

Grasping the Gospel

Wrestling with Sin, Understanding God's Mercy

by Mark Moody

Tim Keller once wrote concerning the Gospel that “you are more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe yet you can be more accepted and loved than you ever dared hope at the same time.”¹ These thoughts have benefited me greatly, but at first glance they seem to be contrasting ideas. How can I be excessively sinful and yet exceptionally forgiven? This tension illustrates my difficulty (and maybe yours) to believe the Gospel.

Good News? Eh...

The good news is pretty clear: Jesus died to forgive sinners. Good news indeed. The question is not whether this is true. All Christians affirm this. The question seems to be, “How can those who affirm this about Jesus concurrently struggle with joy?” Joy seems to be one of the distinct marks of a Christian (Galatians 2; Romans 5). Wouldn't living with joy just make sense? And why would those who believe they are forgiven also struggle with being forgiving (Luke 7:47), another cardinal expression of faith in Jesus? It does not seem to add up. That is unless there are some aspects of the Gospel we need help grasping to better experience what Jesus has already provided for us.

Viewing Sin

Many of us believe Jesus died for our sins. The problem for people like me is we do not believe our sins are very sinful since we have stayed clear of visible, external “major” sins. So forgiveness to us doesn't seem “big.” We might even think, “*What do I need to be forgiven of?*” Simply stated, we do not understand the devastating effect that “grading” sin on a curve has upon our belief of the Gospel. If we do not see sin as God does—all sin on equal par, all sin with various consequences, but all sin essentially against God—then we see very little need for forgiveness. This easily expresses itself in a judgmental, critical eye towards those who have not performed as well as we have. Those who have blown it with egregious sins such as immorality, divorce, carousing, etc... (Galatians 5) are “sinners” while our acceptable “sins” such as envy, anger, jealousy, slander, etc... (Galatians 5) are not seen with the same sense of violation since they are the more hidden sins and easier to conceal.

In other words, we live out of the strong belief in a “performance Gospel” meaning God approves of me for keeping my nose clean and disapproves of me (or anyone) who does not. (And secretly, we all believe God REALLY sees visible sins as the biggies, right?) So this becomes my chief effort—to keep my nose clean, stay out of visible sin, and smile when I go to church. We consider others' good perception or opinions of us with the utmost seriousness since, in our thinking—righteousness (good standing) among people directly relates to our ultimate righteousness with God.

Viewing Ourselves

¹ Tim Keller, School of Servant Leadership Curriculum, Redeemer Presbyterian Church. Page 2.

Fortunately, as we consider the message of the Gospel (forgiven, accepted, and in a great position with God through Jesus), our quest to appear righteous to others (through our efforts) does not and should not be what defines our faith. Whereas at one time we may have thought showing ourselves as moral, good-living Christians (meaning we stay away from bad sins like morality blow outs, drunkenness, etc...) to be what is most important, we awaken to our own real sin and cling to the cross² as a place of hope, forgiveness, and love.³ In a sense, we can be grateful for Jesus' death for our sins because (maybe for the first time since our conversion) we really see ourselves as sinners who daily need forgiveness. We didn't stop sinning at conversion; the cross still awaits us at the start of everyday to say, "Hey! Wake up! You're forgiven today! Even before you get started, when you sin, just know—you're forgiven."

This freedom to acknowledge sin while still believing we are forgiven, free, and accepted helps us see our desire to be good or better than others spiritually (through daily being given over to pursuing our performance or reputation) ultimately putting us at odds with the Gospel.⁴ In other words, our daily attempts to prove ourselves or gain a good "name" with others reveals our functional belief in a "performance Gospel," a Gospel based on pursuing our own goodness (righteousness) rather than pursuing God (and there is a difference!)

This awareness that we are living a performance Gospel can begin to open us up to see we are sinners who needed Jesus' death on the cross for *us*. Not just others. Dwell in that thought for a moment... The cross becomes personal. We need the cross (Gospel) to forgive both our striving to appear righteous enough to God (self-righteous performance) as well as our daily short fallings of his righteousness (sin).

As the good Spirit⁵ does the work Jesus left the Spirit to do by guiding and teaching us this gracious truth, we experience freedom in seeing our *genuine need for forgiveness* and swap a dependency on our righteousness for a heart belief that God's righteousness on our behalf is what makes us a son or daughter of God.⁶

As part of this process, I need to SEE sin as...

- Anytime I do something good and think God now thinks more highly of me (God's greater acceptance based on my greater righteousness).
- Anytime I criticize or look down on someone in my heart for their sin (a judgmental heart, self-exalting pride).
- Anytime I think my sin is less in the eyes of Jesus because it is not visible or external (Jesus had strong words for those who were self-deceived who believed this way).

Viewing God

As the Spirit of comfort and encouragement (John 14:26, 27) brings this to mind, we grow in our functional, day-to-day belief that we are NOT credited by God for being

² Galatians 6:14; Romans 4:8

³ Luke 5:32

⁴ Luke 5:32; Ephesians 2:8, 9

⁵ John 14:26, 27; 16:13, 14

⁶ Galatians 4:4-7; II Corinthians 5:21

better than everyone else (the pressure we experienced before to attain this credit becomes less and less) and we are able to put ourselves in the same boat as everyone else in need of God's righteousness and forgiveness on our behalf. This opens up space inside us to be the grace-filled, forgiveness-granting, Spirit-empowered followers Jesus died to purchase. We give up on our desire to prove or defend any good in us and begin extending forgiveness to friend and enemy alike, aware of our need for help, thankful for the forgiveness given. No longer defined by sin, we rest in the Father who calls us sons and daughters. We rest in God.⁷

In this way, the Gospel *grows* in us. This newfound freedom to lean in to Jesus develops a heart of grace for those in need or even those in sin, as we are *never far beyond* the need of God's grace ourselves. This view of God and His Gospel is a great freedom to grow into, a salvation worth passing along to others, a life worth pursuing with Jesus with much gratitude for his love and forgiveness.

It is only as we let this kind of Gospel sink deep in our hearts that we begin moving towards Jesus' transforming grace. Rather than being afraid of him, we begin drawing *in* to Him. This is the ebb and flow of the Gospel-centered journey Jesus has opened up to us and keeps inviting us farther into day by day.

Reflect a Bit

- How might dwelling in the Gospel encourage you in the daily ins and outs of everyday living?
- How could you experience a greater grace with Jesus through owning up to sin verses making excuses for it, looking at "greater" sins in others, etc...?
- Where are you drawn into a performance mindset with Jesus? How is He inviting you to rest in Him and His grace for you rather than attempting to perform for Him?

⁷ Galatians 4:6