" stresses grace without truth, for they say that we are all accepted by God (if there is a God) and we have to decide what is true for us. But "truth" without grace is not really truth, and "grace" without truth is not really grace. Jesus was "full of grace and truth".

#### TWO ILLUSTRATIONS

The "two thieves" at work in the Christian life can be illustrated *as a drunken monk trying to get on a donkey*.<sup>5</sup> The drunken monk tries to get on the donkey, and falls to one side, then gets up off the ground, and tries again to get on the donkey again, only to fall off to the other side. Consider also Jerry Bridges' "path" diagram, in *Transforming Grace* is another helpful illustration of the two errors. Consider the path of the Gospel-grace, and the two gutters on both sides, of legalism and hedonism. In this diagram, Bridges describes the Gospel as the marriage of "law and love" (or "truth and grace"). The "thieves" of legalism and hedonism are described as a result of misconstrued grace (love) and truth (law). They have blown one of them out of proportion to the other, when, in truth, they should be married. One should never be emphasized as more significant than the other. (As Skip Ryan notes, there are things about the Gospel that people like. And then there are things about the Gospel that they don't.)

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<sup>5</sup> From Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace* (Fuji notes that he derived this from Clair Davis, WTS).

To some, the “Gospel” is regarded as grace without the truth,<sup>6</sup> ultimately ending up as hedonism, or relativism, or irreligiosity (a Christian life that takes advantage of God’s *love*, and results in less intimacy with, and knowledge of, the Father and what honors Him, since one’s personal desires can easily take precedence, above a God who loves, yet, is active in addressing one’s idols). To others, they define the “Gospel” as truth above love, resulting in a life characterized by legalism, moralism, or religiosity (a Christian life that views God as *Judge*, and results in less intimacy with, and knowledge of, the Father and what honors Him, since one’s fear of God’s anger can easily take precedence, above a God who is ‘holy’, yet delights in His child).

**Why is all this important? Knowing that these are the general errors beyond/outside of the Gospel is helpful. Why? Because we have these two major tendencies in the Christian life, and the Gospel addresses these wrong approaches in us: (1) performance-based religious life and (2) self-gratifying irreligious life. These major errors are tendencies in *everyone, every person we meet, every celebrity, sports figure, person on the street, roommate, sibling, friend, and family member*. Ergo, the Gospel is the relevant solution to their errors—the error of trying to gain moral approval by self-driven performance (legalism or self-transformation), or of living according to their own desires and determinations (hedonism or self-gratification). As Keller noted, both lifestyles are ways and means of avoiding Jesus as Savior, and thus, both require the Gospel for rescue, unto true intimacy with the Father, and true transformation of the heart and deed.**

For the Christian, the above two thieves can be described in the theological terms of justification and sanctification.

The legalist views sanctification as justification. We need union with Christ—greater union with the righteousness of Christ. We need to connect with the already of the Kingdom, the Kingdom reality that has come. The legalist dilutes justification into sanctification. Legalism, in essence, bases justification (righteousness before God) on sanctification (how we are doing/growing). “I am approved by God because I am doing all these holy, pious, good, moral things.” The reality of justification is lost. For this person, justification is gained when we work hard at our sanctification. The danger is that justification gets lost (legalists would not look to Jesus for righteousness), and we look to ourselves for righteousness.

The hedonist sees sanctification as optional, or something that should only happen “naturally” as the heart changes. This never happens; our hearts are always inclined to sin. We need union with Christ—greater union with the ministry and active life of Christ in us. We need to connect with the not yet of the Kingdom, the Kingdom reality to come. The hedonist diffuses sanctification into justification. Sanctification—growing in holiness, becoming like Christ—is not pursued as part of the Christian life because it has been swallowed up by justification. “Since I am is justified (saved from God’s wrath), I’m good to go. Quiet time, schmiet time. I’m saved and that’s all there is to it. Church is not for me. And I just like my life the way it is.” There is no living out of the reality of Christ in the world (or sanctifying participation in the body of Christ). The danger is that sanctification is lost as a process, and no progress is made in becoming like Christ (hedonists feel no true need to die to self), and we go ahead with our self-centered (hence sinful) desires and agenda.

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<sup>6</sup> Skip Ryan speaks (In the MP3 of his message, “Transforming Grace, Part 1”) about what modern people like about the Gospel is that it is a “Gospel of love.” That there is a God who cares. But what do they *not* like about the Gospel? That the Gospel is a word revealed outside of ourselves, since modern people don’t like that they must receive the truth outside of themselves. They believe in an internal knowledge of *right*—ultimately, their consciences will be their guide.

“On a good day (a lá Jerry Bridges), I have done my quiet time, thought about the Lord, done good deeds for some, been helpful to parents, had an encouraging conversation with neighbors, listened to people’s problems, was faithful in my work. That good day was about *what I did*. I felt good about the ‘filthy rags’ I presented to God. That goodness was not based upon Christ. Without Christ, no one comes before the Father (unless one wants to be judged and condemned). The Gospel says that I must not trust in my own good performance (or think that I have lost everything before God because of a bad performance). The reason why I am considered good that day before God’s eyes is not me but Christ who covers me. The reason why I would even want to obey God is not me and my desires but Christ who lives in me and His desires supplanting mine.”<sup>7</sup>

C.J. Mahaney, of Sovereign Grace Ministries, practices the following to overcome his tendency for legalism and hedonism: every night before he goes to bed, he dozes off thinking about all of his failures (moral failures, failures in ministry, areas where he messed up), and reminds himself that each are covered in the blood of Christ. Similarly, he recounts areas of success in his life, and reminds himself that none of those successes amount to his “earning” the right to be called a child of God; all have come as a result of his being covered in the blood of Christ. That’s pretty darn good theology.

#### IN SCRIPTURE

In Scripture we find these major errors to be very evident. If you study the Gospel according to Mark (or any of the Gospels), you will notice that Jesus had harsh words for the religious. “Woe to you...” Why? The religious are actually further in some ways from the Gospel (and from a reconciled life with the Father) than the irreligious, because they treat themselves as though they *are* worthy of the Father’s favor and love. However, Jesus came to save who? The sick and the lost; one has to see himself as a sick (spiritually dead) and lost in order to see a need for Jesus as Savior. Jesus sets Himself and His Gospel against two general types of folk: (1) those who took pride in their self-righteous works, performance, background, genetics, etc., and (2) those who lived for themselves, with no regard for God or godliness.

#### MATTHEW 23: JESUS ADDRESS THE LEGALISM IN OUR HEARTS

Jesus calls woe upon woe<sup>8</sup> on the Pharisees:

<sup>23</sup> Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former...<sup>25</sup> Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence...<sup>28</sup> In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

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<sup>7</sup> Derived from JunKyung (Fuji) Kim.

<sup>8</sup> “Deploring the miserable condition in God’s sight of those he is addressing” *New Bible Dictionary*, IVP.



**Legalism:** "Moralism is the view that you are acceptable (to God, the world, others, yourself) through your attainments. (Moralists do not have to be religious, but often are.) When they are, their religion is pretty conservative and filled with rules. Sometimes moralists have views of God as very holy and just. This view will lead either to a) self-hatred (because you can't live up to the standards), or b) self-inflation (because you think you have lived up to the standards)."<sup>9</sup>

#### JOHN 4: JESUS ADDRESSES THE LEGALISM AND HEDONISM IN OUR HEARTS

Jesus addresses the Samaritan woman (a hedonist, who is looking for genuine love, and as a result, is given to immorality as a defining characteristic of her life) at the well, to no longer live for her desires, longings for adoration from men, determining her own sense of right and wrong and to experience true love, adoration and worship. Upon her request to have this living water, Jesus tells her to "Go, call your husband and come back (John 4:16)." His response generates a **legalistic** impulse:

"I have no husband," she replied.  
Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband."<sup>18</sup> The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."  
"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet."<sup>20</sup> Our fathers **worshipped** on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus' response to her query about "worship":

<sup>21</sup> Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup> You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup> Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."  
<sup>25</sup> The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."  
<sup>26</sup> Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

**Hedonism:** "Though they may be highly idealistic in some areas (such as politics), they believe that everyone needs to determine what is right and wrong for them. They are not convinced that God is just and must punish sinners. Their beliefs in God will tend to see Him as loving or as an impersonal force. They may talk a great deal about God's love, but since they do not think of themselves as sinners, God's love for us costs him nothing. If God accepts us, it is because he is so welcoming, or because we are not so bad."<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, Jesus had *gracious* words for the "sinners and prostitutes and poor and downtrodden" (John 4:1), children who would come to Him, recognizing their inability in sin and looking to Him for their righteousness. The Apostle Paul et al spoke out

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<sup>9</sup> Tim Keller, "Centrality of the Gospel."

<sup>10</sup> Keller, "Centrality of the Gospel."

against those who would take pride in their self-righteous works, self-made knowledge (which puffs up),<sup>11</sup> living on man-made rules and regulations<sup>12</sup>. And he exhorted those who would take grace for granted and continue to live in sin, as though God would still approve with such overextension of mercy.

## EPHESIANS 2

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are **Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised"** by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)—<sup>12</sup> remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, **without hope and without God in the world.** <sup>13</sup> **But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.** <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup> by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. <sup>17</sup> He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

The above may juxtapose the Godless and hopeless Gentiles with those of Israel/"the circumcision"/the Jew who depends on the law (its commandments and regulations) as his righteousness. Christ brought near the Godless and hopeless through His blood. Christ abolished the law with its commandments and regulations in His flesh (2:15). The righteousness that both kinds of people, Jews and Gentiles, need is not found in themselves, but in the person and work of Jesus.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 5

The context of 2 Corinthians is the licentious living of believers in the church; in this passage, the Apostle Paul appears to be addressing godly, Christ-centered living for those who might have a tendency to please themselves and not live accountable to God:

**So we make it our goal to please him,** whether we are at home in the body or away from it. <sup>10</sup> For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. <sup>11</sup> Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. <sup>12</sup> We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. <sup>13</sup> If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. <sup>14</sup> **For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.** <sup>15</sup> And he died for all, **that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.** <sup>16</sup> So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 8:1.

<sup>12</sup> Colossians 2:20.

no longer. <sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

## JUDE

Consider Apostle Jude's outcry against hedonism / relativism / immoralism of those in the church:

<sup>3</sup> Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. <sup>4</sup> For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. **They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.** <sup>5</sup> Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe. <sup>6</sup> And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. <sup>7</sup> In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire. <sup>8</sup> **In the very same way, these dreamers pollute their own bodies, reject authority and slander celestial beings...** <sup>10</sup> Yet these men speak abusively against whatever they do not understand; and what things they do understand by instinct, like unreasoning animals – these are the very things that destroy them. <sup>11</sup> Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion. <sup>12</sup> These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm – shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead. <sup>13</sup> They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.

## ROMANS

How can we disregard the text that strongly opposes seeking righteousness in keeping the law (contra-legalism) and taking grace (justification) as license to sin (contra-hedonism)? Romans 2:17 (and onward), addresses the futility of trusting in keeping the law for we don't obey it fully. The Apostle Paul wants to address everyone with the one solution, the Gospel:

Romans 1 <sup>14</sup> I am obligated both to Greeks and Non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. <sup>15</sup> That is why I am so eager to preach the Gospel also to you who are at Rome. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

Romans 1 continues with grieving against the Gentile and irreligious folk:

<sup>26</sup> Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. <sup>27</sup> In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. <sup>28</sup> Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. <sup>29</sup> They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; <sup>31</sup> they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Romans 2:17 (and onward) grieves for the Jews and religious:

<sup>17</sup> Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; <sup>18</sup> if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; <sup>19</sup> if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, <sup>20</sup> an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— <sup>21</sup> you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ... <sup>28</sup> A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.

In Romans 6, Paul wars against taking grace as license to sin.

<sup>1</sup> What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? <sup>2</sup> By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? <sup>3</sup> Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ... <sup>14</sup> For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. <sup>15</sup> What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! <sup>16</sup> Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?

Such hedonistic thinking is antithetical to the nature of the Gospel. The solution/resolution/reformation of such license-oriented thinking (as well as the attempts at self-made goodness even in keeping the good law) is the Gospel according to Christ—His death and resurrection.

Romans 3 <sup>21</sup> But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished — <sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his justice at the

present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

In essence, a reading of Apostle Paul's illustrates general categories of man's sin. His writings consistently show a pattern of addressing legalism and hedonism.

#### ERROR IN COMMON

The above two major category of errors have some similarities. (1) **One ends up naturally with the other**, and (2) **both end up creating greater distance from the Father**, meaning that there is less intimacy with Him.

As a person sets up his or her own idea of what is righteous, they are not holding onto the Gospel, and legalism will ultimately fail them, and they will end up with hedonism/license in sin. Man-made rules and regulations will not ultimately restrain sensual indulgence (Col. 2:23). Legalism will get us to be good hedonists at the end.

Hedonism/license-to-sin will set up man-made rules to live by, which is legalism. How? Hedonism implies relativism: every person determines what is true and what is right for *them*. (Ergo, sin, an absolute, cannot be determined since there is no absolute determiner of truth.) In relativism, the rule is that each person does what is right in his *own* eyes. In essence, you're the determiner of your own version of what is right and wrong. You develop your own code of morality and ethics (and even though you know that you cannot judge people by your standards any more than they can judge you by theirs, you do anyways.). Therefore, you, as a hedonist, will bind yourself in your own legalistic rules to make you a better hedonist; *hedonism gets us to be legalists at the end*.

There is an even more important similarity: both avoid Christ (as substitutionary atonement for sin).

Legalists can do it themselves; they don't need Christ. They grow more distant from the Father as a result. Hedonists want to live freely, of themselves; they don't need a Lord and Master. They also grow more distant from the Father as a result.

#### IN SUMMARY

The reason why these two errors are the prevalent sins is that they reflect both the character of God and sinful man. God has made us be holy (true to His law and morality) and free (freely worshipping God). Sinful man tries to establish goodness, being better than others, etc. while desiring to be autonomous and free. We find that every person commits the two errors. The Christian can be a legalist as well as a hedonist. The non-Christian can be a moral person (and a harsh judge of others) as well as a hedonist.

Then, what is the solution for the non-believer? Christ and his Gospel. What is the solution for the believer? Christ and his Gospel.

*Christ and His Gospel are for both sinner and "saint".* The Gospel saves a sinner, to become a saint. The Gospel saves a saint, to progress in the Christian life (to become all the more like Christ). Everyone needs the Gospel, all of the time.

Knowing that these two are the main errors outside of the Gospel, we can exegete all sorts of folk—Christian, non-Christian, Eastern and Western culture, first and second generation, Korean and American, children and old folk, youth in gangs and suburbs. We can exegete the characters in television shows and movies. From the legalist Rush Limbaugh, with his “world according to Rush,” to Howard Stern’s relativism, “everything can be exploited (until it exploits him).” The Gospel gives us the content to exegete and understand the world and its people, so as to be missional.

#### REDISCOVERING THE GOSPEL FOR MINISTRY

Knowing these are the general errors beyond /outside of the Gospel is helpful. Why? Because when we share (counsel, teach, preach, encourage) the Gospel to others’ hearts and minds, the Gospel addresses both the religious and the irreligious (believer and non-believer). Usually, the religious person addresses how sinful we are (preaching usually addresses license, partying, drinking, living indulgently, the unholy life, etc.). The heathens and heathen lifestyles are what get usually addressed in church. We may get the impression that these are the things that the Gospel seems to save us from, to make us holy by freeing us from such desires.

However, what does not get addressed are people who are “doing all these good works” and look very holy and Christian but who have not based their salvation in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, and have based their “redemption and righteousness” on how they have served the Lord or attended church gatherings. Our teaching and preaching may miss Christians who think that they have lived a God-glorifying life this past week based on their personal performance but not having looked toward the Son, Jesus, for His grace that covers over sin.

*The irreligious life is empty. The religious life is empty.*

The Gospel of Christ comes and invalidates both religion and irreligion. Christ as grace and truth (John 1:17) comes to address the depth of sin in our lives and provides the “balm of Gilead” which heals. And he comes to show us the mercy, forgiveness, acceptance, unconditional love, knowing full well our inadequacy, inability and sin piled high and deep.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PERSONAL LIFE

What are your tendencies outside of the Gospel?

When you have forgotten the Gospel, what kind of counsel do you seek? To try to be better? Or “it’s OK to live for one’s needs, one has to be true to his/her desires?” Or seek after the cross of Christ?

When you fail, what kind of solution do you seek to bring back the joy and peace to life? What do you tell yourself to recover a sense of being ‘right’?

How does the Spirit counsel and comfort you to the Gospel?

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY

My [Donny’s] ministry at Camp was a ministry of “acceptance” of many campers who were sinful, were expecting to be put down, but then found grace in the eyes of their counselor (and hopefully, in the eyes of God). As a Genesis member, I often flipped back-and-forth between being an “accepting” leader with being a “self-righteous” and

“wrathful, judging” leader. That is to say, if you were a good counselor, you received much acceptance. If you crossed me, there was reason to fear. In my cabin, I realized that there were many aspects of my ministry that did not embody the Gospel: from the way I dealt with my youth when I was irritated because they were being immature in the way they dressed, joked, or handled relationships with members of the opposite gender at Camp (they are teens—they are immature!), to even programmatic aspects to my ministry, such as making them memorize verses in order to go to lunch (the late 1980s to early 1990s), to the way cabin inspections gave extra credit to those who were cleaner and nicer, and deducted points for leaving Bibles on their bunks in the cabins. All of these rules were provisional—meaning that they probably served some good purpose at some point in time (and they point to a greater law that was fulfilled in and by Christ), but as my Gospel-conscience grew, many of these things had to go away. The sanctification of my ministry brings continued freedom as more and more of these areas are re-oriented in the Gospel (as counselor and as Director, which still needs much renewal, repentance, and revision), and deducted as non-value-add areas of our program when they are not centered around the Gospel.

When a teacher or counselor does not like his or her group, cabin, or students, and complains that they are not responsive, we may have missed the perfect opportunity for the Gospel. (And we may have missed the essential point of why we have the Gospel and do Gospel ministry.) Didn't God give us the Gospel and move us to do Gospel ministry *because He already knew that they (we) are sinful, unresponsive, weak, and self-centered?* Pastors have left churches complaining of the congregation, of how the people were so flawed. It is like saying “the problem with our prisons is that we have bad prisoners.” We are complaining about our calling when we complain about people who do not have the Gospel.

Could we have basically missed the point of the Gospel? We are making a judgment that they are bad people and have hardened their hearts to God, a judgment resulting from a legalistic, “holier than thou” worldview. Sinful people do not respond well. Sin and hardened hearts are the very reason why we were given the Gospel.

As leaders and teachers we forget that we, too, have and continue to have a problem with deep sins (we overemphasize grace on ourselves, but not on others). And when we complain, we presume for the moment that our righteousness or spiritual maturity is by our own effort (we have attained goodness by the truth but they have not).

The Gospel explicitly addresses sin and the sinfulness of man, for Christ came to save sinners and those who are of hardened hearts. And if they are of God's elect, they will listen to the Gospel, they will respond to it, and they will be drawn nearer to God. Hence, Gospel-centered ministry is *not* about ministry when people are responsive and nice, when they nod their heads and laugh at everything you say. Gospel ministry is to love them without basing ministry on audience response (as God has loved us), to incarnate Christ, to preach and embody the Gospel as a faithful response to God. God will carry out His responsibility of redeeming His people.

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10)

Our righteousness in doing ministry is not how many people respond—God is not honored by the number of people we bring to the altar. God is most glorified when we

are satisfied in faithfully preaching and ministering Christ.<sup>13</sup> God will do His task of awakening the elect via the Spirit of Christ (this we are not in control). It is not a matter of simple human effectiveness but Gospel faithfulness. Our part is not to make people's hearts grow, our part is faithfulness to the application of the Gospel to ourselves so that we do Gospel-centered ministry to others. Would we deny ourselves in trying to find satisfaction in the responses of people, take up our cross, and follow Jesus faithfully? What does that mean practically? We need to grow in the Gospel, praying for greater understanding of it.

#### TEACHING AND PREACHING

The following concept is drawn from Tim Keller's presentation at the PCA EM Pastor's Conference (2002):

Keller's exhortation is that when we minister the Word, we should be careful that we do not set up just two lives, for people to consider and take as options. Usually, we set up "this bad life that we should avoid" and "the 'Christian' way of living." (Yes, there is the foolish way and the wise way.) The danger of such preaching/teaching is immense. It can be taken as, "Don't do this, do this," or as, "You can get away with these things and still be a Christian." Rather, there are three options: the foolish legalistic life; the foolish hedonistic way; and the Gospel, Christ-centered way.

Gospel preaching addresses both ways of foolish living—against hedonism as well as legalism. The unbeliever needs to hear from those in the church the criticisms that they have known all along (that legalism and religiosity is useless) as well as critique of the hedonistic-relativistic view (a life with no real sense of God). The Gospel does not allow the hedonist to revel in their "self-centered freedom" but to come into the life of Christ. And the Gospel does not allow the legalist to think that they are living the right life but take upon the "true burden" that is light, in Christ. And that they need to hear the criticism against themselves—they have been in greater in rebellion than just "smoking, drinking, and hanging out with girls who do."

We are not just to be like Moses (who was both declared righteous, but yet humanly flawed). Not just to be like Lot (who went after that which was good to his eyes). But find the joy in the promised righteousness that comes in having Christ (the perfect leader that Moses, Joshua, David et al looked forward to).

Ministry happens in a Gospel-infrastuctured environment. In a legalistic place, people are corralled onto an island (or a fortress), those who perform well, or people are driven away in judgment. In a hedonistic place, people are gathered to feed each others' desires/idols, or encouraged individually to live separate self-centered lives.

A place established in the Gospel would attract folks who are ashamed of their sin, yet confident in their sonship because they are clothed in Christ, all the while enabling a relationship with a just, holy and loving God (through Christ). It would not be an island but a kingdom with an open immigration policy. There would be unity as a people for all would have a common bond in Christ.

Let us deny ourselves—deny our own attempts at righteousness, deny our own desires, carry our own cross and follow after Jesus and lose our lives in the Gospel (Mark 8)—only to be found in Christ.

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<sup>13</sup> John Piper.



## LEGALISM AND HEDONISM EXIST EVERYWHERE

If the above is true, that there are two errors when the Christian (and non-believer) is not in-line with the Gospel, then we would see legalism/hedonism everywhere; the world can only see two paths in life, whereas the Christian is put on a third path, altogether.

Some examples:

(1) *Chocolat*, the book and movie. As noted by some to be one of the most “Christian” movies without intending to be so.

(2) *Les Miserables*: the cruel, self-righteous, law-dispensing police inspector, Javert, who doggedly pursues Jean Valjean, the redeemed redeemer (messiah-figure of the narrative).

(3) *Titanic*: Jack, the hedonist (though he would later give up his life, as a savior-figure); Rose caught between two world/worldviews, between Jack’s life of freedom and her fiancé’s (a legalist) money, tradition, public uprightness and high society. The struggle between legalism and hedonism (notice, that, from a worldly standpoint, there are only two choices).

(4) *Friends* sitcom: Monica is the legalist; Joey (and Rachel), are the hedonists.

(5) *Smallville*: Lex Luthor is the hedonist-relativist (doing whatever he pleases through whatever method that works); Clark Kent’s dad (Jonathan) is the keeper of the law, setting down the rules, keeping people safe. Lex and Clarks’ dad are always at each other’s throats.

(6) The concept of “Good cop, bad cop.”

(7) *Star Wars*, early episodes (I, II, and III): Anakin is the hedonist, following after his emotions, seeking freedom and recognition, in a world dominated by legalistic tradition (the Jedi), since Jedi are keepers of the peace abiding by the rules and laws, and must refrain from letting emotions take over.

(8) *Lord of the Rings*: the struggle by all those who want to do the ‘right’ thing with the Ring (which is to destroy it), and the Ring’s power to draw out their inner lust for power. In the characters Gollum/Smeagol, this is apparent in his dual personality, especially in the second installment.

(9) *Republicans vs. Democrats*. The struggle draws out many ethical questions pertaining to our liberalism and conservatism.

(10) *The Office*: Dwight Schrute and Angela (portrayed as the “Christian” employee) are the legalists; Meredith, Michael Scott (the manager), etc., are hedonists. You can actually see how the folly of the one always leads to the folly of the other.

(11) *Grey’s Anatomy*: Dr. Preston Burke is the legalistic doctor; Dr. Christina Yang is the hedonistic doctor. They are “married” to one another. Dr. Derek Shepherd is the “legalistic shepherd”, who cares for the others, and ultimately, has a heart for the weak, while trying to maintain a decent mind for his career (and condemning his former wife with regards to her adultery); meanwhile, Dr. Meredith Grey is the one always living in the “hedonistic gray (or grey)”, living uncontrollably in her emotions.

## GOSPEL LESSON

Read Luke 15:1-2, 11-32. This is the narrative of the Prodigal Sons.<sup>14</sup> The parable was intended for those who were judging the sinners present with Jesus (to 'eat' with people in ancient times was to be very intimate with them).

A Jewish father sometimes divided up his estate among his sons (primogeniture culture), but continue 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.

In essence, the younger son wanted to live as though he no longer had a father; he was living the life of a hedonist (an existentialist). You see the implications of a hedonistic lifestyle taken to the extreme: going to a place distant from the father, wild living, and wild spending (15:13-14). Of course, the pursuit of one's desires ultimately disappoints you in the end because eventually, a famine hits (15:14), and because the son is empty, he lives lower than the slaves (15:15-16). 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, and paid tremendous consequences.

At some point, the son comes to his senses (15:17). 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. Anxiety is a means of leaving home; something has gripped you, and worry is the tool that it uses to control you. Bitterness is a means of leaving home, being far from the Father. Bitterness means that someone else's sin has gripped you, and you have become disenchanted with your Father's role as Judge. You want to live life on your own, and your currency is wrath and bitterness; your wrath is the tool being used to control you. What's going to happen when the famines of life hit your area?

He remembers who he was, a child of a wealthy father. He doesn't have to live as a slave. So, he puts together a rather elaborate prayer: "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 (15:18-19)." In essence, the son, a hedonist, upon recognizing his unworthiness, figures that the only way to be accepted into his father's house again is to become a legalist, to become as one of his father's paid men.

However, what happens? The son gets up to return to the father. He is hoping for a job, after a long lecture, and some dignified punishment, but what does he get? He gets a run, a hug, an embrace.

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 (you see this in the Asian community as well).

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<sup>14</sup> My [Donny's] understanding of this passage began my true rediscovery of the Gospel; I heard sermons preached from Tim Keller, as well as was influenced by readings and messages related to this passage from Jack Miller.

The son, upon meeting his father, begins his long speech, but what happens? He begins, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son (15:21)." The father cuts him off: "Quick! Bring the best robe...put a ring on his finger...sandals on his feet...being the fattened calf...for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." There is a celebration in the house of the father upon the return of the hedonistic son (15:22-24). The father never let his son finish his speech about becoming one of his hired men; what an invitation to those who are hedonists, who have come to their senses, and are considering a return to the Father! Can you imagine the reactions of those who were listening to the parable: the religious and the irreligious?

The son is given all the rights of sonship upon returning to the father again. Another way of thinking this through is this: the son never really lost his rights as a son. He thought that he could lose his sonship because of the way he lived, and the way he abandoned his father. How was he assured of his rights? The robe, the ring, the sandals, the calf: all of these things belonged to the elder son (since all that was left in the estate now belonged to him – the younger son took his share of the inheritance and squandered it away), but instead were given to the younger son. The Gospel says what? We had lost our rights as sons through Adam, but God gave us all that belonged to the Elder Son (Jesus Christ); we now live as though we had always been close to the Father, as though we never left home because our Elder Brother left home to bring us back (and traded places with us).

Meanwhile, while the celebration is taking place, the elder son was in the field; he heard the music, but didn't really *hear* the music. He was angry at the father for accepting the younger son, and refused to enter into the celebration (15:25-28). Look at the graciousness of the father: he pleads with the elder son.

How does the son respond? "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... (15:29-30)." The son continues to show his disapproval for the father's acceptance of the hedonistic brother. The elder son is a terrible son, **a legalist**; he, even though he never physically left home, was just as distant from the father, perhaps, even more distant. He felt entitled to the estate, since he lived as though he was working to earn these things; in fact, the elder son used the word *slaving* to describe his work and obedience to his father's orders.

How does the father respond? Incredibly gracious and inviting (15:31-32). He desired to be intimate with both sons, hedonist and legalist. Of course, the second part of the parable is left open-ended; we don't know how the elder son responded to the invitation. Nevertheless, one thing is clear: both sons required repentance, as both were alienated and lost, from the father.

This parable drops paradigm bombs on both legalistic and hedonistic Christians (and nonbelievers). It teaches us a way of viewing our badness – that we are so far from the Father that we cannot earn our way back into His favor. It also teaches us a way of viewing our goodness as well – that our goodness in many ways can easily keep us from becoming intimate with the Father, especially if we are using our goodness as a means to 'deserve' the Father's estate; such a goodness comes from a morally restrained heart, not a transformed heart. In some ways, our goodness can actually do harm than others' badness; we must be careful not to judge others for their lifestyles the closer we come to understanding our Father's heart for His children. The Gospel saves sinner and saint, those who are immoral, and those who have moralistic pride. For the hedonist, the

Gospel calls us to hear the music of the Gospel, the music and dance of salvation; for the legalist, the Gospel calls us to celebrate and hear the music of salvation (the joy of transformation) in Jesus, the better Elder Brother, who does not become indignant at our return, but rather empties Himself of all of His wealth, and literally becomes poor, so that we through Him might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).

#### INWARD APPLICATION

Christian growth, according to the Gospel, is greater sensitivity to sin—increased sense of one's own legalism and hedonism. This is the Spirit's work of making us more aware of our sinful flesh.

1. What is your current, revised, working definition of the Gospel?
2. In the "two thieves" apart from the Gospel, how do you often turn from the Father, in sin? Are there areas of your life where you are more legalistic? Hedonistic? Provide examples.
3. How does the Gospel save you today from your hedonism and legalism?
4. How does this Gospel address issues in the way you deal with your relationships? The way you view your church community?
5. What are some practical things you can do to remind yourself of the Gospel each day?