

# The Gospel



## Of God's Heart

**Emulating In Our Lives  
The Incarnational Offering  
Of The Heart Of God**

**DICKSON**

“The best and safest way for you, therefore, my dear brethren, is, to call your deeds past to a new reckoning, to re-examine the cause ye have taken in hand, and to try it even point by point, argument by argument, with all the diligent exactness ye can; to lay aside the gall of that bitterness wherein our minds have hitherto overabounded, and with meekness to search the truth. Think ye are men, deem it not impossible for you to err; sift unpartially your own hearts, whether it be by force of reason or vehemency of affection, which hath bred and still doth feed these opinions in you. If truth do anywhere manifest itself, seek not to smother it with glosing delusions, acknowledge the greatness thereof, and think it your best victory when the same doth prevail over you.”

Richard Hooker  
*Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*  
1593

# The Gospel Of God's Heart

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## Preface

This is not a story book or novel. It is my sincere prayer that readers will receive this book only as an inadequate medium through which you can have a brief glimpse into a most profound message of history. The book is written as a literary progression of thought that is centered totally around understanding all our being in reference to discovering the heart of God. You will have to pardon my redundancies. Some things just need to be said more than once.

If the reader stays on this journey through to the final chapters, then it is my prayer that the intended paradigm shift to gospel living will be accomplished. If you are already there in your knowledge of Jesus, the Son of God, then this book will be a reaffirmation of your journey of joy. I only hope that I have aided you in being reminded again of the wonderful gospel that changes hearts and lives.

After I presented this series of studies to one particular group of disciples who had been Christians for several decades, one of the leaders of the group said, "We need to reboot our Christianity." This is the effect the heart of God has on us. I pray that this book may have this effect on you. The more we study this subject, the more we reach into our own hearts in order to discover the true motives by which we seek to serve our Lord.

When we honestly search our own hearts, we sometimes discover that we have gone off track in following after our own religious inclinations. When we discover that we have become more religious and less Christian, it is then that we must reboot our motives for doing what we do. This is what happened on the Passover/Pentecost of A.D. 30. The honest Jews who were there over two

thousand years ago saw that they had strayed from the heart of God because of their legal compliance to their own religiosity. They immediately saw in what the apostles said a message of deliverance from themselves. They saw the death of their religion in response to the heart of God that they had nailed to the cross. That day of Pentecost, and the times that followed, were truly defined by what Peter later said to another audience of religiously burdened people, "*Therefore, repent and be converted so that your sins may be blotted out, in order that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord*" (At 3:19).

In the writing of this book, it was my quest to make the truth of the gospel clear. I have sought to make the truth of the heart of God clear in order that His heart would touch ours. When this happens, it is then that we are motivated to start living the transformed life. Gospel living truly unleashes the times of refreshing in our lives. Our motivation for being who we claim to be as disciples of Jesus starts to make sense. And for this reason, we will be able to finish the course of our discipleship, not because we are running on our own power, but on the power of the gospel that lives in us.

If in some way this book encourages you to take your focus off religious performances, and refocus on the grace of the heart of God, then my purpose for writing has been accomplished. When we start giving off the aroma of the gospel of Jesus Christ in our lives, we will then begin living the refreshed life. The motivation of our being as a disciple of Jesus will be consumed by the incarnational offering of the love of God that appeared on earth over two thousand years ago.

## INTRODUCTION

At the time God said to Israel, “*You will have no other gods before Me,*” the people of Israel resided in a world of innumerable religions (Ex 20:3; Dt 5:7). If they sought for a god who would conform to their own desires, then there were an assortment of gods throughout the world from which they could choose.

If they did not want one of the gods that surrounded them as a nation, then they could make their own, which thing they did. We forget that we are often imaginative at exalting ourselves as our own god. We all have within us the desire as the king of Tyre, who proclaimed of himself, “*I am a god. I sit in the seat of gods in the midst of the seas*” (Ez 28:2).

But God reminded the king, as He would remind us, “*You are but a man and not a god, though you set your heart as the heart of God*” (Ez 28:2). Judgment was coming upon the king, as it will be on us if we set ourselves up in our own religiosity as our own self-appointed god. The Lord God said to the king of Tyre, “*Because you have set your heart as the heart of God,*” foreigners will bring you down (Ez 28:6). Herod made the same mistake as the king of Tyre. He exalted himself to the position that the people cried out of him, “*The voice of a god and not a man*” (At 12:22). When we become our own self-appointed god, we are no better than the king of Tyre and Herod. We have made ourselves the standard by which we judge ourselves religiously righteous in our own eyes. We have vio-

lated the first of the ten commandments.

Because we have been created after the image of the one true and living God, we have been blessed with a very creative mind. And herein lies our problem. If we allow our minds and emotions to be governed by our own mental ingenuity, then we give birth to religion. When we set aside any direction from the true God of heaven, then our minds and emotions take control of our religiosity.

Since God created us to be religiously minded, we cannot help ourselves. We go our own way to create gods in our minds and set them before us to be revered and worshiped. In doing so, we soothe our consciences while we allow ourselves to be led away from God by ourselves. We isolate ourselves from the one true and living God by worshipping the gods we have created in our own minds.

As god creators, we rightly assume that any god we would create in our minds must demand laws by which to live in order that we be justified before this god by keeping his laws. We conclude that there must be laws to obey and works to do in order to please this god we have embedded in our minds to please. These are things that the gods of idolatry require, and thus we create laws and religious rites for ourselves in order to validate and identify our particular faith. We know that our god must have a heart, so we project the limitations of our own heart into the behavior of our god. His heart is defined by our emotionality and

confined to the limits of our feelings.

Herein is the beginning of religion. This is the foundation upon which we create a distorted view of the heart of our imagined god, which heart never functions beyond what we can feel ourselves. We would define “religion” as the spiritual expressions of men in an effort to release their God-created instinct of reverence and worship. The function of religion is always governed by either man’s laws or emotions, or both. And because religion is governed by our own mental and emotional instincts, the Bible portrays religion as misguided. Idolatrous religion always takes one away from total focus on God.

Whether willfully, or ignorantly, our spirit of worship of what we perceive to be beyond ourselves, must be shown expressions of worship. If there are no expressions of worship, either through obedience to law, or self-devised meritorious religious rites, then our conscience gives us hassles in our relationship with our god. If we seek, as Israel, to set aside the law of God (Hs 4:6), then we are free to create our own laws by which we meritoriously justify ourselves before the god we have created after our own imagination. If we rebelliously seek to live without law, but at the same time soothe our guilt through good works, then we will develop a catalog of good deeds that must be performed in order to defray the wrath of this god we have created in our minds. In either case, whether through meritorious law-keeping or good works, our spirit of idolatry has created a religion wherein we seek to justify ourselves through our

own behavior.

In our efforts to justify ourselves, we become the focus of our own worship. We do so by honoring our systematic theology of self-justification, or our catalog of good works, whichever satisfies our conscience. In our religiosity we have laid on our consciences our own self-righteousness, and thus, find it very difficult to discover the heart of the true God. When one obsesses about his own desires, or his own self-righteous religiosity, he or she can never discover the true heart of God. And herein is the curse of religion with which we all must struggle.

Now we bring this into the historical context of the first century. It was in this century that the God of love invaded the religiosity of man with the revelation of His heart. Both the religious adherents of those who had gone astray from a true faith that was originally established at Mount Sinai (the Jews), and the adherents of those who did not have the Sinai law of the covenant (the Gentiles), were invaded by the gospel of the incarnate Son of God. The results of the invasion were overwhelming, so overwhelming that the world has never been the same since.

Into this religious world came the good news of God’s heart. The message of His heart was so radically different than the foundations upon which apostate Jewish religion, and the “pagan” idolatry of the Gentiles, were based. The message was radically different because what was revealed was the revelation of the heart of the one true God who exists

beyond and above the creative imagination of all men.

The totality of the events of the gospel started in a manger and will eventually be concluded in the final coming in a cloud. In between is the revelation of the heart of God in the flesh and His ascension to the right hand of God. The ministry of the incarnate Son of God was a mortal confrontation of the gospel of God's heart against the heartless religions of men. In the midst of the conflict between God's heart and heartless religiosity, a great company of religious people discovered something wonderful. They discovered the difference between their efforts to justify themselves through law-keeping and religious rites, and the justification that appeared through the grace that was revealed through the incarnational offering of the Son of God on the cross.

When the vast company of those who were obedient to the gospel eventually made their way from Jerusalem into the far corners of the ancient world, the heart of God, that was emulated through their character and behavior, was in direct conflict with the idolatrous religions of men. The fact that the gospel message was so different and so effective answers the question as to why the early messengers turned the world upside down through their gospel living (At 17:6). Their preaching of the heart of God that was revealed on the cross and in the resurrection, changed the world because it was so different from the guilt-producing self-righteous religions of men. Their lives emulated something that

was so radically different than idolatrous living.

It is imperative, therefore, since we are removed over two thousand years from the conflicts of that first century, that we renew our knowledge of what led to those heated conflicts that raged across the first century world when the gospel of God's heart undermined the very foundation upon which the religions of men were based. In fact, we will better understand why the conflicts were often unto the death of the gospel messengers when we understand that the message they bore was so different from the religions of the day. When the religions of the day became state religion, then the heat of the war against truth became so intense that the Holy Spirit had to write a special revelation to those who were willing to live the gospel unto their death (Rv 2:10; see 17:14).

Once we discover the power of the gospel within the early disciples, we too can find peace in the fact that the conflicts between the true gospel and the religions of men continue to rage unto this day. We conclude, however, that if the conflict between the gospel and religion does not exist, then religion has won the battle and the gospel message has been watered down to be just another religious belief that could be cataloged with all the other religions of the world. This very thing happened about two decades after that first Pentecost Sunday in A.D. 30, and it continues to happen today (See Gl 1:6-9).

It is simply the nature of the gospel to stir conflict with the religions of men

because the gospel touches the heart of men. This is true because the faith of God's righteousness, and the religions of man's righteousness, are always in conflict. God's imputed righteousness through faith has been conquered by religion if there is no conflict. And if there is no conflict, then the gospel is gone.

The gospel of the heart of God cannot reside in the heart of one who has given his heart over to the religious inventions of any person. Sacrificial submission to the gospel by faith, and narcissistic religiosity, cannot reside in the same heart. This is exactly what Jesus meant when He forewarned His disciples, "*Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword*" (Mt 10:34). When God invaded the world of religion through the incarnational offering of His Son, spiritual warfare began. It will not conclude until the end of all religion at the end of the world.

In order that we get our facts straight, one of the writers of the gospel message (Luke) wrote specifically in order that we understand this point:

*Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of those things that have been believed among us [Christians], just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word,*

*it seemed good to me also, having an accurate understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account ...*" (Lk 1:1-3).

This chronicler wrote these words in order that we "*might know the certainty of those things*" we have believed (Lk 1:4). Luke introduced the above purpose for his writing about twenty years after the ministry of Jesus and the revelation of the gospel. In this short time—the time from the revelation of the events of the gospel to the time of Luke's writing—the message of the gospel in some minds was becoming distorted. In some regions, religion was winning. Christianity was being transformed into just another religion. And so it is always with us as we allow those little religious gods within us to develop a religiosity that is contrary to the gospel.

The point is that we must continually remind ourselves of the truth of the wonderful gospel that invaded the world through Jesus Christ. If we do not, then we will succumb to the onslaught of the creative minds of men who craft religion and gods after their own desires. Therefore, we will be as Peter who wrote many years after his readers had heard and obeyed the gospel: "*I will not be negligent to always remind you of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth*" (2 Pt 1:12).

## Chapter 1

# THE ETERNAL INCARNATION

The window through which we can understand the heart of God is the sacrifice that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit offered through the incarnate Son of God. It is easy to quote a scripture that states, “*God is love*” (1 Jn 4:8). But to understand the full essence of this loving heart in reference to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is often difficult for finite beings as ourselves to comprehend.

After speaking of the grace of God that was revealed through the eternal offering of the incarnate Son, Paul was overwhelmed with the reality of the awesomeness of the heart of God that was revealed: “*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable [incomprehensible] are His judgments and His ways past finding out*” (Rm 11:33).

When we consider things that pertain to God, it would be right to conclude that it is impossible to understand fully the love of God that defines His heart for us. After we have loved to our extremity, God’s love carries on. And when it comes to the sacrifice of the incarnation itself, we find it quite humbling, but specifically, most incomprehensible.

Being handicapped with our emotional limitations, we seek to understand, to the best of our ability, the heart of God that was nailed on a wooden cross over two thousand years ago. Regardless of our limitations to understand fully the

depths of the heart of God, what we do understand through the incarnation, cross and resurrection is exceedingly moving, if not, overwhelming.

The necessity of the incarnation of the message of the gospel was based on the fact that animal blood, that is finite and terminal, could never cancel sin between the Infinite and the finite (See Hb 10:1-4). If animal sacrifices could atone for the sins of men against God, then it would be God creating a finite sacrifice for our sins against an eternal being. But that type of sacrifice would be cheap, and thus, it would cost God nothing.

Sacrifice means that someone has to pay a price. David, a man after God’s heart, realized the significance of this principle when he would not accept free animals that were given to him in order to offer any sacrifice to God for himself (See 2 Sm 24:24). **David knew that that which cost him nothing would have no value as an offering on behalf of himself.** The same was true of God. God could not create a sacrificial animal that was sufficient for the reconciliation of His created people to Himself for eternity. The created sacrificial animal would have cost Himself nothing. No love of God for us could ever have been revealed through a created animal that was sacrificed. In order to offer a sufficient sacrifice, therefore, God had to give of Himself. A price had to be paid.

We must consider another principle

in reference to sacrifices for sin. When the burnt offering required by the Sinai law was offered for the sins of the people, it had to be consumed completely upon the altar (Lv 1:1-9; 6:8-13). It was not to be eaten by those who offered it, as were other sacrifices that the people brought to eat in fellowship with the Levites. The burnt offering for sin had to be irreparably consumed on the altar, and thus, never restored to what it was before the sacrifice. And so it was with the sacrificial offering that God provided for our sanctification.

Since the burnt offering of the Sinai law was established in many ways to illustrate that which was to be revealed through the gospel, then we are beginning to understand the use of the word “sacrifice” in reference to the incarnational sacrifice of the Son of God. Jesus indeed existed in the form of God before the incarnation (Ph 2:5-9). He existed in the form of God as spirit (Jn 4:24). We are assured of this because of what John wrote: “*And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us*” (Jn 1:11). Jesus was not “in the flesh” in eternity, and then, continued as flesh on this earth. The text says that He **was made** flesh. The form of spirit in which Jesus was as God the Son, was brought into the flesh of a body that would be perishable as all men.

To what extent was the incarnation? It had to be complete in order to be a sufficient sacrifice for our sins. There were no peculiarities about the body of Jesus that made him different from any other man. His body, as Isaiah prophesied, could be “wounded,” “bruised” and

“stripes” laid upon it (Is 53:5). It was a body that had no unique beauty (Is 53:2). And when we consider His emotional incarnation, the Son of God was incarnate into emotions and feelings that could sorrow and grieve from being rejected and despised (Is 53:3). The incarnation was truly complete in the sense that God the Son came into our world in the fullness of who we are in body. He did so because of His love for us whom He had created (Cl 1:16).

So God the Holy Spirit revealed through the pen of Paul that “*He [the Son] made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant and being made in the likeness of men*” (Ph 2:7 - IKJV). Other translations say He “*emptied Himself*” (*American Standard Version*). Still others read that He “*made himself nothing*” (*New International Version*).

We suppose the translators assumed the He “made Himself nothing” in comparison to what He formerly was in spirit with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. From what the Spirit revealed, we understand what incarnation actually is. And since the Son was the “only begotten” Son from the Father, we must conclude that “incarnation” finds its definition in the reality of the Son of God being made in all ways as we are as finite men (Ph 2:7). Once the Holy Spirit fertilized the egg of Mary’s womb, the Son of God “*was made in the likeness of men.*” The revelation of the heart of God was set in motion (Ph 2:7).

Though we have a difficult time understanding what actually took place

when God the Son became flesh in the incarnation, we must not question the fact that such happened. When we were children we imagined that God had literal eyes, ears and a face. We even believed that He had arms and legs. But in our childish understanding, we missed the metaphors that are used in the Bible to explain the being and function of God among men. If our childish imagination of God were true, **then the Son of God on earth was only a parallel transfer from His existence as one with the Trinity in eternity to what He was in the flesh during His ministry.**

If Jesus had eyes, a nose and ears as God before the incarnation, **then there would have been no incarnation.** And if there were no true incarnation, then we would actually cut the heart out of the incarnational sacrifice of God on the cross. The gospel of His offering would be of no value. There would have been no sacrifice on the part of the Son of God

in giving up being in the form of God and emptying Himself of His spirit existence as God. **If there was no incarnation, then there was no sufficient sacrifice for our sins.** We would be a people of a simple religious faith that must be pitied by the unbelieving world for believing such a preposterous fantasy.

The more “fleshly” we might view the Son before His birth into the flesh of a man, the less we consider the incarnation to be a divine function on the part of God on behalf of our sins. If there were no complete incarnation, then there would have been no adequate sacrifice that was qualified for the cross of justification. The truth of the gospel, therefore, is based on the real and actual incarnation of the Son of God. If we are to understand the extent to which God was moved in heart to come for us, we must understand the extreme extent of the incarnation.

## Chapter 2

### THE ETERNAL SACRIFICE

When we bring together incarnation and sacrifice, and the eternal results thereof, we must consider the possibility that the sacrifice of the Son was eternal. It does not seem reasonable to believe that the sacrifice was simply for six hours on the cross, or even for the thirty-three years of incarnational living on this earth. These considerations move us to venture into things about which we have only glimpses of revelation.

When we speak of future things, we

invariably reach into a realm of speculation where we consider things that are sometimes outside the realm of revelation. We are encouraged to walk through doors of little revelation, but our speculations must be guided by our conclusions that we reap from what is clearly revealed on the subject in the Bible. For this reason, we must not make dogmatic conclusions beyond what the Scriptures would indicate on any subject of which there are only brief statements of revelation.

Neither must our speculations contradict clear statements of Scripture.

We must guard against our speculations of future things being final conclusions that would contradict that against which we have struggled to overcome or control in this present life as disciples of Jesus. We must not conclude that we will enjoy a carnal future when all our Christian life we have sought to live beyond that which is carnal. Too many speculators of the future have assumed they would receive carnal power or possessions in the future, while in the Christian life, our aspirations have always been to think and behave with a spiritual mind that is above the carnal. God will not bring into existence in our future that which is contrary to that from which He has asked us to refrain in this life. In fact, **those who are living the gospel life have no desire to be controlled by material blessings or to access power in the future, for in their gospel living in this world they have grown to deny these things.**

With these thoughts in mind, the Holy Spirit would have us think of things in the future in reference to what is coming. It is for this reason that the Scriptures speak of the things to come. After concluding revelation concerning things in reference to the final appearance of Jesus with the souls of those beloved saints who have passed on before us, the Spirit encouraged the Thessalonian disciples, *“Therefore, comfort one another with these words”* (1 Th 4:18).

The words that Jesus and the Holy Spirit used to convey the future coming

of Jesus were comforting in the fact that Jesus was actually coming again. However, what will transpire when He appears, or His presence when He is revealed, is somewhat left to our imagination.

After the resurrection, and when the disciples saw Jesus for the last time outside Jerusalem, He had for the previous six weeks shown Himself alive in His resurrected body (At 1:3). The incarnate body that had become flesh (Jn 1:17), and was previously crucified on a cross, buried in a tomb, and then resurrected on the third day, was in their presence (Mk 16:6,7). He appeared to the disciples with a body that was *“flesh and bones”* (Lk 24:39). The same incarnate body that had gone into the tomb sat there in their presence and ate food with them after the tomb.

In view of Paul’s statements concerning our own “new habitation” that is yet to come after the resurrection, we would conclude that the resurrected body of Jesus was the same as our changed body will be after the final resurrection. We do not know all the details.

Now in reference to our future resurrected body, the Holy Spirit revealed through Paul a mystery that *“we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed”* (1 Co 15:51). *“The trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed”* (1 Co 15:52). This perishable body in which we now dwell will be changed into a body that will not perish (1 Co 15:53). *“We know that if our earthly house [body] of this tent is destroyed, we have a building from God,*

*a house not made with hands **that is eternal in the heavens***" (2 Co 5:1).

It is not our primary desire, therefore, to die and be without a body before the Lord. "*For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, **not because we want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, so that mortality may be swallowed up by life***" (2 Co 5:4). It is not our final desire to be disembodied, and thus be without the presence of a body. We seek to be embodied. In our new spiritual body in which we will be with the Lord, He Himself is in some way possibly embodied in this spiritual body at this very time. We are not sure.

We yearn to understand the nature of our heavenly body that is to come in order to better understand the resurrected body of Jesus in which He stood before the disciples after His resurrection and at the time of His ascension. We wonder concerning our new habitation because of one statement that the Holy Spirit made in 1 John 3:2:

*Beloved, now we are the children of God, and **it has not yet been revealed what we will be**. But we know that when He appears, **we will be like Him**, for we will see Him as **He is**.*

It is important to notice that when Jesus comes again, "***we will be like Him***." We will "see" Him when He comes, and thus the coming will not be in spirit form, for spirits cannot be seen with human eyes unless they are manifested beyond that which is spirit. Therefore, we must not forget that John re-

vealed that we will see Him "***as He is***."

John was writing at least two decades after the ascension of Jesus. He used the **present tense** to explain the present existence of Jesus at the time He wrote. As Jesus is now, then in the same bodily form we will see Him in His coming.

Since we will be like Jesus when He comes, then according to what Paul revealed in 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5, **we conclude that in some way He is now like what we will be with Him in our new habitation to come**. The only means by which we can in some way speculate concerning the nature of the resurrected body of Jesus in which He now is, and with which He will be when He comes again, is to understand how Paul explained we will be when we are resurrected. As we will be, so Jesus came forth from the grave changed, but still in some way as we will be according to the explanations that the Spirit gave concerning our future "spiritual body." Now the Spirit goes into detail in 1 Corinthians 15. He first establishes that there will be a change in our bodily existence.

*All flesh is not the same flesh. But there is one flesh of men, another flesh of beasts, another of fish, another of birds. There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies. But the glory of the heavenly is one and the glory of the earthly is another (1 Co 15:39,40).*

The Spirit continues to help us understand that we will be bodily changed at the resurrection into something differ-

ent: “*So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown perishable. **It is raised imperishable***” (1 Co 15:42). Our natural body in which we now dwell “*is sown a natural body. It is raised a **spiritual body**. There is a natural body and there is a spiritual body*” (1 Co 15:44). Here is the point of the Spirit in reference to the necessity of the changing of our present body: “***Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable***” (1 Co 15:50). And so we would conclude the same concerning the resurrected body of Jesus. His incarnate body went into the tomb, but there was something different about it when He stood in the presence of the disciples after the resurrection, and with which He ascended out of their presence (At 1:9-11).

However, our speculations here must be cautioned by what Jesus said of His own body immediately after the resurrection. He stated that He was still in a body of flesh and bones (Lk 24:39). It was this body that ascended out of their sight. Therefore, when we consider His presence as to what form He now is, and the form by which He will be revealed when He comes again, we must conclude that somewhere between the ascension and the final coming **He will be as we will be in our spiritual body that is to come**. We would not conclude that He must remain in the bodily form in which He was at the time of the ascension. That is really not our business to know. But we do know what John stated, that He will come in a bodily form that we can recognize.

John said that at His coming we will see Him as He presently is (1 Jn 3:2). Jesus will not appear from heaven as a spirit, the form in which He was with the Father in eternity before the incarnation. He gave up being in spirit as the Father when He was made in the flesh of man (Ph 2:6,7). He gave up the form of God in order to take on the incarnate nature of our earthly body. Jesus reassured His disciples that His body could sit in their presence before a plate of food (Lk 24:42). He was resurrected with a body to which Mary could lovingly cling (Jn 20:17). But in the final resurrection we will be made into the spiritual body in which He will be revealed.

In order to reassure His disciples of His resurrection, Jesus “*showed them His hands and His feet*” (Lk 24:40). The body that appeared in their presence was the same body that they had laid in the tomb three days before. The resurrection of His incarnate body was proven true by the flesh and bones that stood before them on that memorial occasion. John later wrote of the encounter that he and the other apostles had with the resurrected Jesus who ministered the word to them between the resurrection and ascension:

*That which [the Word] was from the beginning, that **we have heard**, that **we have seen with our eyes**, that **we have looked** [Gr., gazed] **upon and our hands have handled**, we proclaim concerning the Word of Life (1 Jn 1:1).*

This was the same body that six

weeks after the resurrection “*was taken up and a cloud received Him out of their sight*” (At 1:9). His was a bodily resurrection, and thus, we suppose that His was a bodily ascension. And since we will see Him as He presently is when He comes again, we assume it will be a bodily coming in a spiritual body, for we will actually see Him as He is (1 Jn 3:2). He will not come as a spirit in the clouds. The Holy Spirit says that we will actually be able to behold Him with the physical eyes of this body in which we now dwell.

In what body form Jesus now dwells is certainly left to our speculation. We do know that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven. We do know that this physical body of flesh and blood will be changed when the heavenly kingdom comes. We do know that we will be changed to be like He presently is. And thus, we conclude that at His ascension, **Jesus did not return to be in the form of God as He was before the incarnation.** It is with this conclusion that we affirm that **the incarnational sacrifice was forever.** Jesus too will reside in a bodily presence with which He is now clothed, and with which we will be clothed at our resurrection, and throughout eternity.

The preceding conclusion has profound implications. The conclusion is important because of what John wrote in 2 John 7: “*For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess that Jesus Christ is coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist.*” We know that the Greek word for “com-

ing” in the text can also be translated “presence.” If we would use this translation, the statement of John would be speaking of the existing presence of Jesus as He now is in eternity. Because it is translated with the word “coming,” we assume that John is speaking of the final coming of Jesus as he did in 1 John 3:2. But if we keep the bodily ascension in mind when we consider the statement of 2 John 7, then we would conclude that Jesus is presently in the body with which He ascended, and with which He will come again. There would be no change in bodily presence from resurrection to final coming, and then, into eternity.

We are not told that when Jesus ascended out of the sight of the disciples that He reverted to a spirit form. It could be that He did, but it seems that the Holy Spirit was revealing through the pen of John, who witnessed the ascension, that in some way Jesus continues in the bodily form that He had at the ascension, and with which He will come again in the future.

John also mentioned that Jesus “**is coming in the flesh.**” We must consider that since flesh and blood cannot inherit the heavenly kingdom of God, then John was actually using the present tense to refer to the incarnation. In other words, he was emphasizing the “presence” of Jesus in the incarnate body of His earthly ministry.

At the time John wrote in the middle or latter part of the first century, the Holy Spirit envisioned the Gnostic heresy that would gain strength among Christians in the second century. The subjects of the

heresy would deny the incarnation. The Gnostics assumed that Jesus was only an apparition of the disciples' minds, or a spirit that indwelt a human body of the man Jesus for the duration of the ministry of Jesus. At the cross, this "spirit" (the Christ), went back to be with the Father when Jesus made the statement, "*Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit!*" (Lk 23:46). The man Jesus subsequently died and His body was buried, and is still somewhere in a tomb in Palestine. Some Gnostics believed that Jesus revived in the tomb, and then fled to Egypt.

What John argues is that Jesus the Son of God did come in the flesh of man. The incarnation was true and real. And to deny the eternal incarnation is to deny the sufficiency of the sacrifice of the cross. The Gnostics, therefore, were cutting the heart out of the gospel.

Whether John was at the time of his writing referring to the incarnation of the past, or to the final coming of the future, his use of the present tense remains valid in reference to the Son of God initially giving up and leaving the form of God when He was incarnate in the womb of Mary (Ph 2:5-8). Jesus was incarnate into the flesh and blood of man. His flesh and bones were crucified and resurrected. His flesh and bones ascended in a cloud out of the sight of the disciples. And with a changed bodily form, the same into which we will be changed, He is coming again.

From the ascension to the final coming there was a change to His incarnate body, for we will be like Him, and He

like us. But in our resurrection we will all be changed into our spiritual body. We must conclude, therefore, that Jesus will come in a bodily form that we can see with our eyes. Paul referred to this spiritual body as a mystery, and thus it indeed is.

If the incarnate body of Jesus came from the grave, stood with the disciples from the time of the resurrection until the time of the ascension, and then was received up into heaven, the emphasis of John in 2 John 7 in some way indicates that **the incarnation was forever**. And when we speak of the total sacrifice that the Son of God made for us, the sacrifice was far beyond the cross. It was forever!

This conclusion may reveal a more profound meaning of the Hebrews 2 text. Jesus was incarnate to be lower than angels, but was incarnate in the flesh of man in order to dwell among His sanctified brethren forever. "*For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brothers*" (Hb 2:11).

We are overwhelmed by these conclusions. His eternal sacrifice is incomprehensible to finite minds. It is a sobering conclusion that brings an eternal meaning to His promise that He would build His *ekklesia* (assembly), die for the redeemed with incarnate blood, and then deliver this sanctified body of justified believers into eternal dwelling in the presence of God. With these conclusions, we are beginning to comprehend the sublime heart of God that was not only revealed on the cross, but also in the incarnation. The incarnation was not temporary, and

the sacrifice on the cross was more than six hours on a cross outside Jerusalem. The incarnation extended deeper and longer. The Hebrew writer continued,

*Therefore, since the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise partook of the same, so that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage* (Hb 2:14,15).

Our fear of death will only be terminated with the death of our last enemy, which is death (1 Co 15:26). This will be realized only at the sound of the last trumpet when Jesus is announced from heaven. It will be then that death is swallowed up in the victory of the saints' res-

urrection from the dead (1 Co 15:54-57).

When we speak of the church (assembly - *ekklesia*) of Christ, we must think beyond this world. We must think into eternity where Jesus will dwell among His people who will also reside in spiritual bodies. It is then that we will truly have a personal relationship with Jesus in the bodily form in which He presently dwells.

This was the eternal heart of God that was revealed through the sacrifice of the eternal incarnation. The offering of the incarnate body sanctified the *ekklesia*. The resurrection of His incarnate body gave hope to the *ekklesia*. His final return in His incarnate body will call the *ekklesia* into eternal dwelling in the presence of God. With this eternal sacrifice we are eternally justified and sanctified, and made fit for eternal dwelling.

## Chapter 3

### LEAVING FATHER OR SON

We once stood beside the grave sites of missionaries of the Moffet Mission in Kuruman, South Africa that was established in the early 1800s. We had mixed emotions while standing there. We noticed a great number of tombstones. The tombstones were a witness to the death of those who gave up fathers and mothers in Europe, many of whom they would never see again in their lifetime, when they boarded ships that were destined for Africa.

It is told that when some missionaries left Europe to go to the "white man's grave" of Africa, that on their departure

from Europe, the brave missionaries would pack their belongings in their own coffins, and then load them on ships that were destined to a people to whom they would preach the gospel. Their dedication to their mission was not a matter of soothing a spirit of adventure, but a matter of preaching the gospel to the "dark continent."

As we stood there by the grave sites of so many at the Moffet Mission who had eventually put to use their coffins, we noticed that about half of the grave sites were those of children. Many of the children of the pioneering messen-

gers of the gospel from Europe had sacrificed, not only themselves, but also their own children to fever and disease in order to accomplish the mission of the gospel. There lay in those graves the fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, who were buried alongside one another because there was a deep-seated love in their hearts for the lost. In those graves were fathers and mothers who had left their own fathers and mothers in Europe in order to bear the glorious message of the gospel to a land that needed so much hope. Our experience at that grave site was mixed with both joy and sadness, but primarily joy.

Our joy emerged from the knowledge that these were truly dedicated servants of God who knew the heart of God. They ended up in that graveyard because their hearts led them there. Those graves were a witness to the power of the heart of God that was revealed through the gospel. The graves were a testimony of those who sought to live the gospel they believed. There was nothing that these sacrificial bearers of the gospel would not have done in order to preach the gospel message to the world.

The early messengers buried at Kuruman were as Abraham, on whom God called to sacrifice his only son. Abraham was obedient to the call. He concluded that if he left his son for a time through the offering, God was able to return Isaac to him through resurrection. Abraham *“concluded that God was able to raise him [Isaac] up, even from the dead, from which he also figuratively received him back”* (Hb 11:19). The

spared life of Isaac was a figure of the future resurrection when we will receive back all our own loved ones.

Those gospel bearers of the heart of God from Europe were able to offer themselves and their children on the altar of sacrifice because both fathers and sons knew that God would eventually reunite them in the resurrection of the dead when Jesus comes again. And for this reason, they did not need to sorrow upon their departure from one another as they boarded ships to leave Europe for Africa. As Paul reminded the saints in Thessalonica, they did not *“grieve as others who have no hope”* (1 Th 4:13). They firmly believed in the gospel that *“Jesus died and rose again”* (1 Th 4:14). They momentarily cried on the shoulders of one another upon their physical departure at the harbor, but realized that at the sound of the last trumpet in the end, *“God will bring with Him [Jesus] those [loved ones] who have fallen asleep in Jesus”* (1 Th 4:14). They found comfort in this resurrection reality that permeates the heart of the message of the gospel (1 Th 4:18).

And now we have a better understanding of what Jesus meant, when during His ministry, He called on those who would be His disciples to love Him more than family. To his Jewish readers who cherished the family, Matthew recorded that Jesus said on one occasion, *“He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me”* (Mt 10:37). To the same Jewish families, and on another occasion

when He was nearing the cross, He made a promised to all those who would answer His call to sacrificial discipleship:

*And every one who has left houses, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for My name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit everlasting life* (Mt 19:29).

Everything about which Jesus spoke of leaving and receiving was precious to the Jews. Immediate family was a part of their heritage as Jews. Their identity as Jews was engulfed in genealogies, for through genealogy they proved their Jewishness. And as Jews, the “land” was a part of their continuation in history as Jews. The promised land was an inheritance in fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham (Gn 12:1-4). It was their right to have the land for the heritage of their families. Nevertheless, Jesus called on His Jewish disciples to be willing to leave both family and land.

The gospel would eventually mean that the Jews would sacrifice both family and land. They sacrificed their family heritage when all Jews who were obedient to the gospel became one man in Christ where there is neither Jew nor Gentile (Gl 3:26-29). The Jews sacrificed their land in the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem when over one million Jews were killed and the rest were sold into slavery throughout the Roman Empire (See Mt 24). Palestine was depopulated of Jews.

The beauty of sacrifices on the part of the Jewish Christians, however, was

that they sacrificed both with joy. If it were necessary, they joyfully left their physical family heritage when they came into fellowship with Gentiles in Christ. They left lands when they discovered the heart of God who gave His Son, and subsequently, they were scattered everywhere throughout the world in order to preach the gospel (At 8:4). This helps us understand the historical statements that were made in reference to the new Jewish Christians on the day of Pentecost and thereafter: “*And they sold their possessions and goods and divided them to all, as everyone had need*” (At 2:45).

*Nor was there any among them who lacked, for as many as were owners of land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold* (At 4:34).

“*And Joseph, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas ... having land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet*” (At 4:36,37). We would conclude that the first disciples, who were primarily Jews, got the message of the heart of the gospel. They were willing to do anything that God would call on them to do, for God went to the extreme and did all that was necessary for them through the incarnational offering of His Son on their behalf.

The message of the gospel involves **leaving and giving** all that is necessary in order to follow down the road that Jesus took in order to make the gospel available to the world. When we speak of the incarnation, therefore, we discover

a part of what the Father and Son did on our behalf. We understand what Jesus meant when He made the preceding statements in reference to the sacrifices that His Jewish brethren would have to make upon their obedience to the gospel. And the beautiful thing about what Jewish Christians left is that they did it with joy. It was as James said primarily to his Jewish readers, “*My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials*” (Jas 1:2). And such did the Jewish Christians in their early discipleship after obedience to the gospel:

*For you had compassion on me in my chains, and took joyfully the seizure of your goods, knowing that you have for yourselves in heaven a better and an enduring possession (Hb 10:34).*

The gospel involves, if necessary, leaving fathers and mothers in homelands, and often sons and daughters in the lands of one’s mission. The gospel means following in the steps of Jesus when He came to us with the good news of the incarnation, cross, resurrection and ascension. Paul said, “*Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus*” (Ph 2:5).

Paul continued in the Philippians 2 context that Jesus left heaven through incarnation in order to be a missionary with the gospel message to a “dark world” (Ph 2:6-8). This is the spirit of sacrifice that we must see in the incarnation. It is a sacrificial offering because God the Father and Son so loved the world (Jn 3:16), that they were not willing that any one

person of their creation perish (2 Pt 3:9). When we discover the heart of the Father and Son to willingly leave one another for others, **then there is no one on earth, whether friends or family, that we are not willing to leave for the sake of the gospel.** When a Christian sincerely says to the Father, “Ask anything and I will do it,” then we know that this Christian has discovered the heart of God.

While on the cross, the words of Jesus cut to our hearts in view of what the Father had to do on our behalf. Jesus cried out to the Father, “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*” (Mt 27:46). The common interpretation of this statement is that the Father had forsaken Jesus only for a moment on the cross because He bore the sins of the world. But we think the meaning goes far, far deeper. We wonder what tears flowed in heaven thirty-three years before the cross when the Son possibly said to the Father, “It is time, Father, for Me to leave You forever in the form in which We now exist.”

The Son subsequently left the Father through incarnation and would never be with the Father again in existence as He was before the incarnation. If the incarnation was indeed forever, then it was at the ascension that the Son was united in presence again with the Father in heaven (Hb 8:1), but only as He now is and we will be (1 Jn 3:2). In the resurrection, the Son would forever be as we will be in our new spiritual bodies in eternity, but also in the presence of the Father. All this will be possible because the Father and Son had a heart for us.

Because of His own sacrificial offering to leave His Father through incarnation, Jesus found no difficulty in calling on those who would be His disciples to be willing to also leave their fathers and mothers, sons and daughters on behalf of those who were dead in sin. Jesus was not a hypocrite in making the request. He and His Father had so loved the world that He gave up and left the Father for us (Jn 3:16). We too should so love the world of lost humanity to be willing to leave our fathers and mothers for Him. Our hope is in the fact that the leaving will eventually end in restoration through resurrection. It will be in our resurrection when Jesus comes again that our reunion will forever be sealed with all those who die in Christ. The cross was the solution for justification, but it is our faith in the coming resurrection that turned our hopeless end into an endless hope.

In the context of Jesus' call for His disciples to be willing to leave family and possessions for Him, He was speaking specifically concerning what He did for them. His reference was to their obedience to the gospel. If any unbelieving family member would hinder their obedience to the gospel, then they must choose Him over them. If family must be sacrificed for Jesus, as Jesus so loved us through the sacrifice of the incarnation and cross, then with the same sacrificial love we must put Him first.

Herein is revealed the heart of God that was revealed through the Son. When Jesus said to Philip, "*He who has seen Me has seen the Father,*" He meant more than presence, essence and being (Jn

14:9). We see the heart of God in the incarnate presence of Jesus who came to dwell among us. We see the heart of God in His eternal loving sacrifice for us.

Jesus is the revelation of God's love for us. He was explanatory and patient with Philip on the occasion of the preceding statement of John 14:9. But He was definitive by asking Philip, "*How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?*" (Jn 14:9). Philip was thinking physical. But Jesus was focusing on the heart of God. God's heart was revealed through the loving Jesus who was standing in their midst at that very moment.

We see the heart of God through Jesus, and thus we yearn to be in the presence of that heart in eternal glory. And when we understand what Jesus left in heaven for us through the incarnation, our hearts are more than touched. They are forever changed. The entire focus of our lives is changed from that which is of this world to that which is above and beyond. No human relationships or possessions will detour those who have truly discovered the heart of God that was manifested through Jesus. This is gospel living.

So we stood beside the graves of so many in Kuruman, South Africa whose hearts had been touched by the revelation of the heart of God through Jesus. It was a moment of joy to experience such a testimony of those who had left so much because Jesus had left so much for them. There was nothing that the Father in heaven could ask of them that they would not have done because the Father through Jesus, held back nothing from them that was needed by them to be with Him.

## Chapter 4

# RELIGION: GROWTH AWAY FROM GOD

In order to understand the heart of God that was revealed through the Father's expression of grace on the cross, we must in some way determine a definition of religion. We are religious because we were created to search for that which is beyond or above ourselves. Everyone has an innate desire to worship, or be religious. In the absence of revelation from God, however, we will devise some system of worship or religious expression that brings some intellectual and emotional relief, and thus, religion is born. Even when there is Divine revelation, we still have a tendency to go our own way religiously (See Hs 4:6). This explains the history of Israel, and especially the nature of the religion of the Jews at the time Jesus came into the world (See Gl 1:13).

The religiosity of man in the absence of Divine direction, combined with the will of men to go their own way, moves adherents of religion into different religious sects or groups that conform to a determined, and agreed upon, code of religious rites, or doctrines of theology. In this way religion is inherently divisive among men. Because it is divisive, it not only divides religious people within societies, but it also moves one away from the gospel, and thus away from the heart of God.

Because religion is self-oriented, it has a deceptive nature about itself. It makes one feel that he is either emotion-

ally or legally growing closer to God, but in actuality, is moving away from the heart of God. This occurs in religion because the more religious one would become through the establishment of more codes of religiosity, one feels comfortable and content in the bondage of his or her own religiosity. In our religiosity, we deceive ourselves into thinking that the more religious rites we establish for ourselves, the more religious we are, and thus, the closer we feel we are to God. But the exact opposite is happening.

It might be good for us to regularly read 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12. The text speaks as if it were written just yesterday, for we live in a religious world where religious people willingly accept messengers of Satan who are disguised as apostles (2 Co 11:13-15). Because they do not have a love for the truth, they accept "*deceiving power and signs and wonders*" as miraculous in order to validate their religiosity. Such religious workers are ministers of Satan who "*masquerade themselves as ministers of righteousness*" (1 Co 1:15). These would be those who cry out "Lord, Lord," but are not interested in the will of God (Mt 7:21).

The better we understand the phenomenon of religion, the better we can understand the explosive response to the gospel in the first century. The day of Pentecost in A.D. 30 in Acts 2 is an example of a surreal paradigm shift from

religion to the gospel. It was a day when honest and sincere people finally realized that their religion (Judaism) had moved them so far away from God that they felt hopeless in their religiosity. When the respondents on that day heard the announcement that the heart of God was revealed through the crucified and resurrected Son of God, they were overwhelmed. Grace had appeared to dispel religion.

Herein is revealed the inherent problem with religion from which those initial respondents fled. Because we are created religious, we, as a collective of religious individuals, will always agree upon a religious code of belief and conduct by which each one of us is accepted into our particular religious group, and by which each religious group is identified. Religion demands a collective of individuals, and thus, in order to be accepted into this collective (fellowship), rules must be established for everyone in order that the collective identify itself as a unique religious sect. The rules, or codes of identity, are the means by which the adherents to a particular religion find confidence in their faith. When the religious rites are collectively obeyed, then the religious sect is propagated throughout history. Such was the nature of the Jews' religion (Gl 1:13). By adherence to their religious rites of identity, they were able to continue their identity, and above all, their separation from the world of idolatrous Gentiles.

Compliance to the rules of a particular religion becomes the means by which one is considered faithful, and thus

justified before God. In religion, the adherents of any particular sect always confuse acceptance by those of the religion with acceptance by God. In their obedience to the rules of their respective religion, the adherents assume that such is the condition upon which they are accepted by God. The rules and laws of the religion, therefore, become the means by which one is justified as a member of a particular religious sect, as well as whether one is justified before God. If one is not justified as a faithful member of a particular religious sect, then he or she is judged unfaithful, and thus fails to be justified before God. Faithfulness to a particular religious sect is thus the condition upon which one is justified faithful before God.

This same system of identity is sometimes used to engineer a national/religious society. The reassuring religious rites and civil rules (laws) within a society will often originate from social upheaval that is taking place in society. In order to bring peace, the religious world often synchronizes religious and civil rules by constructing a national/religious order wherein each individual is accepted in the society by adherence to the civil/religious rules. Adherence to the civil/religious rules makes a theocracy, and such was Israel made at Mt. Sinai.

However, the initial faith of Israel was not a religion, for the foundation of the Jews' faith was originally based on the revealed word of God at Mt. Sinai. In contrast to people bringing peace within their own societies through devised systems of national religion, Israel

was established as a theocracy through direct revelation from God.

In a theocracy, civil government and religion become one. In order for one to be an accepted citizen of the governed society, he or she must adhere to the rules (laws) of the religion, and vice versa. Those who do not comply with the rules of the theocracy are considered apostates, and thus expelled from the society. Built within the Sinai law were rules that maintained a separation of the Israelites from the nations around them. These rules were there for a purpose, for God did not want Israel to go the way of the world, which thing they invariably did.

For the same reason, Islam is a theocratic religion. Rules were instituted in the Quran to identify a Muslim, and thus keep the Muslim separated from the “infidel” at all costs. In the conflicts of the seventh century, Muhammad organized his army into a single fighting force by introducing a religious nationalism whereby all citizens fought against all other religions that did not conform to his religion.

However, advocates of a theocratic society may be zealous to keep the laws of the nation and religion in the beginning of the new nation, but when citizens begin to set aside, or become frustrated with the rules that define their faith and government (Hb 4:6), apostasy is no longer defined as apostasy. That which was originally considered apostate teaching becomes the new definition of the national religion. So went the theocratic society of Israel when the people gave up that which defined them as a unique

people of God. This is the fear of fundamental Islamists today in their efforts to fight against those Muslims who want to modernize Islam. The fundamental Islamist’s greatest fear is to modernize in the way of the West, and in doing so, lose his identity as a theocracy according to the definition of the Quran.

But in reference to Israel, Israel began as a heavenly defined society through the authority of Divine civil and moral laws that were given to the people directly from God. However, the citizens of Israel eventually laid aside the law of God (See Hs 4:6). Israel’s faith in God that was defined by the revealed will of God was replaced with their own fabricated religion, which was idolatry.

The command that they have no other gods before the one true and living God was replaced with gods they had created after their own imagination and religious rites that conformed to their desires. They became their own gods of their own religion. The law of God was replaced with their own religious rites by which they would claim allegiance to the new gods in their own minds.

Israel went astray as a nation of God by moving from God’s authority in matters of faith to their own self-righteous authority. This is the inherent nature of all religion. When Israel went astray from its original God-given national and spiritual boundaries, then the citizens did that which was right in their own eyes. On more than one occasion in the book of Judges the statement is made, “*Every man did what was right in his own eyes*” (Jg 17:6).

Now this brings us to a similar, but somewhat different scenario in reference to the Jews' religion that existed in the fullness of time when Jesus came (Gl 4:4). The text of Mark 7:1-9 (Mt 15:1-9) is one of the best texts that explains the religious environment into which Jesus came with the gospel, as well as the religious environment in which we live today. In this confrontation of the scribes and Pharisees with Jesus concerning the religious rite of washing of hands, the true danger of religion is revealed.

The scribes and Pharisees had come to Jesus with the complaint that *"they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands"* (Mk 7:2). We would certainly agree that washing one's hands before eating would be a good practice. Though the statement, "cleanliness is next to godliness," is not a statement of the Sinai law, it was certainly a good statement that expressed the laws of cleanliness of the Sinai law. By the time Jesus came, however, the washing of hands before eating had been made a religious rite by the Jews. The Jewish fathers had taken that which was a good practice of cleanliness and added it to their religion as a religious rite. The problem, therefore, was that at the time of Jesus the *"Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, thus holding the tradition of the elders"* (Mk 7:3). Mark recorded that *"there are many other things that they have received in order to observe"* (Mk 7:4).

In this judgment of the Pharisees and scribes, it was not just about washing hands. It was about the catalog of

religious rites that had been handed down from one generation to another. In the case of the disciples with Jesus, the Jews' religious customs had been ignored by some of the disciples of Jesus. The religious rites that defined Judaism were broken.

Jesus took the complaint of the scribes and Pharisees as an opportunity to identify the curse of the religion of Judaism. Jesus first rebuked the Pharisees, and all the Jews, by introducing the prophecy of Isaiah. Isaiah spoke of those who would indeed begin with the Sinai law, but then digress into a self-imposed religiosity.

Jesus introduced the problem of the Jews' religion: *"Well did Isaiah prophecy of you hypocrites ..."* (Mk 7:6). In the confrontation, Jesus introduced the word "hypocrites." Religion is always hypocritical. For example, and as an example to bring Jesus' teaching on this matter into our own world today, it is a common religious rite among Christians to pray before the eating of a meal. This observance is practiced throughout the world. It is a tradition that has been handed down from our fathers, a tradition that has no authority of Scripture. Nevertheless, as the Jews' washing of hands before they ate, Christians say a prayer before they eat. Both are good practices, and honorable. However, since both are only religious traditions, they are thus inherently hypocritical if they are bound on the consciences of people as a religious law.

For example, suppose there was no water available when a Jew walked

across the country and desired it was time to eat a snack on the road. We would guess that he would eat with unwashed hands. Maybe the legalistic Jew would have taken some water with him in order to wash his hands. Now suppose a Christian says a prayer before a meal before he starts on a long journey. After he has traveled down the road for several hours, he becomes hungry and desires a snack. He reaches into his snack bag and eats a sandwich without saying a prayer.

As the Jew who ate his snack without washing his hands, so the Christian ate his snack without saying a prayer. If either the Jew or Christian bound their particular religious rite as law, then both became hypocrites on the road. The problem with religious rites is that they are self-oriented, and thus often at times manifest the hypocrisy of those who teach such as law. Sometimes the adherents of either rite would obey the rite, but sometimes they would not. It is difficult to be consistent when living under the authority of religious rites that are considered to be law.

Jesus identified the problem of religion with His continued rebuke from Isaiah, *“This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me”* (Mk 7:6). The more we honor our religious rites, and teach men to observe them as law, the further we are moving ourselves away from the heart of God and His will. When we serve our own hearts out of guilt in order to comply with our own self-oriented religiosity, the less we understand, and the more we move toward the heart of God.

This problem goes further than hypocrisy. Jesus explained, *“In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men”* (Mk 7:7). Religion moves the “commandments of men” into the realm of doctrine. The reason this happens is that in the social order of our religion, we must daily and directly confront those who enforce the “commandments of men.” We are intimidated because of our desire to conform to the norm of the accepted religious rites of our religion. God is somewhere off in heaven, and thus we can ignore His teaching. We do not have to confront Him directly. **Religion is born out of the desire of religious people to harmoniously conform to the religious rites of one another.**

Religion thus progresses to the “laying aside” of “the commandment of God” (Mk 7:8). Since we are intimidated to obey the codes that identify our respective religion, we marginalize the word of God. This inevitably leads to what Jesus pronounced had happened to the Jews at the time of His arrival: *“All too well you reject the commandment of God so that you may keep your own tradition”* (Mk 7:9).

Religion ultimately leads to the rejection of the word of God. When the stage of the development of our religion has reached the level of rejecting God’s will, we have, as the Jews, removed ourselves from God. Such is the danger of religion, and all of us have our religious rites that often become the opportunity to reject, or at least, ignore what the Bible teaches. These rites are often not wrong, but when they start to supplant, and then

replace, the word of God, then we are gone. It is for this reason that we continually study the Bible. We seek to continually check ourselves that our religious

rites do not become the authority by which we conduct our lives, and worse, the authority by which we judge one another concerning faithfulness to God.

## Chapter 5

### GOSPEL VERSUS RELIGION

Though God created us to be religiously inclined, we must not accuse Him of creating us as flawed individuals in our expression of our religiosity. We were not created spiritually flawed, but mentally and emotionally always in need of a Higher Power to guide us (See Hb 12:9). With this God-created yearning for this Higher Power, it is our responsibility to search out and find the authority of this Power, for we reason that it would not be logical, or loving, for God to leave us to our own religious devices (See Jr 10:23). This was the logic behind what Paul wrote in Romans 1:20:

*For the invisible things of Him since the creation of the world **are clearly seen**, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and divinity, so that they are without excuse.*

God created within us a religious inclination that should move us, by simple observance of that which was created, to look beyond ourselves in our search for spiritual satisfaction. But at any time in history, it always seems to be as Paul wrote, “**Men ... suppress the truth in unrighteousness**” (Rm 1:18).

Religiously misguided men of the past “knew God,” but “they glorified

*Him not as God*” (Rm 1:21). The reason for this is that they had no love of the truth (2 Th 3:9-12). So “*professing to be wise, they became [religious] fools*” (Rm 1:22). They “*changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like unto corruptible man and of birds and four-footed beasts and crawling things*” (Rm 1:23). The problem with those who seek self-serving religion over God is as Paul wrote, “*They exchanged the truth of God for a lie **and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator***” (Rm 1:25).

This is the nature of the religionists. Through efforts of self-justification, the religious worshiper seeks to worship a god who pleases him, and to serve this god according to the performance of his own religious rites. In doing so, the adherent of religion moves away from God by thinking that his or her religion will bring one closer to God. This is the deception of religion. Any religion that places trust in the performance of man to justify himself before God, minimizes the free gift of God’s grace through the cross. Religion inherently supplants gospel.

God will not force His way into the lives of those who give up on Him (Rm 1:24). Religious people have given up

on God for centuries because **“they did not like to retain God in their knowledge”** (Rm 1:28). And herein is the problem of religion with which we are challenged in a religious world today where the religious world is giving up a knowledge of the Bible. The Bible is no longer the primary authority for faith for the religionist. For the religionist, faith is based primarily on the religious behavior of the adherents to a particular religion (See Rm 10:17). And because the religionist does not **“receive the love of the truth so that they might be saved,”** God allows him to be deceived by his own religiosity (2 Th 2:10).

**God will send them strong delusion so that they should believe a lie** [of religion], **that they all might be condemned who did not believe the truth** [of the gospel], **but took pleasure in wickedness** (2 Th 2:11,12; see Gl 2:5,14; Cl 1:5).

Jeremiah realized this rebellious psychology of man when he wrote, **“O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself. It is not in man who walks to direct his steps”** (Jr 10:23). When applied to man’s religious behavior, this psychology of man is not a mental flaw. God did not create us to be rebellious robots. It was intentional on the part of God that man’s innate religiosity should seek the will of his Creator. But when we determine to give up a knowledge of His will in order to preserve our own religious rites, we have moved ourselves away from the very heart of God.

We must keep in mind, therefore,

that we all have our favorite religious rites simply because we are religious beings. However, since we are such, then it is imperative that we constantly keep our religiosity in check with the word of God, lest we be carried away from God by our own religiosity. Such happened in Israel of old, and it can happen to us today (See Hs 4:6).

If it were in man to direct his own ways according to his own will, then we would be pre-programmed robots who would have no choice. And if we were programmed to always do that which was right in the eyes of God, then God could never remain just if anyone were condemned to an eternal hell. In fact, if we were programmed to always do the will of God, then there would be no such thing as hell. Everyone would be saved. But if there were not the optional destiny of hell, and the reality of such, then how could we ever love? Why would God even need to reveal His love for us if we were headed back to Him regardless of any wrong choices we might make? It is for this reason that any doctrine of individual predestination is an attack against the gospel.

We must never exclude nor ignore the reality of hell. If we do, then we minimize the motive of the heart of God that was behind the sacrificial offering of the cross. In fact, if hell is not a reality, then the cross was foolishness. If there were no hell, then why would the Son of God humiliate Himself through incarnation and the death of the cross?

Since God is love, **then He could not create an individual who was with-**

**out the ability to choose his own destiny.** If we could not choose love, and thus choose our destiny to be eternally with God, then why would there be creation in the first place? Think of it this way: Since God is love, then He had to create us. And for us to respond to any love that He might show toward us, we had to be created with the freedom to return His love through obedience. This means that in our creation as individuals who could choose, there was the chance that we could go wrong by making the wrong choices. And so went Israel after the gods of their own imagination in order to satisfy their own rebellion.

Now we can understand why we are so inclined to create religion, either in the absence of God's will, or our outward rebellion against His will. The existence of religion reveals either our rebellion, or according to Paul's statement in Romans 1:20, our willful ignorance of God and His will. In either case, it reveals the will of the creature to "worship and serve" the creature rather than the Creator. It reveals the efforts of the created to move beyond the Creator. Since God created man in a way that necessitated the steps in which we should walk, then those who would choose to ignore the principles of God have chosen to rebel against their Creator. If we seek to be religious in our rebellion, then our religion is moving us away from God.

We must not think in this discussion that we are missing the point of the power of the gospel, and the heart of God revealed therein. On the contrary, we are laying the foundation upon which God

crushed our proverbial fascination with religiosity that had progressed far into the night by the time of the first century. It is with this awareness that we interpret Galatians 4:4: "*But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His son ....*" We might conclude from this statement that the Holy Spirit wanted us to understand that the extreme of religiosity, both among the Jews and among the idolatrous Gentiles, had progressed to the point that humanity needed the relief of the gospel.

The "fullness of time" was not in reference to the fulfillment of prophecy, for prophecy concerning the Messiah could have been fulfilled anytime during the five hundred year existence of the Roman Empire (See Dn 2:44; 7:13,14). The "fullness of time" would at least refer to the socio/religious environment wherein sincere Jews, as well as idolatrous Gentiles, began to feel the extreme bondage of their religion (See Gl 5:1). In feeling this bondage, many realized the futility of their efforts to justify themselves through their numerous self-imposed religious rites. They thus longed for spiritual relief.

By the time of the first century, both Jews and Gentiles had fabricated their own religiosity to perfection, if indeed we could ever use the word "perfection" in reference to religion. At least the Pharisees made a good attempt at such, for they assumed that God's law could not be "perfectly" obeyed unless there were an assortment of religious rules connected to each commandment of God. They were so fearful of going the way of

their apostate forefathers who had forsaken the commandment of God and ended up in the captivity of the Assyrians and Babylonians, that they created a religion (Judaism) by which they could judge themselves justified before God according to their own performance of their self-imposed religious rites.

Therefore, in order to never let such apostasy happen again in the history of Israel, the scribes and Pharisees surrounded each revealed law of God with a host of their own precautionary religious rites (religious traditions). Unfortunately, in obsessing over their added religious rites, they forgot to focus on the intent of the commandment of God itself. As previously discussed, Jesus judged them with the statement, “*For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men*” (Mk 7:8). The religious leaders put themselves in a situation where they could not see through the maze of their own precautionary traditional religious rites of obedience in order to discover the spirit of the original commandment of God. And for this reason, Jesus intensified His judgment of their religion by saying, “*All too well you reject the commandment of God so that you may keep your own tradition*” (Mk 7:9).

Religion can arise in the hearts of any well-meaning worshiper. We would judge the religious leaders of the Jews sincere in that they wanted to guard themselves from going into the former apostasy of their forefathers. However, we would judge them, as Jesus, to be apostates in their fear of apostasy. Well-intended religious people today often go

wrong by legally creating a religion by which they seek to justify themselves before God through strict adherence to the codes of their own self-imposed religion.

The departure from gospel to religion does not take a great deal of time. In reference to some Christians in Rome, the same road to “fake religion” was taken by some among the disciples. Their former approach to religious behavior that was characteristic of the Judaism from which they had come was brought into their gospel living as Christians. Unfortunately, they made the mistake of reverting back to their former system of religiosity.

To counter their theology of works-oriented Judaism, Paul made a statement that frightens those who have turned Christianity into a legal system of attempted self-justification: “*For sin will not have dominion over you, for you [Christians] are not under law, but under grace*” (Rm 6:14). Those who have turned Christianity into a system of self-justification through law-keeping, as the scribes and Pharisees had turned the Sinai law, will have difficulty understanding this statement. They will have difficulty for they have gone in the way of self-sanctifying religion, as opposed to the way of the gospel.

In reference to the religion that Jesus encountered in the first century, the grace and faith that was revealed through Him was an invasion into the world of Jewish and Gentile religiosity. It was the grace and faith of the gospel that penetrated to the very heart of the religiosity

of those who sought to perform their way into eternity through religious rites. The revelation of the gospel was such a shocking contrast to the religion of Judaism, or the “Jews’ religion” (Gl 1:13), that three thousand people in one day stood stunned before twelve men who spoke freedom in Christ. When the day of Pentecost was finally over, about three thousand repentant people had come to the conclusion that salvation was truly by grace and faith. Their own religiosity had moved them so far away from God that they saw in Jesus the only way back (At 4:12). They had lost heart in their own religiosity, but saw in the gospel the way back into the heart of God.

Once we conclude that religion is an effort on the part of man to walk in his own paths, then we come to an axiomatic truth: **The more we are into religion according to the doctrines and commandments of men, the further we are removed from God.** And we might add to this truth that the more comfortable we feel in our self-imposed religiosity, the less appeal the gospel has on

us, for the gospel supplants all of self for all of Christ.

When we understand the very core of the religion of the Jews, then we can begin to understand the overwhelming response of those three thousand honest Jews on the day of Pentecost who immediately understood the message of the gospel. They had moved themselves so far away from God through their own religiosity that they immediately saw their way back “into the grace of God” through the risen and reigning Son of God. It was a glorious realization. Their response will always be the epitome of people on earth who understand the revelation of the heart of God through the incarnation, cross, resurrection and ascension of the Son of God. When such is realized, there is no going back to legal or emotional religion. There is no longer the desire to “worship and serve the creature” rather than the Creator. When one discovers the truth of the gospel, there is no longer a lure to religion that is based on our own self-righteousness to justify ourselves before God.

## Chapter 6

### GOSPEL VERSUS SELF-JUSTIFICATION

Justification refers to law and one’s compliance with law in his relationship with God. Justification would mean that we stand before God “just as if we had not sinned.” Justification, therefore, is our legal relationship with God according to His law. Our only problem is that we can never stand alone before God justified, if we seek to do so on the basis of

our own ability to keep His law perfectly. We all sin, and it takes only one sin to separate us from God.

How we view justification defines the difference between religion and the gospel. The religionist would assert that he is justified before God because of his own efforts to live in a manner by which he would stand justified before God free

of sin. This self-justification would be accomplished through the atonement of sin through the self-sanctifying efforts of one's good works.

The efforts of a good religionist—which is in all of us—may be well intentioned, but the heart of God that was revealed through the gospel teaches that one is justified only through the cross, and thus, sanctified by the blood offering of Jesus. The religionist seeks through self-sanctification to be justified on his own behalf, but the gospel says that we are justified by the cross, and thus sanctified because Jesus poured out His blood for our sins. One system of justification is religion. The other is gospel.

The difference between the two approaches by which one would come before God are entirely different. Depending on how one considers his or her relationship with God is often revealed through trials that come our way. When something goes wrong in the life of the religionist, who is working so hard to justify himself before God on the merit of his own performances, he blames himself, and then God for not working enough in his life. He blames God for not working in his life to guard him from all trials. If there is a death in the family, he blames God for allowing the death. If he suffers financial setbacks, he blames God for allowing him to be in such a financial predicament. Pleas for the Holy Spirit to work in his life never seem to be answered because there are always failures in his performance to be a good person. Trails deny him the satisfaction of living a self-sanctifying life.

On the other hand, those who live by the gospel have an entirely different world view. The gospel says, “*Come to Me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*” (Mt 11:29). The gospel says, “*Count it all joy when you fall into various trials*” (Js 1:2). The gospel says, cast “*all your care on Him, for He cares for you*” (1 Pt 5:7). The one who lives by the gospel, lives the life of gratitude, knowing that it is the gospel, not himself, that justifies him before God. He understands that trials are not the result of God's displeasure in his life. He understands that he reaps what he sows (Gl 6:7), and thus, he also understands that God is not the sower of the failures of his living.

What the religionist forgets is that in our relationship with God, all of us violate law (Rm 3:23). According to law, therefore, we are all guilty, and sometimes we must reap the consequences of the bad fruit that we sow (See Mt 7:17). And for this reason, and if we would enjoy eternal life, all of us must in some way be able to stand before God justified of all our violations of His law. The problem is that no man can be justified before God on his own ability to live a life without sin.

Therefore, we can thank God that He sent a Lawyer to the cross on our behalf. It is the gospel of the Lawyer that was revealed on the cross that made justification possible to all those who would connect with God (1 Jn 2:1; see Hb 7:25; 9:24). It is because of the justification of the sacrificial offering of Jesus that we understand the heart of God. We do

so because God could just as easily have discarded all of us to eternal destruction. But because He has a heart for us, He revealed a way of setting aside violations of law in order that we be reconciled to Him for eternity.

Because God knew that we could not live flawlessly according to His law, justification at the cross was planned before the creation of the world. Before the foundation of the world, and before the creation of the first two lawbreakers, the Son of God volunteered to set things right legally between God and fallible man who would be created. This thought was behind Jesus' prayer statement to the Father immediately before His crucifixion: "*You loved Me before the foundation of the world*" (Jn 17:24).

Before "the foundation of the world" the Father predestined the sanctified (the church) unto eternal glory. "*He has chosen us [the church] in Him,*" Paul wrote, "*before the foundation of the world*" (Ep 1:4). In order that God be just in the creation of those who would break His law, the gospel of justification had to be in place before the first word was spoken to bring into existence all lawbreakers. The church, therefore, is the realm of the justified. As a group, the church is destined to eternal glory.

When Jesus came into the world in the flesh, He "*uttered things that have been kept secret from the foundation of the world*" (Mt 13:35). After the creation and before the cross, even God's prophets searched diligently the revelation that had been given through them concerning things that would later be re-

vealed through Jesus (1 Pt 1:10-12). Jesus "*indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times*" as the revealed mystery of the gospel (1 Pt 1:20; see Ep 3:3-5). Before there was creation, therefore, there was justification made possible by the foreordained cross, for without the plan of justification through the offering of Divinity, it would have been unjust for God to create.

By the time the mystery was to be revealed, the Jews, because they could not wait for God's righteousness, established their own system of righteousness before God. Paul explained their problem in the following statement:

*For they [the Jews] being ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God (Rm 10:3).*

Theirs was a system of works and religious rites whereby they sought to justify themselves through meritorious law-keeping and works. In seeking this self-made righteousness through their self-made religion, they ignored the righteousness of God. They prioritized their righteousness above God's righteousness.

This was the very thing that Paul, a Jew, and the three thousand on the day of Pentecost, recognized that they had done in their relationship with God. It is this realization that strikes right at our hearts and leads us to accept what God has exceedingly abundantly done for us

above all that we could do for ourselves (Ep 3:20). However, we must not forget that Paul wrote that the self-righteous Jews did not submit to the righteousness of God because of their pride in their own religion. **It is difficult for those who consider themselves most righteous before God, because of their own religion, to forsake such for the righteousness of God.**

But this was not the case with those honest Jews as Peter, Matthew, John, and then Saul of Tarsus. The following self-confession of Saul, now Paul, would be a statement that explains all that one should honestly do upon discovering that his own self-imposed religiosity keeps him from obedience to the gospel:

*I count all things [of my past religiosity] for loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things. I count them refuse so that I may gain Christ, and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness that is from law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness that is from God by faith (Ph 3:8,9).*

Judaism was a religion in which Paul excelled. It was a typical religion by which adherents sought to justify themselves before God through obedience to self-imposed religious traditions. Judaism was a religion of self-justification through religious rites and traditions by which religion is defined. Adherence to the rules and traditions become the standard by which adherents judge them-

selves faithful to their religion, and because they are “faithful,” they have a supposed “faithful” relationship with God. The leaders of such religions, therefore, become the gate-keepers for faithfulness of the adherents by making judgments concerning the adherents’ faithfulness to the rules and regulations of the religion. This world view of the advocates of religion, and their leaders, is characteristic of all religions throughout the world today.

In reference to Christianity, Christianity is often turned into a religion of self-justification through the added rules and rites (issues) of those who would seek to religiously rule over their fellow religionists. Obedience to these rules, or religious codes of behavior, become the standard by which one is judged righteous, and thus faithful before God. Depending on one’s obedience to specific traditional rites, he or she is judged to be either faithful or unfaithful in reference to “the church.” Some have digressed their Christianity to even judging the salvation of others on the basis of whether one conforms to a particular personal opinion.

This is nothing new. In the first century, Paul wrote to some disciples in Colosse who were moving in the direction of making Christianity a “self-made” religion. They were introducing a system of religious rules whereby members would seek to justify themselves before God on the basis of self-made religiosity. Through the keeping of their traditional religious opinions, they were bringing into the fellowship of the disciples a system of man-made religiosity

by which they judged one another.

Paul warned these Colossian disciples of their efforts to create a “self-made” religion by turning Christianity into a legal system of self-justification. He asked, “*If you died with Christ from the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourselves to [legal] ordinances?*” (Cl 2:20).

In the context of the gospel, and in obedience to the gospel (2 Th 1:6-9), the Colossian disciples had “died with Christ” (See Rm 6:3-6). They had responded to the gospel of grace. Paul was now challenging their present efforts of

trading their justification by the cross through their obedience to the gospel for legal religious ordinances of men whereby they would declare themselves justified and righteous before God. He was questioning why, having been justified by the cross, they would turn again to self-sanctification in obedience to the religious ordinances of men.

In reference to such man-made religious ordinances and self-justification, Paul simply shouted out imperatives in reference to our efforts of self-justification through obedience to the religious rites of men: “***Do not touch. Do not taste. Do not handle***” (Cl 2:21).

## Chapter 7

### SELF-SERVING RELIGIOSITY

If we exchange the justification that we have before God through the cross, for an attempted self-justification through religious rites that we would bind on ourselves, then it is not a matter of trading one means of justification for another. We would actually be giving up our justification that we have received through the cross if we would seek to establish our own justification. Self-justification inherently denies, or disregards, the sufficiency of the justification of the cross.

We should not consider for a moment any efforts on our part to subsidize our justification that we have received fully through the cross. Some Jewish brethren tried to do this in Galatia. But the Holy Spirit sternly charged them for fabricating “another gospel” (Gl 1:6-9).

Without any need for interpretation, the Spirit rebuked those who would make any attempts at self-justification: “*As we said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed*” (Gl 1:9).

Therefore, we would do well to listen to Paul’s continued exhortation of some in Colosse in reference to their obedience to the religious ordinances of men in order to live a religiously justified life: “***All these [ordinances] concern things that perish with the using, after the commandments and doctrines of men***” (Cl 2:22). We assume that we will perish with the religious rites of men if we seek to add to the gospel our own religious traditions by which we would seek to justify ourselves before God. In fact, in the

bluntness of a literary mandate, the Holy Spirit said the following to some Galatians who did this: “**You have been severed from Christ, you who seek to be justified by law. You have fallen from grace**” (Gl 5:4).

Self-serving religiosity through obedience to meritorious religious rites, or even a meritorious obedience to the law of God, gives one the opportunity to boast as a good religious person before God and man. For example, the self-righteous religionists of Jesus’ day had someone blow a trumpet when they made a contribution to the poor on the streets and in the synagogues. But Jesus said, “*When you do good deeds, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be glorified by men*” (Mt 6:2). Inherent in self-righteous justification through law and good deeds is “trumpet blowing” religiosity in order that we may be recognized for our performances.

Self-righteousness always leads to trumpet blowing for self-glorification. We naturally like to be glorified as individuals who crave attention. We seek the approval of others. But if we involve ourselves in such religious behavior of showmanship, Jesus says that we have already received our reward (Mt 6:2). Attempts for glory through self-righteousness, therefore, lead to exchanging the glory that one will receive from God to that which is given by man. This is the curse of our obedience to the religious ordinances of men in an attempt to justify ourselves before God. It is the inherent curse of religion.

With the following statement of rebuke, Paul concluded that some in Colosse had involved themselves in self-righteous religiosity:

*These things have indeed a show of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and neglect of the body, but not in any value in restraining the indulgence of the flesh* (Cl 2:23).

The problem with self-righteous religion is that we suppose we can, through our outward religious performances, make a presentation of righteousness before God and man. But at the same time, we often allow the sinful motives of our hearts to go unchecked. The trumpet blowing religionist seeks to present himself outwardly righteous before others, but fails to deal with the sin beneath the sin. He seeks to restrain himself through extreme outward asceticism, fasting or performances of good deeds, but does not correct the sin beneath the sin. All that he does as a show of religiosity, therefore, is worthless in controlling the lusts of the flesh. He is the one about whom Jesus spoke who sinfully gazes with lust on at a woman, but fails to correct the adulterous sin of his heart that is beneath the sin of the lustful gaze (Mt 5:28).

Self-righteousness is always misleading, for it fails to correct sins of the heart. But the justification that comes through our obedience to the gospel is inward. The justification (righteousness) that we receive through the gospel deals with the heart in order to correct our be-

havior. For this reason, there is no desire for trumpet blowing for what God has done inwardly. It is God for whom we must blow the trumpet for working on our hearts.

It is our inward justification that gives impetus to our outward behavior. This is exactly what James meant when he wrote, *“I will show you my faith by my works”* (Js 2:18). The Christian works because he is already justified before God. He does not work in order to be justified. His work is in appreciation for what he has, not in order to receive that which he needs.

There is no contradiction between Paul and James in reference to our justification by faith and works. Both Paul and James were addressing Christians, but approaching the subject of justification from different perspectives, depending on the problem that prevailed in their respective audiences. Some in Paul’s audience were resorting to justification through meritorious works of law. Some in James’ audience believed that they stood justified without doing anything in response to their justification.

James asked his audience, *“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?”* (Js 2:21). Because of faith, Abraham was motivated to act on God’s instructions. *“You see that **faith was working with his works**, and by works was faith made perfect”* (Js 2:22). So James concluded, *“You see then that a man is justified by works and not by faith only”* (Js 2:24). Abraham was not justified by meritorious works that he had determined

on his own in hope that they would be accepted by God. He was justified “with his works,” which works of obedience to God’s command completed (perfected) his faith. In the example of Abraham, faith and work, through the offering of his son, could never be separated. His work was the manifestation of his faith that God had already accepted him.

Because Abraham was justified by God by his existing trust in God (faith), his inward justification (righteousness) before God was revealed through his obedience to offer his son, Isaac. For this reason, he was not meritoriously justified before God through the offering, but because he walked in the righteousness of God. We must not reverse the order of justification and faith in the case of Abraham. **Abraham was first justified by faith, and then his obedience revealed his justification by faith.**

Abraham’s example was James’ argument against those who assumed that their “dead faith” was acceptable to God. James’ argument is against those who seek to stand righteous before God on the basis of “faith only.” His argument is that true faith is revealed to others, and before God, by one’s obedience, as Abraham’s offering of Isaac indicated His justification before God. **Faith that is not manifested through works reveals that the “faith only” person has not discovered the heart of God that was revealed on the cross.** Abraham’s understanding of the heart of God was revealed to us through his offering of his only son. Because of his faith, he was willing to do all that God asked of him.

On the A.D. 30 Pentecost, about three thousand people heard a message of justification that was totally contrary to the religious system of self-righteous justification that permeated the religion of Judaism. Judaism was a religious system of self-righteous justification in which the Jews had participated throughout their lives. It was the religion of their fathers that had been handed down from one generation to another, with more regulations being added to the Sinai law with each generation. When the A.D. 30 Pentecost arrived, it was the religion of all those who were present. In fact, in obedience to law and their religious traditions, the Jews were driven to Jerusalem for the Passover/Pentecost feast.

Unfortunately, the attending Jews at Pentecost had turned the law of God into a meritorious system of religious behavior whereby they thought that they could return home after Pentecost, considering themselves justified before God because they had meritoriously made the trip to Jerusalem for the Passover/Pentecost feast. They could then “blow their trumpets” back home in the synagogue that they had legally made the required trip to Jerusalem.

The Jews were involved in a religion of self-righteous justification. Every honest and sincere Jew knew this. But they reasoned that they had no alternative, for there was no further revelation from God since the Sinai law until Jesus came. They had been as Paul wrote, *“But before faith came, we [Jews] were kept under guard by law, being shut up to the faith that would afterward*

*be revealed”* (Gl 3:23).

The problem with self-righteous justification through perfect law-keeping and meritorious deeds is that those who seek to be so justified before God on the basis of their own performance of law, know that something is very wrong. Honest people confess to themselves that they are sinners before God. They know that no meritorious system of religion can be devised by either God or man whereby man can legally justify himself on the basis of any perfect performance of law. The reason for this is that we are all unrighteous.

Honest Jews knew deep inside that their journey to Jerusalem every year for the Passover/Pentecost feast would never truly bring them peace with God. They honestly knew that no amount of journeys or animal sacrifices could justify them before the God they sought so much to please. The sincere Jews thus mourned over their problem of inadequate performance of law (See Mt 5:4). Justification before God on the basis of self-righteousness was inherently impossible because *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Rm 3:23). Therefore, *“there is none righteous, no, not one”* (Rm 3:10). The same is still true today.

And then came the Pentecost of A.D. 30 that is recorded in Acts 2. Something was announced on that day before an audience of honest Jews who understood the futility of self-righteous justification. In mourning over their plight of not being able to legally justify themselves before the Father, they heard a message of which they could never have

dreamed to be possible. Announced by twelve men on that day was a message of deliverance from themselves. The text reads, “*Now when they heard this ...*” (At 2:37). “This” was not a message of more rules and regulations that they could add to their religion of Judaism. Law and religion were the problem, not the solution.

What they heard was a message that was based on the actions of God. Because God was not willing that any should perish, He acted out of His heart for them. What was announced was the heart of God in action through the offering of His Son. In fact, it was an announcement of the death of Judaism and all works-oriented religions. It was the death of law in reference to justifying ourselves before God through perfect law-keeping. Because of His grace, God took care of our justification through His Son, and thus, He brought to an end any supposed self-righteous justification through either law or religion.

The Pentecost announcement was not simply a message of facts and events concerning the death and resurrection of the One for whom they had, as good and faithful Jews, cried out seven weeks before to be crucified. It was a message of reconciliation through the Galilean they had nailed on a cross. It was a message of good news (gospel), a message that one could be justified before God apart from meritorious works, animal sacrifices, journeys to Jerusalem, or any obedience to the ordinances of man-made religions. Law was found to be insufficient

and grace was in. It was a message that, apart from law, justification was poured out through the Son of God on the cross. It was a gospel that did not come through law, but through promise (Gl 3:15-25). It was a proclamation that in Christ Jesus “*you are not under law, but under grace*” (Rm 6:14).

When honest, guilt-ridden law-breakers see the heart of God at the cross of justification, their only option is a joyous response. When we understand that we cannot be justified legally before God, either through our own religious laws, or the perfect keeping of the law of God, we cry out for grace. When our cry is based on faith that God would not leave us in our pitiful condition of attempting to justify ourselves through the invention of our own religious rites, we seek the only other alternative.

If we would be accepted by our God, then we must through faith accept His conditions for our reconciliation with Him. When we realize that meritorious religion fails, it is then that we understand that grace prevails. When we realize that law-keeping always sells us short of the grace of God, it is only then that we fully appreciate the heart of God that was unleashed on the cross through the sacrificial offering of the incarnate Son of God. It all makes one want to stand up and shout out, “GLORY HALLELUJAH!” We rejoice over the words of the Holy Spirit: “*For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God*” (Ep 2:8).

## Chapter 8

# GOSPEL VERSUS SELF-SANCTIFICATION

Sanctification refers to our spiritual condition in reference to our relationship with God. Justification refers to the violation of God's law, but sanctification refers to cleaning up our mess of sin and keeping us clean when we continue to make a mess of ourselves in living the Christian life. The word "sanctify" means "to cleanse," and thus, to remain cleansed by "setting apart" the cleansed from the world. One must initially be cleansed of sin, and then continually cleansed of sin that separates us from God. Sanctification thus refers to those things (sin) that affect our relationship with God if they are not cleansed.

Briefly stated, justification rectifies our legal relationship with God, whereas sanctification refers to cleaning up legal violations of law. Lawbreakers, therefore, must have a means by which they can continually be cleansed of breaking the law.

What compelled the Jews on the day of Pentecost to act in response to the gospel was that they saw in the gospel the opportunity for reconciliation with God through the justification of the cross, and subsequent sanctification of their sins through the blood offering of God's Son. They had all their lives mourned to be righteous before God, but were honest enough to recognize the futility of their efforts to correct their flawed behavior in reference to God's law. In an attempt to find some peace of mind, they bur-

dened themselves with a system of self-sanctification in order to atone for sin through good works. In this way, they supposed they could maintain a relationship with God that was based on their religious performances. But they found no peace with God through the merits of their behavior. They honestly knew that they were dysfunctional in reference to law and works. No performance on their part could rectify their problem of sin.

Therefore, when they heard the justification of the cross that Peter revealed, they were overwhelmed. They asked the apostles what to do in order to deal with the matter of their sin and guilt before God in reference to their sins. They were specifically mournful over their participation in the crucifixion seven weeks before of the One they realized was actually God's sufficient payment for their dysfunctional lives.

In response to their remorse over their acknowledgment of their spiritual poverty, and their crucifying the Lord of glory, Peter instructed, "*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins*" (At 2:38).

There is more in this statement than simply a door into God's righteousness. In fact, if we consider the command to repent and be baptized for remission of sins as a legal command to be obeyed, then we will miss the justification and sanctification that the three thousand re-

spondents immediately understood in the gospel message. We must keep in mind that what cut the people to the heart was not disobedience to some added laws that Peter supposedly preached to them. What cut them to the heart was the message of the gospel. Peter and the apostles had preached gospel, not law.

Consider their situation from this real perspective: They already knew that justification by the grace of God could never come through law, otherwise it would be earned, and thus obligate God to save them. It therefore had to be free and offered through grace. And for this reason, it was initiated from the heart of God toward all those of the world who had stained themselves in sin. And because it was initiated by God, and not earned, it was inherently free.

Through grace, God launched the means by which they could be connected (reconciled) with Him. It was now the opportunity for those who hungered and thirsted after His righteousness to respond. Upon their request of what must be done in reference to God's offer to be justified, and initially sanctified before Him, Peter gave the answer of Acts 2:38. His answer explained how they could connect with the incarnational offering of the heart of God on the cross. His offering had to be joined with an offering on their part. They had to submit to the instructions that Peter gave in order to connect with the sanctifying blood of the cross.

The Pentecost respondents were given a choice in reference to their sins that separated them from God. Obedi-

ence to the gospel in baptism was "for the remission of sins" because Jesus promised in this new birth, that one could once again enter into the realm of the grace of God (Jn 3:5). In order to connect with the cleansing blood of the cross, they had to take the initiative of offering themselves with Jesus in His death, burial and resurrection (See Rm 6:3-6).

In the text of Acts 2, it states that the respondent Jews on Pentecost were "cut to the heart" (At 2:37). The message the apostles preached dealt with the heart of man. Justification and sanctification, along with God's righteousness, were blessings that came straight from the heart of God. The gospel is a heart to heart mission. And herein is the confusion that is generated by the religions of men that are always meritorious in reference to righteousness. Being seated in the meritorious religion of Judaism, the respondents on the day of Pentecost saw immediately that they had nailed the heart of God to a cross through a meritorious act of alleviating Judaism of any apostates. Their meritorious act of crucifying Jesus, a supposed apostate, was actually a work against the work of God. And since Jesus was proved to be the Son of God through His resurrection, they indeed had a serious problem (See Rm 1:4).

For all their lives the Jews sincerely sought to sanctify themselves before God through meritorious obedience to religious rites and traditions. They struggled for self-righteousness and presumed that they could attain God's righteousness through the merit of their own religio-

ity. This is the common problem of religion. When the opportunity came for them to be freely reconciled to God through His offering for them, they crucified their only option. What they began to realize is that their sin actually worked God's plan of salvation on their behalf. God turned their sin into an opportunity for the remission of their sins.

What brought the people to this point of frustration was their "compounded religiosity." In order to accomplish their own righteousness, they had stacked around the law of God a host of religious traditions in order that the law of God be strictly obeyed. Unfortunately, while they were searching through their catalog of added religious rites, they lost sight of the intent of the law of God by obsessing over their self-sought righteousness. Their own invented religiosity led them to ignore, and then reject, the commandment of God (Mk 7:1-9). Such is the curse of traditional religion. We are blinded by our obsession over our own religiosity. And being blinded, we cannot, as the Jews who crucified Jesus, see the heart of God through Jesus.

The problem was that the Jews thought that through obedience to their self-imposed religious rites, they could justify themselves before God. And in reference to keeping themselves separated from the world, they devised a host of other religious rites that would identify them as good Jews who had no dealings with the world. Forbidding to eat with a Gentile was one of those rules, which rule even Peter had a difficult time overcoming in reference to eating with

the Gentile Cornelius (See At 10, 11).

The problem with the behavior of religious rites, as Peter discovered in Antioch, is that we are not being "*straightforward about the truth of the gospel*" (Gl 2:14). Denominations begin when a group of adherents huddle around an agreed upon set of traditional religious rites. Self-imposed religiosity, therefore, not only blinds us from one another, but it also blinds us from the gospel. We are often so focused on our own church-righteousness that we cannot see or understand the gospel. This is what happened in Antioch when Peter and other Jews hypocritically denominated (separated) themselves from the Gentile brethren (See Gl 2:11-16). When they did such, they stood condemned before God (Gl 2:11).

What the Jews forgot, and that which is often forgotten by the self-righteous religionist today, is that we are justified before God individually through the free gift of the cross. If we accept the gift on God's conditions, then the free justification of the cross leads to our sanctification (At 2:38). All this was revealed on the A.D. 30 Pentecost because, through grace, God had a heart for His creation.

The religious world seeks to turn the message of the gospel around through a system of self-sanctification. We think that we can supposedly sanctify ourselves by not doing bad things in order to be justified before God. Or, when we are bad, we think we can clean ourselves up by doing works to atone for our sins. In order to guarantee our continued sancti-

fication, we establish a catalog of religious rites or good works by which we seek to cleanse ourselves. Our works become efforts to guarantee our salvation. They are not efforts to celebrate our justification, as was the work of Abraham in offering his son. They are works in which we can boast of what we have done ourselves in order to supposedly satisfy God.

**Religion is a system of legally performing self-imposed religious rites and good works in an effort to reach into the heart of God.** Religion is naturally meritorious. It assumes that our justification before God is dependent on our efforts to sanctify ourselves through our own performance of religious rites and good works. In this way, we are behaving as the hypocrites in their “trumpet blowing” religiosity. We are crushing the heart of God by focusing on our own religiosity that blinds us to the heart of God that was revealed through the offering of His Son on the cross. It is for this reason that the more we claim to be righteous through the performance of our own meritorious religious rites and good works, the further we move ourselves

away from the righteousness of God.

In the behavior of our religion, we have forgotten the most important principle of the gospel. **The gospel is the heart of God freely reaching out to the heart of man through the only begotten Son of God.**

We cannot get to the heart of God through that which keeps us away. Our dysfunctional behavior will never allow us to realize our goal of being in a close relationship with our Father. In seeking to get to the heart of God through meritorious religiosity, our own dysfunctional efforts to keep our religious rites and God’s law perfectly (perform), keep us away. In reference to the Jews, and their efforts to solve this problem, they kept adding more religious laws in order to bring some satisfaction to themselves that they were making a good effort. But honest Jews knew the futility of adding precept upon precept, statute to statute, performances upon performances, in any effort to keep one sanctified before God. They realized that the righteousness of God had to come from God alone, and based on His conditions. And, it had to be free.

## Chapter 9

### RELIGIOUS MALPRACTICE

In reference to ourselves today, we often do the same as the Jews. For example, we construct a system of theology by which we can identify ourselves “faithful,” or the “true” church, of which we are “faithful” members. We construct

a legal outline of law combined with approved religious rites, which are then supposedly obeyed without flaw. We stamp ourselves justified before God because other religious groups, who do not conform to our outline of doctrine, are

deemed lawbreakers.

This is the religious environment into which Paul walked in Athens, and into which the Israelites digressed. He declared to the Athenians their idolatrous religiosity: “*Men of Athens,*” he proclaimed from Mars Hill, “*I perceive that in all things you are very religious*” (At 17:22). And they were, for he explained, “*For as I passed by and observed your objects of worship ...*” (At 17:23). All religionists establish either objects of worship that they deem necessary to promote and continue their religion. They declare solemn assemblies into which they call the faithful. In Israel’s apostasy from God, the Israelites turned their faith into a system of religious rituals and twisted assemblies. One of the most striking denunciations of Israel in their days of apostasy was written by Isaiah:

*“To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?” says the Lord. “I am full of the burnt offerings of rams .... And I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of male goats. Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to Me. The new moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly”* (See Is 1:10-14).

Israel had built and treasured places of worship in which they performed their religiosity. They built “high places” where they could go and vainly worship God in the keeping of ritualized worship that was void of their hearts. Though the offering of sacrifices and the solemn as-

semblies were part of the Sinai law, their hearts had long vacated the performance of that which was required by the law. In their religiosity they had even turned the brazen serpent that was made by Moses into an object of worship. When Hezekiah initiated restoration in Israel, “*he removed the high places and broke the images and ... broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made*” (2 Kg 18:4). Hezekiah knew that if a restoration in Israel was to be realized, the people had to vacate their cherished places of assembly (“high places”), and thus, remove their ritualistic assemblies and objects of worship.

The problem with improvised systems of religiosity is that we are focusing on our own performance of law and religious rites in order to make ourselves right before God, while God says we are right through the cross. We make ourselves judges according to our outline of law, but not according to the grace of God. The result is that their hearts leave the performance of both law and our own religious rites. While God looks on our hearts, the religionist focuses on the performances of his religious rites. Religionists forget that “*they have chosen their own ways and their soul delights in their abominations*” (Is 66:3).

God has indeed given law, or instructions by which to live. But the problem is how we use His law to lead ourselves to believe that we are perfect law-keepers who have justified ourselves by law. Attempted self-justification through law-keeping, and/or religious rites, is contrary to our justification that comes

freely through the cross. We keep law because we are justified, not in order to be justified. And therefore, we must be cautious about constructing a “systematic theology” by which we would judge others to be lawbreakers.

Our assemblies are the ideal example. We often satisfy ourselves that we have a proof-text for every point of our outline of systematic assembly. As long as the precepts of the outline of lawful assembly are performed, we believe that we have justified ourselves before God, and sanctified ourselves by performing a Sunday morning ritual. All who would be so sanctified must be in attendance at the lawful assembly that we have deemed to be “scriptural.”

Because we have kept ourselves from all others who do not legally perform our outline of assembly, we have become a denomination among those we accuse of being denominational. As Peter, Barnabas and other Jews in Antioch, who denominated themselves upon the basis of their supposed assembly rite with circumcised Jews only, we too have denominated ourselves from others in our efforts to bind on ourselves various assembly rites that are supposed to indicate our correct religious behavior (Gl 2:11-16). And the fact that we are disturbed because someone would even suggest that we have formulated our own catalog of assembly rites that define our particular group is evidence that we have done the very thing we condemn.

Unfortunately, we never consider checking the legal religiosity of what we are seeking to meritoriously perform. As

the Pharisees, we have convinced ourselves that we can do that which is right, but at the same time, do it legally with a spirit of self-sanctification, and still be right in our own self-justification. Sunday assemblies, therefore, have often become an occasion where we weekly check our meritorious performance chart, and once checked, we content ourselves to be satisfied with our own self-righteousness, and thus judge ourselves to be among the faithful.

In order to determine if we are guilty of such meritorious religiosity, we should by chance change the way we as a group normally observe the Lord’s Supper on Sunday morning. The more disturbance that is caused by doing things different from the usual will give us some idea of how meritoriously legal we have become in order to justify ourselves before God through the “performance” of something that could be accomplished in so many different ways.

The unfortunate problem with our meritorious religiosity is that the religionist can never be consistent in his own religious rites, especially if he assumes to have a proof-text for every point of obedience. This is clearly revealed in those performances we assume are necessary in our observance of the Lord’s Supper. It would be good to take a moment to consider all the variables of the memorial that have been occasions for division among those who seem to have a proof-text for their particular manner by which they observe the Supper.

We become religionists when we behave as the Pharisees who did the same

in reference to the Sabbath. We stack all sorts of “correctness” around the Lord’s Supper in order that we justify ourselves correct before God. As the Pharisees lost sight of the intent of the Sabbath by obsessing and arguing over their religious rites with which they surrounded the Sabbath, we too often do the same in reference to the Lord’s Supper. We subsequently stumble over our traditions, but forget the intent of what Jesus wanted us to remember in partaking together of the bread and fruit of the vine.

God knows, and we know, that we cannot, through the performance of law, or our own traditional religious rites, justify ourselves before Him. It is simply impossible for anyone to live perfectly according to law, or consistently according to the unique religious rites of each particular church group. And when we sin against law, there is no good work that will atone for our sinfulness. There is no formula of religiosity that will sanctify us of our fallibility. We have often thought it amusing that those who partake of the Lord’s Supper in a unique manner that reminds us of our justification apart from law-keeping, often do so traditionally correct according to their unique ceremony of observance. They often legally seek to sanctify themselves by obediently drinking of the fruit of the vine that represents our free sanctification by the blood of Jesus. **They seek to keep law in order to remember their freedom from law.**

Neither our performance of law, nor our self-imposed religious ceremonies, can ever be a means of self-sanctifica-

tion. Therefore, in order for one to stand just before God, God had to take action through the cross. This is exactly what the three thousand honest Jews on the day of Pentecost saw in the message of the gospel. They had for too long futilely sought to behave religiously correct in order to merit the favor of God. They were the masters at creating religious ceremonies. But sincere Jews had for a long time become frustrated with a pretense of self-sanctification before God. On Pentecost, Peter preached a message that exposed the fallacy of their own religiosity, which religiosity seven weeks before had driven them to crucify an innocent man, the very man who would clean up their religious malpractice.

The Pentecost visitors had journeyed to Jerusalem in obedience to law in order to merit their justification before God. But they saw in the gospel that future trips to Jerusalem for the Passover/Pentecost need never to be made again. They realized that in their efforts to perfectly keep law, no one could be justified before God. Also, atonement for violations of law through animal sacrifices was futile (See Gl 2:16). Religiosity in the performance of ceremonies was cancelled by the gospel. Grace corrected what self-sanctifying ceremonies could not. It was great news.

The message of the gospel that they realized in a moment was what many people today cannot discover over a great period of time, for they continue to perform religious rites weekly in order to self-sanctify themselves. Nevertheless, the immediate response of the three thou-

sand reveals to us today a very important point: **Justification through the cross can be understood and acted upon immediately.** If it is not realized, then there is sin beneath the sin that hinders our lack of response to the gospel. If we are steeped in the traditions of our own religiosity that identifies our faith, then our hearts may be beyond being cut by the truth of the gospel. But the Jews on Pentecost were also steeped in centuries of tradition. At least three thousand were not so steeped in their own traditions that they could not see the immediate redemption that came through the cross. As a result, they responded accordingly.

The three thousand did not respond to another system of religiosity in order to be legally sanctified of their sins before God. It was this type of religion from which they fled. Peter did not hand them another outline of law in order that they again have an attempt at self-justification. Repentance and baptism were not announced from a legal perspective as an added law. Repentance and baptism were given as the road map for those who mourned over their inability to justify themselves before God. The road map was given as a way to connect with the heart of God that was freely revealed through the incarnation, death, burial, resurrection and ascension of the Son of God.

In this way the mournful did not transition from one legal system of self-justification through law-keeping to another meritorious system. Since the gospel was justification through the cross, and the blood offering was offered for

the sanctification of their sins, they responded to the free offer by their repentant obedience to the gospel (baptism).

Baptism was the means of connectivity. As Abraham was obedient to God to offer his son because of faith, so in baptism our faith is revealed through the offering of ourselves to be baptized. In our baptism, therefore, God says to us the same as He said to Abraham at the time he sought to obediently offer his son: “... *for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from Me*” (Gn 22:12).

The faith of Abraham and our faith are similar in our obedient walk in the righteousness of God. Abraham’s obedient walk of faith revealed his righteousness before God. Our faith led us to the waters of baptism to wash away sins that kept us from the righteousness of God. Until baptism, we were out of contact with the blood of Jesus that cleanses us of all sins, which sins kept us as alien sinners and separated from God (At 2:38; 22:16). But after our obedience to the gospel, we walk, as Abraham, by faith in the righteousness of God that we received upon our obedience to the gospel.

Without any question, the new covenant of Jesus comes with laws to be obeyed. The problem is not with the laws that direct our lives, but how we view the purpose of the laws. Religion would dictate that law is given for the purpose of meritorious justification before God. Grace, on the other hand, would declare that we are justified legally by the cross, and sanctified by the blood of Christ, apart from our perfect performance of

law. Grace teaches that those who are obedient to law are already in a covenant relationship with God on the basis of their obedience to the gospel. They do not stay in this relationship through perfect law-keeping, but through grace.

Under grace there should never be the opportunity that law could be used as a self-justifying means by which one would continue in his or her relationship with God. Good works should never be the means to bypass the blood of Jesus in our sanctification before God.

Religion fails us whenever we bypass the cross of justification and the sanctifying blood in order to reach the

heart of God. When God revealed His heart through the cross, He never intended that we should on the merit of law-keeping and good works reach His heart. If this were the case, we would never get there, for we all sin. If we could reach the heart of God on the basis of our own performance of law and good works, then there would have been no need for the cross. The gospel message on Pentecost would have had no appeal to the three thousand, for the religionists of Judaism had constructed a master plan of self-justification and self-sanctification in their efforts to be accepted by God on the merit of their own legal performances.

## Chapter 10

### EMPOWERED BY THE GOSPEL

We cannot move on from the preceding chapter without noting the passive mood of the verbs of Romans 6:3: “*Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?*” The verbs “were baptized” in reference to the phrases “into Christ Jesus,” and “into His death,” are both passive. Passive means that **the subject is acted upon**. What Paul revealed is that the person who was baptized into Christ was acted upon by someone else. In baptism one gives himself over to another just as Isaac gave himself over to his father in order to be offered.

When one is baptized, Jesus has already acted upon the one baptized through the blood that comes from His

sacrificial offering on the cross. The justification/sanctification through the blood offering of the Son of God happened at one time in the past for the cleansing of those who connect with the blood of Jesus in baptism after the cross. It is through His own blood that He acts upon the soul of those who offer themselves to God in baptism. The result of His blood offering at the cross continues to cleanse those who have offered themselves since the time He poured out His blood at the cross. In order to connect with the justification of the cross, and subsequent sanctification by the blood, one must make the offering of himself in baptism. He must be crucified with Christ.

This same passive verb was used by

Paul when he said of himself, “***I have been crucified with Christ***” (Gl 2:20). Alfred Marshall, in his Greek-English interlinear, translated the passive verb, “I have been co-crucified.” When we connect what Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, with what he said of himself, he concluded that the incarnate Son of God acted upon him through His sacrificial crucifixion on the cross. Though Paul, and the rest of us, have offered ourselves to be crucified with Christ years later, the effect of the blood that continues to flow from the cross reaches throughout history with a cleansing impact on all the obedient (offered).

In our obedience to the cross and resurrection (the gospel), we step into the realm of Jesus’ crucifixion for all our sins. It is this thought that Paul had in mind when he reminded the Christians in Rome that the atonement of the cross was for all people of all time:

*... whom God has set forth to be an atoning sacrifice by His blood through faith in order to declare His righteous for the remission of sins in the past because of the forbearance of God ... (Rm 3:25; see Hb 9:15)*

This is the atoning sacrifice the three thousand saw and responded to on the day of Pentecost. Peter’s instructions to their response was simply: “*Repent and be baptized*” (At 2:38).

What happened in their baptism was that they came into the realm of atonement for sins that was made available by the sacrificial offering of Jesus. In their

response, they were subsequently “co-crucified” with Jesus. They, as Paul, after they were baptized, led the crucified life because they had been baptized into Christ, into a realm about which John later wrote,

*But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses [sanctifies] us from all sin (1 Jn 1:7).*

The three thousand on the day of Pentecost had been steeped in the religion of their own self-justification for centuries. Through their obedience to the host of religious rites of Judaism, they had sought to self-righteously atone for their own sins. However, when the “fullness of time” came when their hearts were opened by the futility of being unable to atone for their own sins before God, they were ready for the gospel.

Unfortunately, there are too many deeply religious people today who are so steeped in the religiosity of their own religion that the “fullness of time” has not yet come for them. This is especially true of those religionists who are held in the bondage of their own feelings. The frustration of their experiential religiosity is revealed in a weekly emotional walk through a catalog of theatrical hysterics in a plea that God forgive their past sins. They do not realize that their emotional religiosity is a denial of the very thing for which they plea.

A Christian is emotionally stirred by the heart of God that was revealed

through the incarnational offering of God's Son. His heart emotionally cries out in thanksgiving and wonder as to how God could love a sinner as himself through the offering of the cross while he was yet dead in his sins (Rm 5:8). Christians do not cry to God for appeasement. Theirs is a cry of rejoicing that the wrath of God was stayed by a blood offering on a wooden cross.

The emotional religionist, on the other hand, will cry out for a "miracle" in order to reassure himself that he is saved. Those who have grown in the grace and knowledge of Jesus simply open their Bibles and read of the glorious message of grace that surrounds the event of the gospel (2 Pt 3:18). It is therein that they are reaffirmed that they have been baptized into a relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mt

28:19). No meritorious emotional experiences are needed, only mournful repentance.

It is indeed unfortunate when some seek to appease their own hearts through self-righteous religious behavior, and thus, miss the heart of God at the cross by trying to satisfy their own hearts. We must never forget that when we seek to sanctify ourselves through our own religious performances, we are bypassing the sanctification that God freely offers through His grace. When we are earnestly trying to justify ourselves, we close the door that would lead us into the realm of justification that Jesus freely offers through the cross. Too many of us stumble over our own religiosity in our efforts to get to the cross. Too many of us bypass the heart of God by focusing on pleasing our own hearts.

## **Chapter 11**

### **THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD**

Young people often have a difficult time with their self-esteem. We remember those days when we always thought something was wrong with how we looked, who would accept us, or if we fit in with the crowd. We were either too skinny or too fat. Our clothes were either out of style or too ragged. It seemed that something always made us question so many things about how we could be accepted by others. Young people often seek to have the approval of others in order to find their worth among their friends. Their behavior is often determined by how intensely they feel about

being accepted by others.

What many of us have done when we grew into adulthood, is that we never overcame our desire to be accepted by everyone. As adults we often apply the same feelings to be accepted to our relationship with our heavenly Father. Our lack of self-confidence is projected into what we feel God feels toward us. Our relationship with God, therefore, becomes a daily performance on our part in order to gain His approval.

The unfortunate mental consequence of our spiritual inferiority complex is that we are continually seeking

God's approval through our religious performances for Him. We forget that when we perform in order to be approved by God, we indirectly doubt the relationship we have with Him through Jesus. Because of our doubts concerning our acceptance by God, we stress ourselves over the performance of our duties.

The beautiful thing about the gospel is that it builds self-confidence. The gospel builds our confidence in God through the cross, not in our efforts to earn His approval. When we understand that God considers us precious in His sight, then we feel a great sense of worth. When we understand that He has accepted us through Jesus, then every day of our lives is not a frustrating struggle to earn His approval. Regardless of how we may feel about ourselves, or what we perceive others think of us, God considers us valuable, so valuable that He was willing to give His Son for us. And when we understand that He injects in us His righteousness upon our obedience to the gospel, it is then that all the other nonsense of the approval ratings of the world simply vanish away.

When we finally realize the unprejudiced heart of our loving God, we make a marvelous discovery. It is a discovery that transforms our total outlook on life. This is what God seeks to do with everyone through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Through the gospel, and our obedience thereof, He gives us notice of His approval (righteousness). This is what Paul meant when he stated, "*I declare to you the gospel ... in which you stand*" (1 Co 15:1). This is the power of the gos-

pel unto our salvation from ourselves.

We can be assured that God has overlooked all those flaws in our lives that we thought separated us from Him. When God examines our lives, He looks directly into our hearts in order that He might sanctify us through the blood of His Son. Once we gain the confidence of the blood of His Son, we can truly feel that "we're good" in our relationship with Him, and because of Him.

In order to start down this road of discovering the heart of the God who loves us, we must first know that we are not alone with our own spiritual inferiority complexes. Over two thousand years ago there was a great company of religious people who struggled with this very problem. And in only one day, the gospel changed their lives forever.

During His ministry, Jesus had prepared this audience, who would for the first time, hear the gospel on the day of Pentecost in A.D. 30. About three years before Pentecost, and at the beginning of His ministry, He spoke to an audience of Jews who had been stuck in the mire of their own spiritual inferiority complexes in reference to self-seeking righteousness. Jesus promised them, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled*" (Mt 5:6).

Only when one comes to the spiritual reality of his own inability to be righteous before God through the futile efforts of keeping God's law perfectly, and attempting to atone for sin with good works, will he mourn over his spiritual predicament. We might look at this from the viewpoint of our own lack of religious

self-esteem. In other words, it is only when we feel bad enough about ourselves that we will seek for something, or Someone, who can make us feel better about ourselves in our relationship with God.

But before we can establish a reassuring relationship with God, we must first mourn over our inability to be right before Him through our own power. Only through mourning over our inability will we begin to discover the ability of the gospel to make us right before God. In fact, we would say that we cannot truly understand the power of the gospel unless we mourn over our hopeless predicament of trying to make ourselves right before God.

There is good news for the mournful. In the same context of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus made the preceding promise of being filled, He opened a door of hope. He promised that those who humbly come to the point of mourning over their lack of spiritual self-esteem that ***“they will be comforted”*** (Mt 5:4). They could not be comforted in the performance of their own religiosity. This was what caused the problem. Neither could they be comforted by God accepting their own devised good works to atone for their flaws. Religion had failed them. The mournful are always in doubt as to whether they have accomplished enough good works to atone for their sins.

Jesus promised that those who would mourn over their own inability to be righteous (justified) before God, would be comforted by God. They would be comforted if they took the initiative to reach out for His righteousness (Rm 5:8). It would be the mournful, there-

fore, who would be filled with the righteousness of God. Those who feel despondent because of their lack of spiritual esteem must gaze into the gospel of the heart of God at the cross. It is there that one will discover the power of the gospel, and subsequently, discover the way to spiritual self-esteem.

We live in a world where “church” (religion) has often failed to comfort the weary. Thousands have failed to find any comfort in institutional “church” religion, and thus they no longer show up at the altar to sit idly on pews as lonely spectators. Many are simply frustrated in their efforts to find comfort for their problems in life through the ceremonial performances of “church services.” When we invite the wayward to “come to church,” they think they are being invited to another religion, the very thing that many people have fled. They feel they can be just as lonely in their homes as they would be in a mass assembly of socially inert spectators, who themselves are also often lonely.

But herein is the opportunity for the gospel of God’s heart to bring comfort. What “church attendance” could not provide through ceremonial performances, the gospel can. However, in order to bring the gospel to life in our lives, we must deconstruct the religion of our legalism and moralism. Many people have left the insufficiency of legal religion, or the moralism with which a religionist is rightly accused of being hypocritical. When we understand the true nature of the gospel, that it is neither legalism, nor moral perfectionism, then others will

begin to see in us a righteousness that is not from us, but from God. This is the power of gospel living. When people start seeing in us grateful joy, it is then that they will start asking questions. And as Peter stated, we must *“be ready always to give a defense [answer] to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you ...”* (1 Pt 3:15).

We must consider again the imputed righteousness of God that flows from the cross in order that our lives are a testimony to others concerning the power of living the gospel. We must first understand that the word “righteousness” refers also to doing that which is right. However, we must not confuse this “right doing” with the righteousness that comes from God as a result of His justification that flows from the cross. **The righteousness that comes into our lives from God makes our lives as if we have done everything right in His sight.**

Our efforts to do right on our own are always insufficient, but not insignificant. What God did right towards us was to perfect us through Christ. What we do right for Him is always imperfect in reference to our efforts to justify ourselves before Him. Only in understanding this can we understand what Jesus meant when He stated, *“Therefore, you are to be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect”* (Mt 5:48). Jesus’ immediate disciples did not comprehend this until the revelation of the righteousness of God that was revealed at the cross. It would be then that they would understand that because God is perfect, any righteousness that would come from Him

would perfect us.

The Greek word for “righteousness” is the same root word for “justification.” The justified are righteous before God because God has made them legally perfect regardless of their insufficient righteousness through law-keeping and good works. **We are thus righteous before God because we have been justified through the advocacy of Jesus.** In being justified, we are as if we had done all things right in the eyes of God.

When we compare our imperfect self-righteousness through works and law-keeping, with God’s righteousness, there is really no comparison. Whatever righteousness we may offer is accepted only on the basis of His righteousness that we receive through the cross. In fact, **it is His righteousness in us that motivates righteous living in us.** We are thus driven to His justification (righteousness) in order that we might stand righteous before Him on the basis of what He has done for us, not on the basis of what we have done in order to earn His righteousness.

When Paul considered all his righteousness before he was cut to the heart by the righteousness of God, he said, *“I count them [my former meritorious works] refuse so that I may gain Christ”* (See Ph 3:3-8). This is our response to the gospel in which we stand (1 Co 15:1). When we, as Paul, become frustrated with trying to be righteous ourselves, we thirst for the righteousness that comes from God. We have obeyed the gospel, therefore, because we knew that we would be made right with God through Jesus.

As Christians, we seek to respond to the gospel with righteous living because we have already been declared righteous through our obedience to the gospel. This is gospel living. However, we caution ourselves that we do not revert back to our former life of trying to gain the righteousness of God through our own righteousness. In Matthew 6 Jesus exhorted, “*Take heed that you do not do your deeds of righteousness before men, to be seen by them*” (Mt 6:1). The use of the word “righteousness” in this text is in reference to “doing that which is right,” which in this case, was doing good for others for the purpose of self-glorification. It is here that we must be cautious in reference to the place of our righteousness (works) in reference to God’s righteousness that we have as a result of our obedience to the gospel.

Jesus continued to admonish, “*When you do good deeds, do not sound a trumpet before you ...*” (Mt 6:2). We must not “do good deeds” (righteousness) in order to earn something from God. In this case, the “trumpet blowers” not only sought the glory of men, but also meritorious justification before God. There is a difference between “trumpet blowing” righteousness, and doing righteous deeds in response to the word of God. Righteousness in response to God is the righteousness about which Paul spoke on Mars Hill in Athens: “*But in every nation he who fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him*” (At 17:35). Paul was not stating that in doing our good deeds to others we are meritoriously justified before God. If this

were true, then it would reverse our justification before God through His “good deed” for us at the cross. What Paul was saying to the audience of those who walked by faith was that in every nation, whether Jew or Gentile, those who responded to the gospel by faith are accepted by God. And since God “*will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained,*” then it is imperative that through faith all men must turn from the merit of their own righteousness to the righteousness of God that has been made available through the risen Christ (At 17:31). Therefore, God “*commands all men everywhere to repent*” (At 17:30).

The problem with “trumpet blowing” righteousness is that we assume that the acceptance of our good deeds (righteousness) by others necessitates that our deeds of righteousness are also accepted by God as atonement for our sins. This is a fatal assumption, and one that the honest and sincere person would never make. This problem intensifies when we place religious connotations on our righteousness, and then assume that our religious righteousness is sufficient for the atonement of our sins.

Our righteous deeds for others, as well as our righteousness by religious rites, cannot supplement God’s righteousness that He provides through the gospel. If we would conclude that God’s deed at the cross needed to be supplemented by our own righteousness, then we would be affirming that the righteousness that God offered at the cross was insufficient.

We must understand that God's imputed righteousness (justification) at the cross is neither supplemented nor cancelled by our righteous deeds that we do for others in response to His righteousness in our lives. The fact is that the Christian does good deeds for others because of God's good deed (righteousness) for him at the cross. We do right things for others because He made us right through Jesus. This is what Peter meant in Acts 17:35. Those who fear God are those in every nation who have submitted to God. Because they have submitted, they work righteousness (do good). They are not accepted on the merit of their work of righteousness. They are accepted because they feared (obeyed) God.

This determines the difference between religion and gospel. Religionist would say, "I do righteousness (good deeds), therefore, I am accepted." But the one who obeys the gospel says, "I am thankful to the Father, and therefore, I do good deeds (righteousness)" (Ep 2:10). Few who are self-righteous yearn for the righteousness of God. If one thinks he is already there, he has no desire to go.

In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus turned His thoughts to the righteousness that comes from God: "*But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness ...*" (Mt 6:33). Jesus spoke here in order to contrast the self-seeking righteousness of the "trumpet blowing" religionists of His audience with the righteousness that God would give through the justification of the cross. This would be the righteousness that God would give

through the offering of His Son to justify us before Him. It is for this righteousness, Jesus said, that we must hunger and thirst. It is only when we realize the insufficiency of our own righteousness that we will seek to be right before God through the gospel.

God seeks to have us close to His heart. In order to get there, we must be declared righteous by Him. That declaration is made when we are raised with His Son from the grave of water. **We can come close to the heart of God only by confessing our own insufficiency to get there on the basis of our own righteousness.** Paul was more straightforward. He said that we should consider our own self-righteousness as refuse, as he did his before his obedience to the gospel (See Gr. of Ph 3:8).

We cannot live flawlessly in reference to the law of God. We cannot atone for our flawed living through meritorious righteousness. God knows this. When we begin to mourn over our hopeless predicament of self-righteousness, it is only then that we begin to understand all that God did for us in releasing His heart to us through the eternally incarnate Son who was offered that we might be declared righteous. This is the heart of God. It is this "doing-right-on-our-behalf" (righteousness) after which we hunger and thirst.

When we in some way begin to understand how far God had to come to retrieve us out of our doomed predicament of self-righteousness, we begin to understand the heart of God that was nailed to the cross.

## Chapter 12

### ROMANS AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

In the epistle of Romans, Paul argues against those who would seek to justify themselves before God on the basis of their own righteousness, whether in reference to law-keeping or good works. He focuses on contrasting God's righteousness that accompanied Jesus to the cross, with our self-righteousness by which we would seek to earn God's favor. In the contrast, he argues that self-righteousness cannot replace or subsidize the righteousness of God.

Paul began his argument by stating, *"I am ready to preach the **gospel** to you also who are at Rome"* (Rm 1:15). *"For I am not ashamed of the **gospel** ... for it is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, 'The just will live by faith'"* (Rm 1:16,17).

Man's righteousness (good deeds) cannot set aside or cancel the gospel of God's righteousness that was revealed through the incarnational offering of the Son of God. God's righteousness was revealed through the faith of Jesus who obediently went to the cross on our behalf (Hb 5:8). And because He was obedient, *"He became the author of eternal salvation to all those who obey Him"* (Hb 5:9). Through obedience, Jesus made God's righteousness available. It is free to those who would accept it on the foundation of their obedient faith in Him. In this way, the justified "live by faith." They are righteous in their gospel living because of their obedient faith.

In Romans 3 Paul contrasts our un-

righteousness in reference to the truth of the gospel: *"There is none righteous, no, not one"* (Rm 3:10). And for this reason, *"our **unrighteousness** demonstrates [manifests] the righteousness of God"* (Rm 3:5). While we were yet unrighteous, God revealed His righteousness through Jesus (Rm 5:8). Our dysfunctional performance reveals that our self-righteousness is actually unrighteousness. And because our self-righteousness is always unrighteousness in the eyes of God, we are in dire need of His righteousness. It is for this reason that any of our attempts to be perfect before God on the basis of our performance of either law or our own self-righteous good works, is futile. We cannot be righteous before God on the basis of our own religiosity. **The more the religionist performs his own self-righteousness in order to be justified before God, the more difficult it is for him to accept the righteousness of God.**

The religionist often seeks to demonstrate his or her own righteousness through religious performances of good deeds and meritorious religious rites or ceremonies. But in reference to the law of God, we are all unrighteous, regardless of any "trumpet blowing" righteousness that we may seek to offer to God. The more we understand the insufficiency of our own unrighteousness, the more we appreciate the righteousness of God that was revealed through the gospel of Jesus.

The more we seek to perform our own righteousness in order to justify ourselves, the more we are attacking the very heart of the gospel. Self-justification through the performance of self-righteous good works and religious ceremonies deny the sufficiency of the gospel. However, those who honestly understand the insufficiency of their own righteousness, will hunger and thirst after the righteousness of God that comes through the gospel of God's grace.

So what will we do in reference to our inability to perform law perfectly in order to declare our own righteousness before God? The answer is that we cannot declare our own meritorious righteousness. Paul answered, "*But now the righteousness of God without law is manifested*" (Rm 3:21). He encourages everyone who would live by faith to seek "*the righteousness of God that is by the faith of Jesus Christ to all those who believe, for there is no difference*" (Rm 3:22).

It must be noted here in the phrase "*the faith of Jesus Christ,*" that the article "the" is not in the Greek text. Some translators, unfortunately, have taken the liberty to add the preposition "in," thus changing the focus of faith from Jesus to ourselves. This is an unfortunate supposition and one that actually misses the emphasis of the faith of Jesus in the Father in going to the cross on our behalf. We must not forget the statement of the Hebrew writer: "*Though He was a Son, He learned obedience by the things that He suffered*" (Hb 5:8). Through obedient faith in the Father, Jesus went to the

cross on our behalf.

The addition of the article to the translation of Romans 3:22 is a supposition that weakens the intensity of the sacrifice that Jesus offered. From the cross, and in His final moments of life, Jesus, with a loud voice, cried out, "*Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit*" (Lk 23:46). Herein was revealed the faith of Jesus for us. When we speak of the gospel, therefore, the faith of Christ Jesus plays a central part. Through His faith He went to the cross, and by our faith we respond to the cross.

John referred to "the faith of Jesus" when he wrote of the perseverance of the saints "*who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus*" (Rv 14:12). The faith of Jesus in going to the cross on our behalf was a central argument of Paul in Galatians 2 when he referred to our justification before God. Paul placed the emphasis of our justification on Christ, "*knowing that a man is not justified by works of law, but by the faith of Christ Jesus*" (Gl 2:16). "The faith of Christ Jesus" is the literal translation of this text, even though some translators have also here rendered the reading with the phrase "*in Christ Jesus.*" The preposition "in" is not in the text. In making this supposition, some translators have shifted the work of justification from Jesus to us. But the text teaches that our justification was first laid on the shoulders of Jesus. By faith, He went to the cross in order to make justification available to all those who would come to Him by faith. Using the word "in" would place on us the responsibility to respond

to “*the faith of Jesus,*” about which John wrote in Revelation. We must believe “in” Jesus Christ. However, we must not extract the faith of Jesus from the enactment of the gospel. We are “*justified by the faith of Christ*” (Gl 2:16). In Christ “*we have boldness and access with confidence through the faith of Him*” who went to the cross for us (Ep 3:12). This is “*the faith of the gospel*” (Ph 1:27). Our confidence for our justification is not in ourselves, but in Him (See Ph 3:9). The point is that our faith is in Him who justified us before the Father.

The appropriation of the righteousness of God is a spiritual partnership between Jesus and us. Through His faith in the Father, Jesus went to the cross for us. Through our faith in Him, we accept the fact that He went there for us. “*There is no difference (separation)*” between the faith of Jesus and our faith in reference to the availability of the righteousness of God and our salvation. Without His obedient faith, we would never have had the righteousness of God made available. Without our faith in Him, there would be no connection with the righteousness of God that was offered through Him.

The righteousness of God in gospel living is made possible through the faith of both Jesus and ourselves. Therefore, it is a connection of faith. By His faith and our faith we are “*justified freely by His [God’s] grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*” (Rm 3:24). All this was for the purpose of declaring the righteousness of God, not ours. It is Jesus ...

... whom God has set forth to be an atoning sacrifice by His blood through faith in order to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins in the past because of the forbearance of God (Rm 3:25).

God’s justice had to be revealed at the cross in order “to declare at this time ... His righteousness that He might be just and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus” (Rm 3:26). For this reason, the justification (righteousness) of God was applied to all people of faith of all time, both before and after the cross. In this, God was declared righteous in creating those who could not live flawlessly before Him. And in the acceptance of His righteousness through faith, we partake of His righteousness.

As it would not have been just for God to create those who could not live without sinning, and thus would be condemned to hell because of sin, so it would not be just for some to be involuntarily saved without obediently responding to the gospel of God’s justification through Jesus. Therefore, God is judged righteous (just) to condemn the disobedient to hell because of His offer of justification through Jesus. At the same time, the obedient are judged righteous in order to be saved because they have responded to God’s righteousness that was offered through the cross. Our obedience to the gospel is what brings one into the realm of God’s righteousness. Through disobedience of the gospel, the one who is dead in sin will continue unto certain condemnation (2 Th 1:6-9).

Since we are justified through the righteous deed of the Father through the Son, Paul asks, “*Where then is boasting [of our own righteousness]*” (Rm 3:27)? The answer to the question is simple and logical: “*It is excluded*” (Rm 3:27). We have no occasion to boast in our own self-righteousness when the righteousness of

God at the cross took care of that for which we could not do for ourselves. The religionist must remember this very important point: **Self-righteous religious rites can never be used to either proclaim one’s own righteousness, or be considered a subsidy for the righteous work of God through the cross.**

## Chapter 13

### DECLARATION OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Paul now brings Abraham into the picture in Romans concerning our faith. “*What then will we say that Abraham, our forefather, has discovered according to the [works of the] flesh?*” (Rm 4:1). Notice carefully how Paul words this argument: “*For if Abraham was justified by works [of merit], he has something about which to boast, **but not before God***” (Rm 4:2).

Abraham’s performance of works did not justify him before God. Justification by meritorious works never enter into Abraham’s mind. On the contrary, “*Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness*” (Rm 4:3). **Abraham believed before he made the offering of his son, and because he believed, he offered his son.** He was credited righteous, therefore, not because of the offering, but because of his faith.

We sometimes forget when Abraham first exercised his faith in God. Abraham’s faith was first illustrated when God called him to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldeas and go to a land he did not know. “**By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place that he would later receive as an inheritance,**

*obeyed*” (Hb 11:8). Because of his obedience, his faith was declared. He was declared righteous before God because of his obedient faith long before God called on him to offer his son, Isaac. It is for this reason that the offering of his son was not meritorious. He had already been declared righteous before God because he acted on his faith to obey God’s command to leave his homeland and go to a land that his descendants would eventually receive as an inheritance. Here is the point:

*But to him who does not work [meritoriously for his own righteousness], but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly [regardless of his inability to perform flawlessly], **his faith is credited for righteousness*** (Rm 4:5).

Abraham, and all those of whom he is the father of faith, are the blessed “*man to whom God **credits righteousness without works** [of merit]*” (Rm 4:6). Because of his obedient faith, Abraham was credited with the righteousness of God before he obeyed the command of God to offer his son.

Abraham was a Gentile, and thus as an uncircumcised Gentile, he became the father of all who would be credited righteous before God apart from meritorious law-keeping. When we obey the gospel, it is at that time that we are accredited righteous before God. Abraham first believed, and then he obeyed to offer his son. In this way, we must first believe, and then through the offering of ourselves with Jesus on the cross we are declared righteous. We are declared righteous by God before there is any opportunity to work righteousness in our life as a Christian. As Abraham was declared righteous by the offering of his son, we are declared righteous by the offering of ourselves.

We are credited righteous as obedient believers before we have an opportunity to do our first good work as a Christian. This is the meaning behind what Paul wrote to the Ephesian Christians: *“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works ...”* (Ep 2:10). When our faith moves us to crucify ourselves, we are baptized into Christ in obedience to the gospel (Rm 6:3-6). It is then that we are declared righteous, and not before our obedience expresses our faith.

Our workmanship begins when we are baptized into Christ. We are not declared righteous in order to come into Christ. God worked on our behalf at the cross in order that we have the opportunity to do good works after we have obeyed the gospel. Therefore, we are not created in Christ Jesus **by** good works, but **for** good works. We are not created

in Christ Jesus because of our own righteousness, but by the righteous work of God through the cross.

Because of his faith when he left Ur of the Chaldeas, Abraham was credited righteous before God, and thus was blessed to be the father of all those who would come into Christ through obedient faith.

*And he [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith that he had while being uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are not circumcised, so that righteousness might be credited to them also* (Rm 4:11).

Those who would seek to establish their own righteousness through meritorious good works have cheated themselves by working in reverse of the righteousness of God and good works that God offers. Abraham was not accredited righteous because of his obedience to the law of circumcision. He was first declared righteous before God through his faith long before the law of circumcision was given (See Gn 17). And because he was declared righteous through his demonstrated faith, he was obedient to obey also the law of circumcision.

If we seek to declare our own righteousness through meritorious works, then we have marginalized the *“abundance of grace and of the gift of the righteousness”* of God that we might *“reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ”* (Rm 5:17). We have sought to earn that which

God has given as a gift. If God's righteousness is something that is earned, then it is no longer a gift.

Through the sin of Adam, sin was introduced into the world wherein all of us sin, and thus are spiritually separated from God (Rm 6:23). But "*through the righteousness of one [Jesus Christ], the free gift came to all men to justification of life*" (Rm 5:18). All men were not involuntary made sinners through the sin of Adam (Rm 5:19). If this were true, then all men would have been made involuntarily righteous through the justification of the cross. Paul explained, "... *even so through the obedience of one [Jesus] will many be made righteous*" (Rm 5:19). The passage reads "will," not "would." Through the obedience of Jesus on the cross, the opportunity for righteousness was made available to all those who chose to come to the Father through faith. In order to accept the offer of the righteousness of God, therefore, we must through faith voluntarily respond to the heart of God that was nailed to the cross.

Paul wanted to make sure that his fellow Jewish Christians got the point concerning their former sinful state. In order to exemplify sin, the Sinai "*law entered so that the offense might abound*" (Rm 5:20). Law brought the realization of death because it exemplified the fact that we are all lawbreakers. The law was good in that it informed the Jews that they were sinners. The more the honest Jews mourned over their death in sin because they were lawbreakers, the more they hungered and thirsted after the righteousness of God that was revealed through

Jesus. This explains the phenomenal response of three thousand on the A.D. 30 Pentecost.

It is in our state of mourning over our unrighteousness that we are motivated unto what Paul stated, "*obedience to righteousness*" (Rm 6:16). As alien sinners, we were not obedient because we were righteous. It was because we were alien sinners that we realized we were unrighteous, and by this realization, we were drawn to the righteousness of God. When the alien sinner thus sees the inadequacy of his own self-righteousness, he is willing to do anything that God would ask of him in order to receive His righteousness.

When one sees the righteousness of God that is offered freely at the cross, he seeks for this righteousness for which he could not attain through his own meritorious righteousness. The revelation of the righteousness of God at the cross draws us to obedience of the gospel in baptism. This is what Jesus meant when He said, "*And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Me*" (Jn 12:32). Mournful sinners are always drawn to the gospel of God's righteousness.

When we are declared righteous because of our forgiveness of sins in baptism, this righteousness in turn becomes the impetus, or motivation, to do good works in thanksgiving to God for making us righteous before Him through the cross. When our sins are washed away in baptism, we become "*bondservants of righteousness*" (Rm 6:18). The Christian serves because of the righteousness

he has received in Christ, not in order to work himself into being righteous before God. This is the difference between Christianity and religion.

Our message to the religious world that seeks to establish its own righteous-

ness would be as Paul wrote in Romans 10:3:

*For they being ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God.*

## Chapter 14

### A MATTER OF THE HEART

We remember this heartwarming revelation: "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son ...*" (Jn 3:16). This is a statement that expresses the heart of God. It is a statement of the centrality of the gospel of grace.

It is our challenge as finite beings to seek to comprehend the biblical definition of the heart in reference to both God and man. Unfortunately, we are prejudiced by our human emotions. We stumble over our inadequate intellect. But in some way, the revelation of the heart of God can be understood by even us. For example, in response to the gospel of the heart of God that was revealed on the day of Pentecost, about three thousand people were "*cut to the heart*" (At 2:37). There was something that was said by the apostles on that day that cut right to the heart of the people. Therefore, we seek to understand why three thousand people in one day could respond so emphatically to something that was of Divine revelation.

We unfortunately assume that the three thousand were "cut to their emo-

tions." But the text says "heart," not emotions. There are some who suppose that in response to the gospel on that day, there were people who started jumping up and down, falling on the ground, or speaking in tongues of gibberish. But this is reading our wrong emotional response into the occasion of the event. It would be easy to understand what was revealed if there were only a human emotional response. We understand our own emotions, but what was revealed on that day did not lead three thousand people to respond with uncontrollable emotions.

What happened on that glorious day was that the "John 3:16 heart" of God was first proclaimed in history. This revelation of God's love through Jesus cut to the heart of those who heard the gospel for the first time. When they heard that "*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,*" there was an overwhelming response on their part to the offering of God on behalf of their salvational needs that they knew they were lacking. It was a heart wrenching revelation that caused a heart wrenching response. The gospel was more than an

event, and the response was more than obedience to law or emotional chaos.

The gospel reaches right to our hearts. There are some very important things we must understand in order to better understand how God's revelation of His heart on the cross touched the hearts men. When Peter and the apostles proclaimed the gospel for the first time in history, they indeed dealt with the "mind" of man. Facts and events were conveyed to the people. But it takes more than knowledge of facts to cut one to the heart. Nevertheless, the revelation of the heart of God first begins with revealed words.

*But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice and said to them, "You men of Judea and all you who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words ..."* (At 2:14).

Information concerning the event of the gospel was imparted to the minds of those who were present (See At 2:15-36). When the facts and events about the prophecies, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension were concluded, Peter reminded the heart-stricken audience, "**God has made this same Jesus whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ**" (At 2:36).

The people knew all the Old Testament background information that led up to this statement. They knew all the prophecies. They knew the prophecies concerning the Messiah being seated on the throne of David. Add to this the fact that they also concluded that it was fu-

tile to seek justification before God through perfect obedience of law. They had also concluded that sins before God could not find atonement in either animal blood or good works. They assumed, according to what they understood from prophecy, that something, or Someone, must deal with their sin problem and separation from God (Is 59:2).

Add to the preceding the fact that the Jews had little understanding of the resurrection. In fact, the Sadducees even denied the resurrection of the dead (At 23:8). But in hearing the good news that Jesus was raised up, and then ascended to sit on David's throne in heaven, things began to happen in their hearts. They reasoned that the body of Jesus had not been stolen away by the disciples as the religious leaders falsely reported (Mt 28:11-15). Jesus was actually raised from the dead. When they started bringing together all their knowledge of prophecy, events and facts, the gospel message began to move from their heads to their hearts.

The gospel of the cross and resurrection triggered their hearts because of what they already knew from centuries of studying the Law and the Prophets. At the same time, they judged themselves guilty of a lifetime of sin. And besides this, many of them had encouraged the crucifixion of the innocent One seven weeks before.

They stood there before the apostles, therefore, condemned with sin and guilt. And for this reason, the heart of God that was revealed on the cross penetrated right to their own hearts. The

following statement was actually a plea for help: “*Men and brethren, what will we do?*” (At 2:37).

This was not a plea for another set of rules by which they might legally attempt to obey in order to rectify their sin before God. They had tried that approach for a relationship with God for centuries, but to no avail. They knew that they were lawbreakers who were living in the frustration of their own fallibility.

Concerning their spiritual situation, Paul made the following statement many years later:

*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us, that denying ungodliness and worldly lust, we should live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age ... (Ti 2:12,13).*

This is what happened on the first memorial Sunday of this dispensation of time. The “*grace of God that brings salvation*” appeared on the cross and was announced on Pentecost (Ti 2:11). Jesus was the grace of God that appeared while the Pentecost audience was still in sin. They knew they were undeserving of this grace. Nevertheless, “*God demonstrates His love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (Rm 5:8). Herein is revealed the heart of God to which those on Pentecost responded.

Three thousand people stood stunned in the audience when this gospel message was first announced on the Pentecost of A.D. 30. The action of the incarnation, cross, resurrection and as-

ension of the heart of God was revealed to those who had lost heart in their futile efforts of self-justification. And since they confessed to the futility of their own efforts to make themselves right before God, their hearts were touched by what God had done for them. The result of the message was that the three thousand relinquished to the heart of God that was revealed through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace was revealed, and clearly understood. There needed to be no delay in a response. The response of about three thousand happened in the same day. In some cases in the first century, the response happened in the same hour of the night (At 16:33). It does not take a great deal of time to understand the gospel.

Peter and the apostles communicated the prophecies and events surrounding the gospel to the minds of all those who were present on the day of Pentecost. The response of the people also involved their emotions. However, in their emotional response to the revelation of the heart of God on the cross, they were not justified. If they were justified by their emotional response (belief in the gospel event), then their justification would have depended on their emotions. Again, they would have created a self-imposed righteousness that was dependent on human emotions, but short of all that which had to be done in order to restore their relationship with God. The problem was that they were burdened with sin that continued to keep them separated from God.

The effect of the gospel is not enacted solely by emotions, or belief that

stirs emotions. It is obediently enacted in our lives by our emotional response to our knowledge of the action of God through the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of the Son of God. We must not forget that the three thousand asked what they must “do.” Belief and emotions had brought them to the brink of asking what to do, but their emotional response needed a God-given answer in order that they do according to God’s will.

In the world today this is one of the most confusing points in the religious world. It is believed that an emotional response (“believe on Jesus” or “receive Jesus”) is equated with salvation. If one would only have some emotional experience of belief in response to the heart of God, then it is supposed that one is forgiven of all sins. Emotional responses thus become the only condition for one’s salvation. If this were true, then it would place us right back into the condition from which we seek to be delivered through the gospel, that is, deliverance from our own self-centered righteousness.

Emotional experiential religion falls into the same category as “self-made” religiosity by which some in Colosse and Galatia supposed they could be justified before God. Both systems of religion, however, are meritorious. The experientialist is basing his faith, and thus saving himself, on the merit of his own emotional experience. Likewise, the legalist bases his faith on, and thus seeks to save himself, on the meritorious obedience to an outline of law. **Both systems are le-**

**gal and inadequate for the remission of sins that keep one separated from God.**

The experientialist makes his emotions a legal requirement for self-justification; the legalist makes his performance of law a legal requirement for the same self-justification. Unfortunately, the adherents to both systems of religion become self-appointed judges of one another and others. The experientialist judges his fellow adherents to be on a lower level of spirituality than himself because he or she has not “spoken in tongues,” or had some other hysterical outburst of emotionality. The legalist judges his fellow adherent of not being “faithful” because he supposedly does not conform to a legal chart that explains steps that one must take in order to be saved.

When the experientialists and legalists divide into different sects, they become judges of one another. The experientialists judge the legalists by saying that the legalists have no emotions, and their assemblies are dead. The legalists judge the experientialists by saying that they have no respect for the law of God. Unfortunately, both are making their judgments of one another on the basis of their self-made religiosity. On the day of Pentecost in A.D. 30, the honest Jews who were in the camp of the legalists, realized that their camp was dead wrong. Law had made them spiritually dead, and brought them to the point of spiritual frustration (See Rm 7:9).

The revelation of the heart of God reaches into the mind of the legalist, who

must honestly confess that through meritorious legalities, no one can stand righteous before God (See Gl 2:16). The revelation of the heart of God also reaches into the emotions of the honest experientialist who confesses that after he has exhausted all his emotions, he too feels

unrighteous before God. Therefore, only honest hearts can respond to the revelation of the heart of God that was revealed on the cross and first spoken by the apostles on the A.D. 30 Pentecost over two thousand years ago. Faith has not been the same since.

## Chapter 15

### DEFINING THE HEART

The biblical definition of our heart would include our minds (intellect) and emotions, but according to a biblical definition, would certainly go beyond these two limitations. The Acts 2:37 passage states that the people were “cut to the heart.” Information concerning the facts of the gospel were truly given in order to reach their minds. They reasoned that what Peter revealed was true and according to prophecy, and the fact of the resurrection. And because the people realized that the facts and events of the gospel were true, they emotionally responded by being “cut to the heart.” But their heart response did not end there. It went beyond their minds and emotions.

Their request, “*What must we do,*” means that they had to do something beyond their minds and emotions. The gospel moved them into action. Their minds and emotions were the foundation upon which there was motivation in their hearts to ask Peter and the apostles where they should go from their minds and emotions to being restored to a reconciled relationship with God. They wanted to know what to do. **The heart is the basic mo-**

**tivation or desire of the individual to do something in response to what is learned and felt.**

Because the gospel goes deeper than our minds and emotions, it generates action. When the gospel touches our hearts, we must respond. It is in this way that the grace of God reaches and teaches us. **The gospel is the motive that inspires a paradigm shift in our motivation, and thus in our behavior.** Grace is the impetus to flee disobedience in order to please our Father. This was the substance of what Paul wrote to the disciples in Rome: “*Do we then make void law through faith [in the grace of God]? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish law*” (Rm 3:31). The gospel touches our heart in a way that we cry out to God for instructions to obey.

The three thousand on the day of Pentecost initially responded with the question, “*Men and brethren, what will we do?*” Once their hearts were touched by the action (heart) of God on the cross (the gospel), they were really asking, “Father, give us instructions concerning what we must now do?” Peter’s instructions

were in reference to “doing” that which was relevant to people whose hearts had been touched. The “do” was simply: “*Repent and be baptized*” (At 2:38).

Their response in baptism, therefore, was never meant to be another legality. It was a heart response to the revealed heart of their Father. In their desire to come again into a reconciled relationship **with** their Father, the Holy Spirit revealed that they had to be crucified **with** Christ, buried **with** Christ, in order to be raised **with** Christ (Rm 6:3-6; Gl 2:20). All this was necessary in order that they be eternally **with** God (2 Th 1:6-9). Baptism was the means of connection in order to be in a relationship with the Father in the present. It was not a legality to be added to a host of laws that had actually brought them to ask the question concerning how to be reconciled to the Father.

Consider for a moment the one who simply believes on Jesus in his mind and with his emotions. He believes the gospel to the point of responding to the cross in hope of the resurrection to come. However, he will cut himself short of all that which he desires in a relationship with God if his mind and emotions do not move him to ask, “What must I now do.” When the “do” is completed through repentance and baptism, then he can go on his way rejoicing. But until then, the heart of God through the gospel has not motivated him to do that which he must do in order to restore his relationship with God.

People, unfortunately, like to use hypothetical situations in order to argue

against doing anything that God would require in response to the gospel. For example, it is supposed that one who has believed in Jesus, and then is headed for the water in order to be immersed into Christ, dies on the way in an automobile accident. The question is posed, “Would the unbaptized believer be saved?” We would not want to make judgments for God, but we would answer “Yes.” We do not believe in a God who would be so legally calloused to condemn such a believing disciple. However, we must keep in mind that hypothetical circumstances **do not** establish law or change that which God has instructed in order to receive the remission of sins.

Jesus once gave the example of David and his men eating the showbread in the temple when he was fleeing the murderous hand of Saul (Mt 12:3,4; see 1 Sm 21:6). What he did, Jesus reminded His legalistic audience, “*was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him*” (Mt 12:4; see Lv 24:5). David’s eating of the showbread was not lawful, **but it did not change the law**. His survival as the future king of Israel was more important at the moment, than the law that only the priests were to eat of the showbread. However, after the death of Saul, and when David became king, he protected the law and barred anyone from eating the showbread except for the priests. His unfortunate situation at the time he ate the showbread **did not** change the law.

Now suppose that our particular believing disciple does not die in an automobile accident, but is not in search of

water in order to be baptized into Christ for remission of his sins. Suppose the Ethiopian eunuch had simply passed by the water when he said, “*See, here is water! What hinders me from being baptized*” (At 8:36). If the eunuch would have passed by the opportunity to obey the gospel immediately in order to come into a restored relationship with God, then **he would have invalidated his belief**.

Philip’s response to the eunuch’s question was, “*If you believe **with all your heart** ...*” (At 8:37). Philip had preached “Jesus” (the gospel) to the eunuch. As those on Pentecost, the eunuch believed. Philip then wanted to know if the eunuch’s belief had penetrated to his heart. If it had, then his belief was true. The request, “*What hinders me from being baptized*” is the response of one who truly believes the gospel in his heart, **not just in his mind**. And because the eunuch truly believed in his heart, he “*came up out of the water [after baptism] ... and went on his way rejoicing*” (At 8:39). There would have been no occasion for rejoicing on his way back home to Ethiopia if he had simply passed by the water.

But what if the eunuch had simply passed by the opportunity to be immersed in water to wash away his sins, as the three thousand were instructed to do on the day of Pentecost (See At 2:38; 22:16)? Would his belief have been real and from the heart? Because those on Pentecost were cut to the heart, they asked what they should do, and then they immediately did what was instructed. Suppose the apostles, as well as Philip, would have

failed to instruct them what to do after being cut to the heart by the gospel?

The point is that if a believer simply passes by the water, or some preacher fails to preach all that is involved in preaching the gospel of Jesus, including baptism for remission of sins, then people are left in their sins. The one who says he believes, but does not respond from the heart to all that God instructs in order to deal with our problem of sin, has invalidated his belief. One can be left as a “dead man walking” with all his past sins, either through his refusal to stop the chariot and be baptized, or by being left in ignorance by some preacher who has failed to completely answer the question of the mournful, “*Men and brethren, what will we do?*” (At 2:37). The mournfully repentant often allow themselves to remain with a “dead faith” that has shown no expression of truly being united with Jesus through baptism (See Js 2:26).

The legalist will always have a difficult time understanding this, and the “believing” experimentalist will always assume that he can perform some emotional outburst to validate his acceptance by God. For this reason, we must go deeper into the subject in order to deal with the religious sin beneath the sin of failing to respond to the heart of God. We must deal with the sin that leads one to fall short of what Peter and the apostles instructed the mournful to do on Pentecost who hungered and thirsted after the righteousness of God (At 2:38). Would God work throughout millennia, and struggle with Israel through all their rebellion, in order to have His heart incar-

nate in the form of man, and then allow Him to be nailed to a cross, and then expect only a mental belief from us in all

that He did in order that we be accepted by Him? Truly, this would not be reasonable to believe.

## Chapter 16

### THE FUTILITY OF CHURCH RIGHTEOUSNESS

The gospel cancels all self-made religions and self-imposed religiosity. Unfortunately, we all have our religious ways about us. And because we do, there is a constant struggle in our lives between religion and Christianity, merit and gospel. When Christianity is twisted into a religion through either our legal obedience for self-justification, or experiential emotionalism, then “church righteousness” is developed whereby we all seek to establish our own common righteousness as a group that is based on the performance of our respective religious associations. We become denominational when we substitute a unique culture of church righteousness for the gospel of freedom.

This was the contextual religious environment that Paul addressed when he wrote to the Christians in Colosse. Some in Colosse were in the process of developing a church righteousness after the meritorious systems of the idolatrous religions of the Gentiles, or the legal religiosity of Judaism (Cl 2:20-23). They were bringing into the church of the free a meritorious system of religiosity by which they would move Christianity into a religion. The gospel of freedom was being set aside by religious rites that had no authority of the word of God.

In the context of any attempts to es-

tablish a church righteousness by which we would seek to save ourselves, we must again take another look at the core nature of the gospel. The gospel destroys any attempts to substitute church righteousness for God’s righteousness. Our peace of mind in reference to our relationship with God depends on conforming to His will, not the will of the “pastor,” or the unique religious group to which we belong. Church righteousness gives birth to a unique religious sect when the adherents of the particular group commonly agreed upon a set of religious rites. On the other hand, the gospel insures allegiance only to Jesus and His word, regardless of whether one is obedient to the religious culture of any unique sect that is identified by unique religious rites that are accepted by the group.

In order to gain the peace that passes all understanding in these matters (Ph 4:7), we must base our world view of faith upon Paul’s arguments in Romans 3. Paul begins with the statement, “*But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested ... even the righteousness of God that is by the faith of Jesus Christ to all those who believe ...*” (Rm 3:21). As earlier stated, it is significant to notice first in this statement that the article “the” in reference to law **is not** in the Greek text. What Paul is establish-

ing is the fact that **God's righteousness was not revealed through law**, nor any other religious law of man. We must be cautious, therefore, not to establish a unique "church" that is based on adherence to the religious rites that a particular group of people have imposed on themselves.

Here is the principle: The gospel was not revealed because God was obligated by law to offer His Son. The gospel came to us apart from law, not because of law. Jesus had no obligation to die on the cross in order to fulfill any law. **God was not in debt to man to pay the sacrifice of His Son on the cross.** If the cross was according to law, then there was no grace. If our obedience to law obligated God to save us, then grace was given out of debt.

Now apply this principle to unique church religious rites that we might impose on ourselves who would be the church. Since God did not reveal the gospel on the basis of law, then certainly we would not establish the church on the basis of law. The church of Christ is based on the gospel, not on the members' conformity to a certain list of religious rites. If we would base the church on conformity to law, then what is the difference between a law-based church and a church that bases itself on commonly agreed upon religious rites? Simply because a law-based church might have a passage of scripture below each point of belief and behavior for their "church doctrine," does not set aside the inability of each member to keep law perfectly in order to be identified as the "true church."

However, simply because no member of the church can keep law perfectly does not mean that God has given no law to His people. The identity of His people is first by their obedience to the gospel, but also by their continued efforts to live according to His will, regardless of whether they can live perfectly according to His will. Christians are the children of God because they make every effort to live by the will of their Father, as well as believe the truth of His word.

Since the church is composed of people, there is always problems in reference to obedience. If church exists because of perfect law-keeping, then the church would never exist in its perfect form simply because none of the members can keep law perfectly. But as previously stated, it is by the grace of God that those who have obeyed the gospel exist as "church," and remain as the people of God because they seek to follow the authority of the word of God in all matters of faith.

As law did not obligate God to reveal the gospel, neither does law obligate us to set aside the gospel as the foundation upon which the church is built. The church is based on the gospel, not on law. The church exists because of those who have conformed to the gospel of Christ. Those who obeyed the gospel on the A.D. 30 Pentecost, were added to the church of believers by God. They were not added because they sought to conform to a system of law, but because they conformed to the gospel in obedience thereof (At 2:47).

Since all of us as members of the

body of Christ have fallen short of self-justification through lawbreaking (Rm 3:23), then there was the necessity of free justification “*by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*” (Rm 3:24). For this reason, God sent forth His incarnate Son on the cross as an eternal atoning sacrifice through His blood. He did this “*in order to declare His righteousness,*” not to make a payment to us for our good works, or as a reward for our flawless obedience to His will (Rm 3:25). At the cross, therefore, God declared “*His righteousness that He might be just and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus*” (Rm 3:25). Our faith in our Father to take care of us as prodigal children resulted in Jesus’ sin offering for us. We are the body of Christ, therefore, because through the gospel we have been redeemed into membership through His free offering. Nothing has changed in reference to God’s relational offering of Jesus for us as we walk in the light as members of the body of Christ (1 Jn 1:7).

Since through our obedience to the gospel of the cross we are made righteous before God, then there is no room for any church righteousness about which we would boast on our own behalf. We would not boast of our performance of law in order to be the church, neither would we boast of any self-imposed church righteousness that would identify us as the correct church. We are “church” because of the gospel, not because of what we do as church. There is never an occasion in which we can boast of what we do in reference to perfect law-keeping.

So Paul asked, “*Where then is boasting?*” He frankly answered, “*It is excluded*” (Rm 3:27). It is excluded through the law that we are justified by faith in the work of God through the cross, and not in how much “church work” we would do in a supposed effort to make ourselves continually righteous before God on the merit of how we perform as members of the body.

Neither is our boasting in how well we have performed law in order to be the “true church.” This is what Paul had in mind when he wrote, “*You [members] who make your boast of law, do you dishonor God through the breaking of law?*” (Rm 2:23). This is a penetrating question. The fact is that we do dishonor God when we boast in our law-keeping or religious rites in reference to being the church. Paul’s quotation of the prophets in reference to the lawbreaking of Israel is appropriate for all those who would claim to be the right church on the basis of perfect law-keeping: “*The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you*” (Rm 2:23; see Is 52:5; Ez 16:27; 36:22). As lawbreaking caused the people of God in the Old Testament to be blasphemed by the nations, so the same is true today when we claim to be the people of God on the foundation of our perfect law-keeping. God’s name is blasphemed because the world sees that we do not keep law perfectly.

Must we remind ourselves here that Jesus said that His people would be identified by their love for one another, as He and the Father loved them through the incarnational offering of the cross (Jn

13:34,35)? The church that Jesus built on the foundation of His Sonship is not identified by law, but by gospel loving (See Mt 16:18,19). And love inherently refuses to boast, whereas through law-keeping we always seek an opportunity to pride ourselves on having the right name, the right “acts of worship,” the right works, the right church righteousness.

On the contrary, our boasting as members of the body of Christ, as Paul wrote, is in Christ (the gospel). “*He who boasts,*” Paul admonished, “*let him boast in the Lord*” (1 Co 1:31). And he said it again, “*But he who boasts [as a Christian], let him boast in the Lord*” (2 Co 10:17). “In the Lord” means to boast in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is not boasting about being “in the church,” but boasting on the foundation of the gospel. It is not boasting about being “the right church,” but boasting about the right gospel. In a different statement, Paul said it thus: “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel*” (Rm 1:16). Therefore, Paul boasted in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. If we would boast, therefore, we do as Paul who wrote, “*If I have to boast, I will boast of the things that concern my weakness*” (2 Co 11:30; see 2 Co 12:5). The reason for boasting in weaknesses is that in Christ we are strong. “*For when I am weak, then I am strong*” in Him (2 Co 12:10). And finally: “*But God forbid that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world*” (Gl 6:14).

In reference to trusting in the gos-

pel through faith, Paul continued Romans with the example of Abraham. “*For if Abraham was justified by works [of law], he has something about which to boast, but not before God*” (Rm 4:3). Before the giving of the Sinai law, even Abraham was not justified by any law before God. “*Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness*” (Rm 4:3). Now here is the point: “*Now to him who works [as a Christian], the reward is not credited according to grace [the gospel], but according to debt*” (Rm 4:4). **If one meritoriously obeys law in order to justify himself before God, then he obligates God to keep him saved according to debt and not grace.** Out of faith, Abraham worked because of his faith that God had already saved him. He could boast before men of his works, but not before God because he continued in the favor of God through grace. He already had his salvation because of his faith. The same is true of the “faithful” member of the body of Christ.

On the day of Pentecost in A.D. 30, would we ask the respondents if they felt that God owed them the cross because of their obedience to law? We would certainly conclude that three thousand people in the Jewish audience did not respond because they felt that God owed them the cross. On the contrary, they realized that their own unrighteousness was the reason why God had to save them by His free grace. It was their self-confessed unrighteousness that produced their response to what God freely offered.

If we conclude that the three thousand were indeed moved because they re-

alized that their religious performances of Judaism were futile in reference to being justified before God, then the same should move people today when they recognize the futility of religious performances. We conclude that it would have been a mockery of grace for the respondents on Pentecost to plead for another set of laws to obey, when their dysfunctional performance of law had actually brought them to their knees before the cross. The same is true today. Church righteousness is a mockery of the grace of God if we assume that we can “do church” in order to demand the grace of God. We must not forget that gospel living is not legally doing church righteousness.

Now consider Paul’s conclusion to this matter: *“But to him who does not work [to meritoriously justify himself], but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited for righteousness”* (Rm 4:5). We therefore stand justified before God in His righteousness, not because of our self-righteousness, but because of the righteousness of God that comes through the cross. We are justified to be righteous before God through our faith in His grace, not by any faith in our own performance of church righteousness by which we would demand salvation.

The experientialist exhausts himself emotionally every Sunday in order to justify himself before God. But such meritorious emotionalism fails to give credit to God for His righteousness that has come to the believer through faith. The same is true of the legalist who imposes

on himself and others his own performances of church law in order to be justified before God. He has forgotten that the gospel that he obeyed brought him into Christ where he is already justified through the incarnational offering of the Son of God. He does not stay in Christ because of any perfect keeping of law, or meritorious church righteousness. He walks in the light of Christ because of what the cleansing blood of Jesus continues to do every day of his life (1 Jn 1:7).

The legalist must rejoice in remembering that he is freely justified in Christ. The experientialist must also remember that meritorious emotional performances will not put God in debt to keep one saved. We are already saved through the gospel of the cross. It is for this reason that the one “*who does not work*” meritoriously to save himself, but has faith in God who justifies us, is given credit for the righteousness of God (Rm 4:5).

In concluding this point we would remember a beautiful statement that Paul quoted from David: *“Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins have been covered”* (Rm 4:7; see Ps 32:1,2). Happy is the person who believes that his sins have been vanquished at the cross, and thus, does not have to labor daily in fear that he has not kept law perfectly, or performed enough good works to atone for his own sins. Since we are justified freely by God’s grace, then *“we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works”* (Ep 2:10).

Christians thus work because they

are justified, not in order to be justified. They seek out what God would require of them (law) in order to be obedient children. They seek to follow the healthy teaching of the word of God in order to manifest their faith. They are eager to preach the word of God, knowing that there are many who “*will not endure sound teaching*” (2 Tm 4:3). Because they love the truth of God’s word, they

study the Bible in order not to be led astray by the deceiving teachings of men (2 Th 2:10-12). For this reason, every Christian labors in study and teaching, not in order to earn salvation, but to bring others out of the darkness of deception (See Ph 2:12). The “church work” of the saved is in appreciation of what they have, and can offer through teaching a world in darkness.

## Chapter 17

# THE INCARNATIONAL SACRIFICE

It is our quest to discover the heart of God at the cross. Since the descendants of Abraham in A.D. 30 had a two thousand year old illustration of the obedience of Abraham—who lived before the Sinai law was given—they were prepared to respond to the revelation of the heart of God. The cross was another offering of a son, but this time the offering had eternal consequences. The sacrifice that was offered (the Son of God), and the ones for whom the sacrifice was made, would carry on into eternity.

Only when we connect all the dots between Abraham and the cross do we fully understand what occurred when God gave the following command to Abraham:

*Take now your son, your **only son** Isaac whom you love, and go into the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains that I will tell you (Gn 22:2).*

What seems so incomprehensible about Abraham’s response to this command of God is what is recorded in the following verse in the Genesis 22 text: “*Then Abraham rose up early in the morning and saddled his donkey*” (Gn 22:3). There was no questioning by Abraham. There were no emotional arguments. No debates. There was not even a sleepless night, for the text states that he “rose up” from his bed (sleep). There was only obedience, and the obedience was without question. And for this reason, James wrote of the obedience of Abraham that he was justified because of His faith. Abraham had faith in the work of offering his son on the basis of his faith that God would take care of both himself and Isaac (Js 2:21).

What transpired on the occasion of the offering helps us venture into the heart of God at the cross. When we compare Abraham’s offering with the offering of the Father on the cross, then our

minds begin to wonder concerning what actually transpired at the cross.

When Abraham raised his knife in obedience to the command of God to offer his son, God responded out of heaven with the command, “*Do not lay your hand upon the lad ...*” (Gn 22:12). Because God spared Abraham from carrying out the command to offer his son reveals the motive of God behind the command. God revealed His motive for the command in the following statement He made to Abraham: “*Now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from Me*” (Gn 22:12).

Abraham’s obedience to offer his only son revealed his heart’s obedience **to do all that God would ask of him**. If we were to ask Abraham, “Is there anything that you would not do in order to be obedient to God?” Abraham’s answer, that was validated by his obedience to offer his son, would be, “No.” In the obedience of Abraham, we understand the obedient faith of Abraham. God’s people of faith would not understand the full meaning of why God gave this command to Abraham until two thousand years later.

For two millennia, the example of Abraham molded the hearts of those who would seek God. Those of faith would understand from Abraham that **he would do all that was necessary in order to be obedient to his Father**. When Paul used the example of Abraham being justified by faith, he was asking his readers to consider the faith of Abraham that moved him to be obedient to the Father

in all areas of life.

The time eventually came in the history of Israel when the occasion to offer a son was reversed. The Jews understood the obedient heart of Abraham to do all that the Father asked. It was now time that they understand the “obedient” heart of God in reference to the offering of His Son on their behalf.

Abraham had the heart of God because he offered his son without an explanation from God, nor a reward for doing so. In the same manner the Father “obediently” offered His Son on our behalf without conditions from us. The cross did not happen because of the requirements of law, for we could manufacture no law to give to God that demanded the offering of His Son. God’s heart, therefore, was revealed at the cross unconditionally, and without His payment of some debt that He owed to those of faith who had worked meritoriously to demand the offering. On the contrary, the incarnational offering was the result of the deplorable problem of sin of those of faith, not because those of faith had put any demands on God to make the offering.

In our sins we all cried out to our Father for redemption. The Father replied with unconditional love. He was “obedient” unto our cries. **Because of His heart, there was nothing He would not have done in order to bring us out of our deplorable condition of eternal death through sin so that we might be in His loving fellowship forever**. This is the heart of God.

Did God have to act on our behalf?

Yes, He did! He is a God of love (1 Jn 4:7). ***“In this the love of God was manifested to us, that God sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him”*** (1 Jn 4:9).

Abraham’s sacrifice that he was willing to offer would cost him his only begotten son. God’s sacrifice for us cost Him His only begotten Son. The difference between the two offerings was that there was no one greater than God who could hold back the cross in order that the nails of the crucifixion not be driven through the incarnate hands of the Son of God. Because there was nothing greater to hold God back from the offering of His only begotten Son, then we begin to understand that the incarnational offering of the Son was truly the ultimate offering for our sins.

The offering of an eternal sacrifice reveals the heart of God for His creation. Offering the eternal sacrifice of His Son reveals that God, too, would do anything that was necessary in order to bring us into His eternal glory. David, a man after God’s own heart, revealed something unique about the incarnational offering of the Son of God. Paul spoke to the rulers of the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia, ***“Now concerning the fact that He [God] raised Him [the Son] up from the dead no more to return to decay, He said on this, ‘I will give You the sure mercies of David’”*** (At 13:34). The gospel was the revelation of the mercy of God that was revealed through David’s merciful behavior as the king of Israel. It was mercy that cost God the eternal sacrifice of His Son. Sufficient sacrifices

out of mercy that atone for sin come with a high price.

At one time during his reign, David made a burnt offering to the Lord. What transpired during the events that led up to the offering reveals that David was truly one after God’s heart. Knowing that David wanted to make the offering, Araunah said to David, ***“Let my Lord the king take and offer up [free] what seems good to him”*** (2 Sm 24:22). What Araunah was offering David was both the location to make his offering, as well as all free oxen that were necessary to make the sacrifice. Araunah wanted to give all the sacrifices to David for him to make his personal offering to the Lord.

David’s response to Araunah, as Abraham in the offering of Isaac, revealed that he truly understood the cost of offering an acceptable sacrifice. David responded to Araunah, ***“No, but I will surely buy it from you at a price. Neither will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God of that which did not cost me anything”*** (2 Sm 24:24).

And so it was when Abraham, without question, sought to offer his only begotten son. And so it was also when God offered up His only begotten Son as a sacrifice for our sins. As David would not offer a free sacrifice on behalf of his own sins, God would not offer for our sins a sacrifice that cost Him nothing. God’s offering at the cross was in the same sacrificial nature as what He called on Abraham to do, and which David did. There is no acceptable offering to God that does not come without expense.

This is the heart of God that was

revealed through the incarnational sacrifice of the only begotten Son of God. This message of the gospel was what cut to the heart of the three thousand descendants of Abraham on the day of Pentecost. They knew the unconditional love of Abraham to do all that God commanded. They knew through David that sacrifice costs. And now they knew that God was willing to make an unconditional eternal sacrifice that would suffice for their sins, but it would come at a very high price.

Peter and the apostles revealed that God's incarnational sacrifice for the people came with a great price, and thus, they could only respond as Abraham's faith moved him to obey in all things. The gospel message cut straight to the hearts of all those who heard on the day of Pentecost. When the message of the gospel is focused on the heart of man, there is an instant response in the hearts of those who seek to walk by the faith of Abraham and David.

**The gospel penetrates to the heart, and then reaches to the mind. It is then that the heart is stirred into action in order to do all that God wills in our lives.**

The gospel message cut the Pentecost audience to the heart because the people realized that God was not willing to hold back from paying any price necessary in order to bring those of faith into His eternal fellowship. The old song was truly correct in expressing the heart (action) of God through the incarnational sacrifice of His only begotten Son.

Gone is all my debt of sin,  
A great change is bro't within,  
And to live now I begin,  
Risen from the fall;  
Yet the debt I did not pay  
Some one died for me one day,  
Sweeping all the debt away,  
Jesus paid it all.  
(M. S. Shaffer)

## Chapter 18

### LAW CONDEMNS—FAITH SAVES

We need to remain standing beside the three thousand on the day of Pentecost in order to see ourselves condemned through law. We must continue to listen through their ears and understand with their hearts. We must extract our Western definition of the heart from the picture in order to understand why so many immediately understood the message of the gospel once all the prophecies were connected with all the events surround-

ing the death of Jesus, His resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God. It is only when we stand in their shoes do we really comprehend the “heart nature” of the gospel that was preached and received on that day.

At least three thousand of those who attended the Pentecost of A.D. 30 understood one very important matter concerning law. Paul revealed in two letters the principle that the three thousand imme-

diately confessed, and consequently, stepped forward to do what was needed in response to the gospel message. In Antioch, Paul reminded Peter of their spiritual state of legal religiosity before they obeyed the gospel,

*... knowing that a man is not justified by works of law, but by the faith of Christ Jesus, even we [Peter and Paul] have believed in Christ Jesus so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by works of law, for by works of law no flesh will be justified (Gl 2:16).*

And then in another letter he wrote to the Roman Christians, “*Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of law*” (Rm 3:28).

In order to understand the heart of God at the cross, it is imperative that we understand curse of law with which the three thousand lived for centuries. When faithful Jews stood before the apostles on that notable day, they stood there with jaws dropped and joy in their hearts. They could not believe what they were hearing.

In the preceding Galatian statement of his own response to the gospel, Paul introduced a profound truth that was self-evident in reference to law. The Jews who were there on the day of Pentecost were not theologically ignorant. They were the most dedicated of the world, for all of them had made a lengthy journey over hundreds of kilometers in order to be there for Passover and Pentecost. Some made the journey every year. We must not question their sincerity, nor their

desire to be obedient to the law of God. But there was a self-evident problem in law that they all realized.

Notice the obvious conclusion to law-keeping that Paul made in the Galatian statement: “*knowing that a man is not justified by works of law.*” There was no need that this truth come to them through revelation. When Paul made this statement, he was speaking directly to Peter on behalf of all Jews and ourselves who seek to be obedient to God. As a follow-up to this self-evident truth, Paul said to Peter, “*even we [faithful Jews] have believed in Christ Jesus.*”

Peter was the Jew of Jews, for on the occasion of this incident he had withdrawn himself from the Gentile Christians in Antioch when the traditional Jews came up from Jerusalem. Paul himself had first persecuted Jewish Christians in Judea because he considered them apostates from Judaism. But when both Paul and Peter saw the heart of the gospel, they had to confess that all their lives their efforts to justify themselves through perfect obedience of law was a futile attempt of religiosity. They were honest law-breakers who knew that something was very wrong with their efforts of self-justification. Law was not the problem. For example, “*the [Sinai] law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good*” (Rm 7:12). The problem is with those to whom law is given, whether Jews or Gentiles, and now, even Christians.

All who were honest and sincere on Pentecost, realized that there was a flaw in the theology of justification by works of law and meritorious atonement

through good works. In fact, Paul stated, *“But that no one is justified by law in the sight of God is evident”* (Gl 3:11). It took no theological reasoning to come to this conclusion. This is an axiomatic truth in reference to law, a truth that is self-evident.

Those on the day of Pentecost realized that for centuries it was not within the ability of man to walk perfectly the road of righteousness that is based on man’s performance of law and good deeds. All break law. Enough good deeds could never be performed in order to atone for one sin. Therefore, the obvious conclusion the honest Jews made was that there was never any atonement for lawbreakers through the offering of animal sacrifices or self-sanctification through good works (See Hb 10:1-4).

In the context of Paul’s arguments in both Romans and Galatians, it is significant to remind ourselves again that the article “the” is **not** in the Greek text of Galatians 2:16 and Romans 3:28 in reference to “law.” It has unfortunately been added by some translators. What Paul was actually writing was a truth that defined human inability: *“A man is not justified by works of law.”*

By adding the article before the word “law,” some have evidently tried to take the pressure off themselves as dysfunctional lawbreakers. By adding the article, we might conclude that Paul’s reference was only to those who lived under the Sinai law. In the case of the Jews, this was true, for the Sinai law was given only to them. But Abraham was justified by faith long before the Sinai law

was given on Mt. Sinai. If Paul’s reference was only to the Sinai law, then we might conclude that we can devise any “law unto ourselves,” and subsequently, be justified by our own self-made “church laws,” as some in Colosse were attempting to do.

Without the article in the text, however, Paul would be moving the focus of the statements of Galatians 2:16 and Romans 3:28 beyond Israel to all who would seek to be justified before God through any law. It is simply impossible for any man to live perfectly before God through law-keeping, regardless of the law under which one might bring himself into submission.

In his arguments leading up to the Romans 3:28 statement, Paul revealed that from the creation to the cross, the Gentiles lived under *“law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else excusing one another”* (Rm 2:15). Because Paul did not use the article in these texts in reference to law, both Jews and Gentiles must recognize the principle that man cannot be justified before God by meritorious works of law. This principle applies to everyone, not just to the Jews who lived under the Sinai law. It applies to anyone who might devise any system of law by which to justify himself before God. It is simply a truth of honest hearts who recognize that there is no possible way for a man to justify himself legally before God through perfect obedience to law, *“for by works of law no flesh will be justified.”*

The problem, as previously stated,

is not with law, but with man. The Hebrew writer reminded those who were seeking to return to a covenant of law, “*For if that first [Sinai] covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for the second. For finding fault with them ...*” (Hb 8:6,7). The fault was not with the Sinai covenant and law, but with the people. The same principle is true today. Any religion that is based on justification through meritorious religious rites or law-keeping has established a futile theology in reference to producing reconciliation with God. The more one religiously seeks to be right with God through religious rites and perfect law-keeping, the further he moves himself away from being that which he seeks to be, that is, righteous before God.

Before any person would seek to establish laws by which he would consider himself faithful before God, he must be honest with himself and confess the obvious truth that we are all lawbreakers. The honest Jews on Pentecost knew this in their hearts. They had followed their leaders’ traditions (laws) for years, knowing deep in their hearts that such religiosity was futile in reference to standing legally justified before God.

Honest Jews knew that the Sinai law could not be kept perfectly. Those Christians who would even consider the “law of Christ” to be a legal system of justification should remember this. They should lest we run to the New Testament in order to construct a legal system of law by which we would attempt to justify ourselves before God. Those who legalize the law of Christ for self-justifi-

cation are seeking to change Christianity into a religion of men, for in religion one focuses on his own ability to perform law in order to be justified before God, and not on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When Paul spoke of the “law of Christ” (Gl 6:2), he was not establishing again a legal system of law under which the Jews were kept in bondage from the time of the giving of law at Mt. Sinai. He was not promoting a paradigm shift from the legalities of the Sinai law to the same, but different legalities under the law of Christ. If one cannot be justified by legalities under any law, even the Sinai law, then there would also be no justification by the legalities of a supposed legal system of law in Christ. What was true under the old would also be true under the new. If there was no justification by perfect law-keeping under the old, then certainly the same inability on the part of man to perform law perfectly stands true under the new.

What some have forgotten in their efforts to make the law of Christ a legal system by which we would seek to justify ourselves before God, is that the law of Christ is what James explained it to be in James 1:25. It is the “*perfect law of liberty.*” The law of Christ liberates us from the demands of justification through law-keeping. If one would seek to turn the law of Christ into a system of condemnation, whereby lawbreakers would seek to justify themselves before God, then Paul has an exhortation for them. It is an exhortation that concluded his arguments against such legal law-keepers in Galatia, but an encouragement

for those who seek to walk by faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ: “***Stand fast therefore, in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage***” (Gl 5:1).

Paul considered it a very serious matter to think that we could justify ourselves before God through law. He considered it so serious that he made the following statement, “***You have been severed from Christ, you who seek to be justified by law. You have fallen from grace***” (Gl 5:4). These words should not be taken lightly.

The reason why one’s efforts to establish any system of law by which he would attempt to justify himself before God is discovered in the fact that such an effort is a denial of the heart of the gospel. It is thus, the “other gospel” (Gl 1:6-9). The reason such is the “other gospel” is that self-justification, or church righteousness, denies the sufficiency of the incarnational sacrifice of the Son of God.

Paul wrote to the Roman disciples, “***Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we will be saved from wrath through Him***” (Rm 5:9). We are saved from the wrath of God through the cleansing blood of Jesus, not through our efforts to protect ourselves through perfect law-keeping. If we would revert to law-keeping in order to save ourselves, then we have denied the gospel of the cross. We have sought to substitute our own works of righteousness for the effective cleansing blood of Jesus. We have denied our faith in the sufficiency of the

atonement blood of the gospel.

On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, three thousand people immediately recognized a solution for which they had struggled for generations. The Jews had proven throughout their history the futility of justification through law-keeping. They had failed so many times throughout their history that they lived in a hopeless religiosity, knowing that surely God had something better. In an effort to find some assurance in their obedience to law, their religious leaders kept adding more statutes and precepts (religious laws) to the Sinai law in order to guarantee strict obedience. They added tradition upon tradition, precept upon precept. But all the additions were to no avail in solving a most evident truth, **that by works of law no man can be justified before God**. Their additions, therefore, became subtractions. They were subtracting themselves from faith in God to a faith in their own ability to supposedly live as perfect law-keepers.

But on that wonderful day over two thousand years ago, good news finally came. By the resurrection of the Son of God, it was proven true that the message of the grace of God through the atoning blood of the Son would bring them into the arms of God. When God’s heart burst forth through the incarnational sacrifice of His Son, there was a spontaneous explosion of obedience across the ancient world. Both Jews and Gentiles of faith, who had been struggling with the futility of self-justification, realized for the first time in history that they could be accepted into the realm of God’s righteous-

ness through grace. It was a beautiful message. It still continues today.

We would be careful, therefore, not to construct a religiosity out of works that would annul the gospel of grace. If we do, then we would be preaching another gospel that is foreign to the gospel of grace (See Gl 1:6-9). We must never for-

get the following words of Paul: “*Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Rm 5:1). Therefore, “*being justified by His grace,*” we are “*made heirs according to the hope of eternal life*” (Ti 3:7).

## Chapter 19

### THE CLEANSING BLOOD

If we are feeling stained with sin, then we must be sure to make our way to the totality of the gospel.

The cross of Jesus deals with legal matters between ourselves and God. Through the gospel of grace, God dealt with the matter of our inability to legally stand just before Him. God knew this inability before He created us, and thus, He revealed at the cross His justice in creating us, for the cross happened in order “*to declare at this time,*” Paul wrote, “*His righteousness that He might be just and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus*” (Rm 3:26).

Because we could never legally make ourselves right before Him through perfect keeping of law, the sacrificial offering of Jesus had to be by grace, and grace had to be free. It could not be earned, for that would throw us back again into the futility of trying to earn our salvation through law-keeping. We would not, therefore, ever consider establishing another law system by which we would seek to justify ourselves before God. Neither would we seek to es-

tablish a religious system of church righteousness by which we would seek to earn the grace of God, or even obligate God to make the incarnational sacrifice of His Son.

God’s righteousness worked on our behalf because of the sanctification that came through the blood of the incarnate Son of God. When we study through this subject, there is one point that must be clearly understood. Paul explained, “*For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*” (Gl 3:26,27).

When any biblical subject is discussed that uses the phrase “into Christ,” or “in Christ,” we must always understand that one comes into a relationship with Christ through his or her obedience to the gospel by immersion into the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Too many people confuse themselves and others by ignoring how one becomes justified by the washing away of all sins (See At 22:16). We must simply keep in mind that faith without action is dead. And

we have already explained that baptism can never be a meritorious work of law. We must also remember that faith can never stand alone without obedience to the will of God, especially when discussing the subject of obedience to the gospel (See 2 Th 1:6-9; 1 Pt 4:17).

In reference to sanctification, Paul addressed the letter of 1 Corinthians “*to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus*” (1 Co 1:2). These were previously sin-stained people who lived in the bondage of sin. “*Such were some of you,*” Paul reminded the Corinthians. “*But you were washed. But you were sanctified. But you were justified ...*” (1 Co 6:11). Because they were justified, and cleaned up by the blood of Jesus when they were baptized in order to wash away all their past sins (At 22:16), they were brought into a sanctified relationship with Christ because they had been baptized into Christ.

There is no magic in the waters of baptism. There is no saving power in the action of immersion. All the magic and power resides in the cleansing blood of the gospel. Herein is the power of the gospel (Rm 1:16). It is the blood of the incarnate Son of God that accomplishes the cleansing of those who come into Christ through the waters of baptism. Hebrews 10 is critical in explaining this truth. The principle upon which the Hebrew writer wrote was, “*By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all*” (Hb 10:10).

The incarnational offering that was revealed at the cross was good news. It

was an offering that terminated all offerings for sin (See Hb 7:27). But even more encouraging is the verb that the Hebrew writer used to explain the results of Jesus’ sin offering for us. We “*have been sanctified.*” The verb is passive. We have been “acted upon” by Jesus in order to be washed clean of all sin. At the cross, Jesus acted upon our death in sin in order that we be cleansed and made presentable to the Father at the time of our immersion into Christ. Jude’s final words are encouraging:

*Now to Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord (Jd 24,25).*

The Hebrew writer continued to explain to his readers: “*For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified*” (Hb 10:14). Those to whom he was writing had been “acted upon” by Jesus through the cross, and thus “perfected” in Christ. The sanctifying power of the cross continued “perfecting” even to the day that the Hebrew writer was inscribing these words. Every time someone is baptized for remission of sins (At 2:38), therefore, the sanctifying blood of Jesus, that was poured forth from the cross, begins to flow throughout his or her faithful gospel living in order to be cleansed of sin. “*But if we walk in the light as He is in the light ... the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin*” (1 Jn 1:7).

Now suppose we would seek to return to a religion that was similar to the legal Judaism from which Paul, Peter and the early Jews fled? When they discovered the gospel of grace, they left their efforts to justify themselves through efforts of self-sanctifying good works. When they saw the sanctification of the cross through the blood of Jesus, they fled from their own efforts of self-sanctification and the failure of sanctification through the blood of animal sacrifices.

The Hebrew writer was inscribing his words of exhortation to some Jewish Christians who were seeking to return to a futile religious system of self-sanctification through law and animal sacrifices. And today, there are those who have unknowingly established the same for themselves through the self-sanctifying efforts of good works. They assume by their meritorious works that they too can be justified by faithful obedience to church religious rites, thinking that “the church” saves apart from the power of the gospel. This is the same as returning, as some of the Jewish Christians, to a religious system of self-justification and sanctification through meritorious works or performances of the rites of Judaism. But notice what the Hebrew writer continued to say about such efforts:

*Of how much severer punishment do you suppose will he be thought worthy **who has trodden under foot the Son of God, and has counted as a common thing the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?** (Hb 10:29).*

All who would seek to establish a meritorious religious system by which they would seek to be self-justified by religious performances of religious rites or meritorious sanctification through works of the “church,” should seriously consider this question that the Holy Spirit posed through the Hebrew writer. We might think that our obedience to the “church” is necessary in order to supplement the gospel, but in doing so, we have “*trodden under foot the Son of God.*” We have “*counted as a common thing the blood of the covenant*” by which we have been totally sanctified. We must remember that “the church” saves no one. We are saved by the gospel, not by “the church.” And because we are saved by the gospel, we are the church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When the church is relegated to a religion of ceremonial performances, we are making efforts to sanctify ourselves apart from the blood of the gospel. **Religion is thus a denial of the sufficiency of the gospel.** Since all religion exists because of man’s efforts to choose his own way into the grace of God, then one’s way to the cross is detoured through the maze of the religious performances of men to prove one’s own worth before God. If we seek to bypass the sufficiency of the cleansing blood of the gospel with our own performances of religion, then we have shamed the Holy Spirit, and counted the blood of the cross to be an insufficient effort on the part of God to cleanse us of our sins.

The cleansing of our sins is something that God does. God has chosen us

for salvation “*through sanctification of spirit and belief in the truth*” (2 Th 2:13). We were sanctified by Him (1 Co 6:11). If we try to do God’s job in reference to our own sanctification, then we are bypassing His work at the cross, and the continual cleansing work of the blood of His Son. Christians are the sanctified (Hb 2:11). But their cleansing was the work of God, not a debt paid to them because of their meritorious accomplishments in performed religiosity. If we seek to be self-justified through self-sanctification, then we nullify the gospel.

Through the cross, God set aside perfect law-keeping as a condition to stand just before Him. In reference to our sin problem, He washed us of sin in the blood of His Son. If we seek His justification through the efforts of self-sanctification in religious performances, then we have denied the effect of the gospel. We have trodden under foot the Son of God and counted His shed blood a common thing.

We would not, therefore, misunderstand what Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 4:3,4:

*For this is the will of God, **your sanctification**, that you should abstain from fornication; that every one of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor ....”*

We do not abstain in order to be sancti-

fied. We abstain from the works of the flesh **because we were initially sanctified by the blood of Jesus**. This is walking in the light of the gospel. We abstain because we were initially sanctified upon our obedience to the gospel. If we were to abstain—in our walk in the light—in order to become sanctified, then we would meritoriously be seeking justification before God on the merit of what we would or would not do. But the fact that we are continually sanctified by the blood of Jesus is the motivation that we guard ourselves against sin in our walk in the light.

Our sanctification by the blood of Jesus at the cross does not mean that we will live sinless after we have been washed in His blood at the time of baptism. If we say we can live without sin, then God says we are liars (1 Jn 1:6). But if we continue to respond positively to the grace of God in our lives by living the gospel of Jesus, then “*the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin*” (1 Jn 1:7). We walk the life of the sanctified, therefore, because of the cleansing that we received through the gospel of Jesus at the cross.

The sanctifying blood of Jesus was not held up at the cross. The cross was only the fountain that released the cleansing power the blood of Jesus upon all those throughout all history who would obey and walk in the gospel of the Son of God.

## Chapter 20

# A RESURRECTIONAL WORLD VIEW

It often requires a readjustment of thinking to learn that the Bible is not first about us. It is first about the gospel of Jesus who is the incarnational offering of God in order to bring us into His company and prepare us for eternity. For the legalist the Bible is considered a rule book of laws by which one seeks to legally justify himself before God. But for those who live after the gospel, the Bible is an instruction manual on what to do and avoid in living the grateful life after being saved by the gospel. The following text turns on a light in our thinking concerning this truth:

*For the **grace** of God that brings salvation **has appeared** to all men, **teaching us**, that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, **we should live sensibly, righteously and godly** in this present age, **looking for the blessed hope** and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Christ Jesus, **who gave Himself for us** ... (Tit 2:11-14).*

This one passage defines the world view of the Christian. In this statement, the word “grace” sums up the totality of all that God did on our behalf in order to accomplish His eternal plan. Grace reveals the purpose for the existence of this world. This is the gospel. This is the world view by which Christians live the gospel. And thus, Paul personifies this grace as our “instructor” concerning how

we are to live in this world in preparation for that which is to come.

In the statement, it is grace (the gospel) that does the teaching. Or better, it is grace that gives us the motive to “*live sensibly ....*” It is the gospel of grace that is our motivation to look “*for the blessed hope and glorious appearing [of Jesus] ....*” It is the gospel that is deep in our hearts that controls our thinking and behavior in order that we be prepared, not just for the coming of Jesus, but also that we be morally refocused in our hearts in order to dwell in eternity in the presence of His Holiness. Only by submitting to the “instruction” of grace can all this happen before He comes again.

The gospel is the underlying motivation that gives us a reason to deny “*ungodliness and worldly lusts*” in order that we look for the coming of the incarnational and resurrected “*Savior Christ Jesus.*” The gospel inspires us to change our lives, and then have hope for a better environment of existence in the presence of our heavenly Father. It was this grace into which the prophets of old searched diligently to discover (1 Pt 1:10-12). We have been so fortunate that all this was revealed in this last dispensation of time on earth (See Ep 3:3-5).

“*By faith Abraham ... was looking for a city that has foundations, whose builder and maker is God*” (Hb 11:8,10). Our faith in all that the gospel of Jesus is turns our minds away from worldly lusts

in order to yearn for a heavenly habitation in the presence of God. The purpose of the entire Bible, therefore, is based on defining **the gospel as our motive by which we would live in the present in preparation for the future.**

The Holy Spirit states this purpose in other words to the Colossians: *“If you then were raised with Christ, seek those things that are above .... Set your mind on things above ...”* (Cl 3:1,2). The exhortation means that by faith we go down into the tomb of water with Jesus, but then we are *“raised with Christ.”* Paul questioned why some in Colosse had been buried and resurrected with Christ if they turned again to focus on living the immoral life. **His argument is that gospel obedience assumes gospel living.**

Paul said this in a similar question that he posed to some Corinthians who believed that Christ was not raised from dead: *“Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead?”* (1 Co 15:29; see Rm 6:3-6). The rational conclusion for the Corinthians was that in their recognition of formerly being the old dead man in sin before their obedience to the gospel, why were they baptized to put away the old dead man if they discontinued believing in the resurrection? Why would one obey the gospel in the first place, if the motivation of the gospel does not lead one away from worldly lusts?

Paul’s questions to both the Colossians and Corinthians were based on the truth of the gospel. If they responded to

the gospel by being baptized into the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, then why would they seek to live according to the world in which they were dead in sin? His argument infers that the gospel (grace) teaches us to do better.

When we were dead in trespasses and sin (Ep 2:1,2), we heard the gospel, and then we believed in the good news of the resurrection. We were then moved to *“seek those things that are above.”* It is the Bible that gives us this direction, and thus the purpose of the Bible is to increase our faith in the incarnational work of the Father through Jesus in order that we grow in faith, for *“faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ”* (Rm 10:17). The gospel is the motivation, and the Bible is the road map.

It is now that we understand what Peter was encouraging us to do in 2 Peter 3:18: *“But grow in the **grace** and the **knowledge** of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”* We are encouraged to study the Bible in order to better understand the grace (gospel) of God that teaches us to live a godly life. We study the Bible in order that we may know more about *“our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”* We thus study in order to understand His work through the gospel to bring us into His eternal presence. The more we learn about the gospel, the more the gospel (God’s grace) activates a gospel walk of gratitude. The Bible, therefore, is first about that in which we must base our motive (heart) in order to be directed in our living the gospel.

Some of the disciples in Achaia, especially in the city of Corinth, were

questioning the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Therefore, it is not unusual that the greatest text on the resurrection of Jesus was placed in a letter that deals with so many problems in the relationships of Christians with one another. Problems concerning dysfunctional and ungodly attitudes and behavior permeated the Corinthian church. The reason for this was based squarely on the denial of the resurrection by some in Corinth who were attacking this fundamental motive for gospel living. They were denying the resurrection of Jesus, and thus, removing the motivation for living according to the gospel. Paul frankly stated, “*Now if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is vain*” (1 Co 15:17). In fact, he eventually comes to the point in his rebuke of those who denied the resurrection by saying that the Christian life is useless if there is no resurrection.

**If there were no resurrection in the gospel message, then there is no impetus for godly living.** It was in reference to this subject that Paul again was laboring for them as a father over an immature child. He had written similar words to the Galatians: “*My little children for whom I labor in birth again un-*

*til Christ is formed in you ...*” (Gl 4:19). The gospel of Christ had not yet been formed in the hearts of some Corinthians and Galatians, and the result was dysfunctional behavior.

If there is no such thing as a resurrection of the dead, “*then Christ has not been raised*” (1 Co 15:16). And if Christ was not raised, “*then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished*” (1 Co 15:18). And thus, “*we are of all men most to be pitied*” for a foolish belief in a resurrection (1 Co 15:19).

The foundation upon which our behavior as disciples of Jesus is founded is **the resurrection**. It was by Jesus’ resurrection that He was proved to be the Son of God (Rm 1:4), and thus, we behave in a godly manner because we believe that Jesus is the Son of God. We know that we will eventually give account for our behavior because He was raised from the dead. Therefore, 2 Corinthians 5:10 must bring us to attention:

*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of [the risen] Christ, so that everyone may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.*

## Chapter 21

### THE GOSPEL FOUNDATION

So if Christ were truly raised from the dead, then everything is changed. Lives are transformed (See 2 Co 3:18). Destinies are changed. Hope springs forth in the hearts of those who have lived in despair. Gospel living becomes the

identity of those who believe the gospel.

The gospel of the resurrection remains the foundation upon which we emotionally stand (1 Co 15:1,2). The Bible is primarily about the gospel of the Son of God in order that we understand

the eternal work of God through the incarnate and risen Christ. Corinth could sort out their ungodly behavior only if the resurrection penetrated to their hearts in order that they have the motive (heart) to change their behavior. When one understands the heart of God that was revealed through the gospel, he or she has the heart to live the gospel life.

Since the Bible is about the revelation of the heart of God through the gospel, then the legalist must step back for a moment and take another look at how he uses the Bible. The legalist usually considers the Bible a “combat manual” to win legal arguments in theological discussions, and thus self-justify himself through perfect obedience to the laws of the manual. He preaches the Bible to establish “sound” doctrine in order that thinking be correct, regardless of behavior. He memorizes Bible passages in order to be ready to win any theological argument that may come his way. All these things are honorable, but what the legalist must not forget is that his motive (heart) for preaching and confronting error must be the gospel.

If the motive for the legalist’s use of the Bible is transformed into reaffirming the gospel in his own life, then the reason for his dependence on the Bible changes. It changes from a motive of self-justification to win theological engagements to helping people to be transformed into the image of Christ (See Rm 12:1). He begins preaching Jesus and not prooftexts. He begins to believe that people are not saved through perfect law-keeping, but through the power of the

gospel. In his transformation, the Bible changes from being a textbook on law to a motivating revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When the early disciples first received the gospel (1 Co 15:1), they had no Bibles. Even those on the A.D. 30 Pentecost had no New Testaments to study among themselves. When the early evangelists went about preaching the gospel, they carried no Bibles to be distributed among the people. The apostles laid hands on certain individuals in order to be blessed with the gift of knowledge (See At 8:18,19). But this blessing was limited to the presence of the apostles to distribute the miraculous gifts.

Therefore, to the astonishment of the legalist, the baptized disciples lived the transformed gospel life simply because they based their faith on the foundation of the gospel. What transformed their lives was the message of the gospel, not the memorization of a host of legalities, or even daily Bible reading, for there were no Bibles. They sacrificially lived the gospel without some organizational structure of either law or religion.

The book of Acts is actually a history of the work of the gospel to transform lives, as well as lead lives. And all the time, we have been using the book of Acts to find “prooftexts” in order to win this or that theological argument with “the denominations.” Or, we have used Acts to construct a legal outline that we presumed to meritoriously obey without flaw. We could then declare that we have justified ourselves saved because we are legally defined as “faithful” Christians.

In all our biblicism, we have lost the heart for godly living in our scurried search to find prooftexts to legally justify ourselves. We forget that a teacher of the Bible will be more effective in changing the thinking of others when he allows the gospel to transform his own life.

In view of the preceding, consider what Peter said in 1 Peter 3:15 would be the impetus that would inspire people to ask questions concerning who we are. As we read through this statement, we see gospel living as the spark that inspires inquiry:

*But sanctify Christ as Lord God in your hearts and be ready always to **give a defense** to everyone who asks you **a reason for the hope** [of resurrection and heaven] **that is in you**, yet with meekness and fear.*

Those who sanctify in their hearts the One who gave up being on an equality with God, will not give an arrogant answer to those who ask him questions concerning his hope of a future resurrection unto eternal glory. Answers will always be “*with meekness and fear*” by those who have in their hearts the incarnate Son of God. And because we live by the gospel, others are inspired to ask why we are motivated to so live as we do.

The Bible is about defending the gospel of Jesus because the gospel is the primary reason why we behave as we do. Christians who live the heart of God always have inquiries directed to them concerning their hope. People seek to know

what makes Christians behave as they do.

When we understand that the gospel must be the totality of our world view and motivation for our behavior, it is then that we begin to understand that answering inquiries concerning our hope is simple. Our answer is not based on knowing a catalog of appropriate scriptures, nor what we consider to be the best translation of the Bible. It is based on the message of the gospel and how effectively we have translated the gospel into our lives.

We can think of a host of questions that the world today often asks the Christian in order to understand why we live as we do. For an example, a common question that is directed to Christians today is his or her belief concerning homosexuality. The answer to this commonly asked question is simple. Our first response to this question would be, “Was Jesus raised from the dead?” **If Jesus were not raised from the dead, then we have the right to live as we please.** Paul said it this way: “*If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die*” (1 Co 15:32). If the dead are not raised, then we have a right to live as homosexuals, or in any manner we so choose, as long as we can get away with it within our society.

The question, therefore, is not about homosexuality. It is about the gospel. If indeed Jesus were raised from the dead, then everything changes in our lives. It is then that we must consult the word of Jesus for direction. Otherwise, the word means nothing, because Jesus would have been just another good religious man of

history who was crucified and was buried.

Paul concluded his logical arguments concerning the centrality of the resurrection to the gospel message with the following statement to the Corinthians:

*Be not deceived, evil company* [with those who deny the resurrection], *corrupts good morals. Awake to righteousness and do not sin, for some have no knowledge of God* [through the gospel]. *I speak this to your shame* (1 Co 15:33,34).

Paul warned Timothy of some who taught that there was no more resurrection (See 2 Tm 2:17,18). Believing the gospel would lead to an increase of ungodliness (2 Tm 2:16). If one does not believe in the resurrection, then his faith is overthrown (2 Tm 2:18). But if the gospel is believed, and obeyed, then there is a paradigm shift in one's behavior. The change is so drastic that one's closest friends will ask concerning what happened in the transformed life of their friend.

## Chapter 22

# GOSPEL LIVING

There is a difference between believing in the resurrection as just another doctrinal point on a legal outline of doctrine, and living the resurrection as the gospel of our lives. If we base our faith only on accepting the fact of the resurrection, but can never get it off the pages of our legal outline and into our behavior, then our hearts go untouched and our lives unchanged. It is our challenge as students of the word of God to lift our knowledge of the resurrection off the pages of the Bible and translate it into our hearts. It is only then that our behavior will be transformed into the image of the incarnate Son of God.

It is here that those who approach the Bible from a legal point of view of knowledge only will have some difficulty. However, the experientialist too has the same difficulty in allowing the

gospel to be a life-changing experience. Both the religious legalist and experientialist often minimize the power of the gospel in our lives because they minimize the influence of the gospel in their lives through self-imposed religiosity.

The experientialist assumes that religion is about him. Having emotional experiences are to be enjoyed for the purpose of receiving some satisfaction from one's faith, or self-validating one's relationship with God. But in all our experientialism, the gospel is minimized as the heart of our faith, and thus, the impetus for godly behavior. In other words, the experientialist seeks to generate an emotional experience for the purpose of validating his faith. And if his faith is validated solely by emotional experiences, then there is little need for the historical gospel to be the foundation of his faith.

Gospel, therefore, as a life-controlling revelation of the heart of God becomes a side issue.

It is in this area that both the legalist and experientialist must be careful in reference to their assemblies. For example, the legalist constructs an assembly of law in order to validate his existence as true. The experientialist, on the other hand, has an assembly of meritorious behavior whereby he seeks to validate his faith through an out-of-control experience that he presumes to come from the Holy Spirit. His hope is that the Holy Spirit shows up at the same time on Sunday morning as he does in order to validate his faith. Both legal and experiential assemblies are based on the merit of either law or emotional experiences.

The biblicist is self-oriented because he seeks to win the argument that he is legally correct while neglecting the emotions of the moment, or the life-changing impact of the gospel in his life even before he arrives at the assembly. The experientialist is self-oriented because he affirms that he is emotionally correct, while neglecting the word of God that he may have created religious behavior after his own desires. He too fails to experience the life-changing power of the gospel because he uses his experiential assembly to validate his faith.

Unfortunately, both the legal biblicist and the religious experientialist are missing the power of the heart of God that is unleashed in our lives through the gospel. Their primary motivation for approval is based on either performance of

law or experientialism. If their assemblies were gospel centered, then their assemblies would be first and totally focused on Jesus, and not the merit of either performing law or religious rites. This is why those who would emotionally cry out “Lord, Lord” (“Jesus, Jesus”) often miss the power of the gospel that is manifested in one’s life in response to the commandments of God (See Mt 7:21).

A good example to better understand where one is in thinking in reference to this point is how contributions (giving) are generated in one’s life. The legalistic biblicist will quote scripture after scripture, precept upon precept, that one must give his money to God. The audience responds grudgingly with tokens in contribution in order to feel that they have legally complied with the commandments to give. The contributors, therefore, give on the basis that they will sanctify themselves holy, and in compliance to law, if they would only release their money into the collection plate. Since their money is the security of their lives, they are cautious about relinquishing too much of their security.

This helps us understand why legalistic churches view 1 Corinthians 16:1,2 as a legality for contributions every Sunday, and why the gospel starved Corinthians were having problems in this area. They had failed to come through with their contribution, as part of the universal body, to help the famine victims of Judea. Some were questioning the central validation of the gospel, that is, the resurrection. They lost their motivation, and it took a letter from the Holy Spirit

to renew their commitment.

In the New Testament, contributions were always for special needs, though often collected conveniently on the first day of the week. Even the contribution on Sunday in 1 Corinthians 16 was for the special need of the famine victims. But the legalist has a difficult time understanding what Paul said in verse 2, “... **so that there be no contributions when I come.**” Since he has established a law for Sunday contributions, it is difficult for him to understand this statement.

While Paul was in Corinth for several Sundays after writing 1 Corinthians 16:1,2, there were to be no contributions made on the “first day of the week.” Since the legalist has made a law out of Sunday morning contributions, with 1 Corinthians 16:1,2 being the prooftext, he has marginalized free-will sacrificial offerings that arise out of the motivation of the gospel in our lives. Contributions on Sunday are relegated to law-keeping.

The Sunday morning contribution is convenient, but one should not feel guilty because he or she has nothing to put into the collection tray when it passes by. Law would produce guilt in such a situation, but grace would produce peace of mind.

If we approach 1 Corinthians 16:1,2 from a legal perspective in order to identify an “act of worship,” then we will have difficulty understanding that giving must come from the heart, not from a legal compliance to law. Gospel dictates that we give because we want to, but law dictates that we have to give in order to be justified righteous before God. In fact,

the “grudging giver” that Paul identifies in his second letter to the Corinthians, is actually the one who would be giving out of obligation in order to keep law (See 2 Co 9:5). The result is that the legal contributor has the desire to hold back as much as possible in order to protect his financial security, but give enough to satisfy his conscience.

One of the best examples for giving out of gratitude took place after the children of Israel, who were by God’s grace, delivered out of Egyptian captivity. In preparation for constructing the tabernacle, God asked Moses, “*Speak to the children of Israel so that they bring Me an offering. You are to receive the offering for Me from every man whose heart moves him to give*” (Ex 25:2; 35:5,21-29).

God asked that the motive of the giving be based on how the heart of each person moved him to give. At the time, the Israelites were extremely grateful for what God had done for them in their deliverance. In fact, Moses said, “***The people bring more than enough ...***” (Ex 35:5). The result of their giving, therefore, was phenomenal. The giving was so abundant that Moses had to proclaim, “***Let neither man nor woman make any more work for the offering .... For the material they had was more than sufficient for all the work to make it***” (Ex 35:6). These were grateful givers who were moved in their hearts because of what God did for them. They were not legally required to give, but gave out of gratitude.

Unfortunately, legalists are almost

always grudging givers. They are cheerful givers only when they have calculated that they can give a certain amount of their security, while holding back enough for security reasons (See At 5:1-4). If one gives out of this motivation, then he will not understand why the poor widow, during Jesus' ministry, gave her last two coins (See Lk 21:1-4). The legalistic giver simply feels legally compliant and guilt free by flipping in the collection tray ten coins that might be a great deal of money in comparison to the poor widow. However, the one who has been touched in the heart by the heart of a giving God will put in his or her last two coins.

We must not forget the experiential preacher who generates hysteria in the audience, and then proclaims that the people are all "robbing God." The people then emotionally respond out of guilt because they do not want to be "God robbers." The focus of their giving, as the legal biblicist, is also focused on themselves, and thus, their giving is also from a motive of self-sanctification.

Add to the self-sanctifying motives that are generated by both the legal biblicist and experientialist, the self-enrichment theology that "God will bless you if you give to Him." This theology is not only carnal and self-oriented, it is totally contrary to the gospel living that was behaved throughout the ministry of the incarnate Son of God. Those self-oriented religionists who teach that giving is some sort of "investment plan" need to take another look at the foundation upon which they have established their religion. We see none of this in the

lives of those in the first century who responded to and lived the gospel.

What the legal biblicist and experientialist have done is generate legal, guilt-ridden, and selfish reasons for the people to relinquish their security, that is, their money. But suppose for a moment that the people were touched by the heart of the One who became poor in all things on our behalf (See Ph 2:5-9). This poverty stricken incarnate Son lived without His own house throughout His earthly ministry. He had no money to buy food, and thus all food had to be given to Him during His ministry. He had no closet full of robes and shoes. He had only one robe, and laid His head down for sleep at night in numerous beds that were not his own. He traveled around in Palestine, not on a "Mercedes" camel, but with feet on which were worn out sandals.

Having been born in a barn, He went out of this world in death in a borrowed tomb. In all this poverty, He gave; He gave the totality of His incarnate life for us who claim to be His disciples. And when we consider the eternal incarnation of His sacrifice, His giving was far beyond what we could possibly do in repayment. He was the revealed heart of God who asks only that we respond to His eternally sacrificed body that was viewed on a wooden cross outside Jerusalem.

And now we understand why it was said of those first respondents on the A.D. 30 Pentecost, "*Now all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they sold their possessions and goods and divided them to all, as*

anyone had need” (At 2:44,45). And now we know that after being Christians for only a few days (At 16:12), the Philippian disciples lived the gospel by sending support to Paul: “*For even in Thessalonica you [Philippians] sent once and again for my needs*” (Ph 4:16; see 4:15,16). We understand why these new disciples impoverished themselves for the sake of others who were in need. Read the legacy below about those Macedonian Christians—including the Philippians—who lived the gospel for the sake of others:

*Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the **grace of God** that has been given to the churches of Macedonia, that in a great trial of affliction, **the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty, abounded in the riches of their liberality.** For I testify that according to their ability, yes, **and beyond their ability they gave of their own accord**” (2 Co 8:1-3).*

When the gospel (grace) of the heart of God penetrates the heart of a disciple of Jesus, as it did the Macedonians, there is no need to beg for contributions. Giving is simply the natural response of those who realized that so much has been given to them through the gospel. **When we live the gospel, we do as God did for us through the eternal incarnational offering of His Son.** Those who hold up on their giving because of a fear of losing their financial security, have not yet given themselves fully over to the security of the gospel. They are not yet fully **standing** on the gospel that they

have received (1 Co 15:1).

We would conclude this thought with a statement that is probably a sarcasm by which the Holy Spirit sought to embarrass some rich Jewish Christians. First consider the dictionary definition of a sarcasm: “**A taunting, sneering, cutting, or caustic remark; a gibe or jeer, generally ironical.**”

Now consider this definition in the context of the rich Jewish Christians to whom James wrote. The rich in his audience were rebuked with the warning, “*Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you*” (Js 5:4). These were those about whom James judged to be fraudulent: “*Behold, the wages of the laborers who have mowed your fields, **which you kept back by fraud, cry out against you***” (Js 5:4). These rich had been so brazen in their materialistic behavior that they cheated their laborers by holding back their salaries. Many of those who were the recipients of the letter of James were these fraudulent religionists.

These self-reliant religionists, who found security in their finances, claimed to be disciples of the Poor Preacher from Galilee who was buried in a borrowed tomb. Now we are in the context of James’ audience and his task to shame those who claimed to live the gospel, but persisted in basing their security on their wealth.

In order to understand James’ sarcasm that he gives in James 1:27, we must compare what those, who were first touched by the gospel, did in their relationships among themselves. As the

number of the disciples was increasing in Jerusalem in the early years, it was only natural that the disciples take care of the widows among them (See At 6:1-6). Some problems developed because a group of Grecian widows were neglected in the daily distribution of what was regularly contributed for the widows. The problem was solved, and the body of believers carried on. One of those who was chosen to administer the contribution to the widows was Stephen, a man who was “full of grace” (At 6:8). He was full of and driven by the gospel of grace, and thus, **he was one whom the disciples could see in his life that he was driven by the heart of God.**

Now consider the rich religionists to whom James wrote. They were not filled with the gospel of grace, and thus, they behaved materialistically. They did not allow the grace of God to teach them anything about gospel relationships. The gospel was not the motivation of their hearts. James wanted to remind them that the gospel moves our behavior beyond religion. So James taunted them with something that even in the society of religious people, who did not believe the gospel, would do out of common decency. Even the religious idolaters would take care of orphans and widows. These self-proclaimed religionists to whom James wrote, who sought to live under the name of Jesus, should at least do the same as religious idolaters. But they did not. So James possibly wrote with sarcasm the following statement,

*Pure and undefiled religion before God*

*and the Father is this, to take care of the orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world (Js 1:27).*

James was essentially saying the same to these “faith only” rich as those about whom Paul wrote: “If anyone does not provide for his own, especially for those of his own household, **he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever**” (1 Tm 5:8).

The concept of religion in all its forms in the Bible are negative. In the Old Testament, religion is referred to as idolatry. The use of the word “religion” by James—the only place it is used in the New Testament—would be the same as the idolater who has created a religion after his own desires, which thing some in James’ audience were trying to do. They idolized their money (See Cl 3:5; 1 Tm 6:10). They had assumed that they were Christians, but they were not even being good religionists in their “faith only” thinking (See Js 2:14-26).

We would conclude that in the context of James’ audience, the word “religion” is used in a negative sense. James was taunting the rich. He was shaming them. If they would at least identify themselves as religious, then certainly they would at least take care of orphans and widows. But the religionists of James’ audience did not. The rich in James’ audience were not doing this simply because James wrote the exhortation to take care of these needy people. The rich were posing to be religious without giving even to orphans and widows.

When the gospel of the heart of God penetrates to the heart of man, we respond as the early disciples who naturally made provision for the orphans and widows among them. At least the novice believer would take care of orphans and widows. If one would claim any religiosity at all, it would be reflected in his or her care for orphans and widows.

Taking care of the poor is our identity with the poverty of the One who made Himself poor by giving up being on an equality with God and humbling Himself to be incarnate in the likeness of man. He willingly gave up His security in heaven, for the insecurity of this world. He asks no less of us. It is for this reason that the Bible is all about the gospel of the heart of God, for when we discover the heart of our Father in the gospel, money loses its personal security.

**Money becomes the instrument by which we can express the gospel in our own lives as Jesus expressed the gospel from the cross for our lives.** This is what those on the day of Pentecost discovered immediately in one day. This is what the Philippians discovered in only a few days as Christians. This is what was reflected in the lives of the Macedonians as they impoverished themselves on behalf of famine-stricken brothers and sisters in Judea. We discover this gospel living when we freely give as He freely gave Himself to us. Our giving freely, therefore, is the identity of our discipleship of Him who gave all for us. Gospel living assumes that one is a giver. Gospel living can be summed up with only one brief statement from the apostle of love: ***“We love because He first loved us”*** (1 Jn 4:19).

## Chapter 23

### GOSPEL ASSEMBLIES

There is no command in the New Testament that Christians should partake of the Lord’s Supper every first day of the week (Sunday). But the first Christians did, and thus, our question is, “Why?” Depending on how one would answer this question will determine if he or she is simply trusting in tradition, or seeking to base his or her faith on the gospel.

If our faith has digressed to meritorious law-keeping, then there is always a frantic search for laws by which we can validate our existence or identity. This frantic search is nowhere more intense

than when we seek to identify ourselves through a legal definition of the assembly of the saints. And in our attempted legalistic validation to be the “right” church, we often miss the heart of God. And in missing the heart of God, we miss the full impact of the gospel through which God’s heart was revealed, and the foundation upon which our faith must be grounded. We forget that law and gospel are opposed to one another if law is used for self-justification. If law is so used, then the law of Christ is no longer *“the perfect law of liberty”* (Js 1:25).

Partaking of the Lord’s Supper ev-

ery first day of the week is one of the best examples to illustrate that many may have, in a rush to self-justify themselves by law, bypassed the gospel of grace. In doing so, they have subsequently relegated the Lord's Supper to a legal religious performance to merit grace every Sunday morning through law-keeping. We must remind ourselves that religion exists **because of what we attempt to do for God in order to merit His favor**, whether by meritorious law-keeping or good works. Christianity, however, exists **because of what God did for us through the gospel of grace**.

What we meritoriously do does not define us to be Christian. Religion is based on meritorious rites we perform. We are Christian, however, because of what God did through the gospel of grace that was poured out through the incarnational offering of His Son on the cross. Unfortunately, what many seek to do is meritoriously and legally "perform" the Lord's Supper in order to self-sanctify themselves until next Sunday morning. This is legalistic religious behavior, and thus, an attempt to self-sanctify ourselves before God.

Jesus' establishment of the Lord's Supper was centered around the gospel, which at the time of the upper room experience was not completely revealed. "*This is My body*" and "*This is My blood of the covenant*" were statements of gospel that inferred His incarnation (Mt 26:26-28). In the Supper, therefore, Jesus sought to bring the disciples' thinking to the revelation of the gospel, from the incarnation to the ascension. It would not

be surprising, therefore, that Jesus said in reference to the institution of the Supper, "*This do ... in remembrance of Me*" (1 Co 11:25). All that surrounds the Lord's Supper is about remembering and reminding. We remember the gospel, and in doing so, we remind Jesus of the final chapter of the gospel that He return and take us home with Him.

**The assembly of those who have obeyed the gospel springs out of the fact of their belief in the gospel.** Those who have obeyed the gospel come together to celebrate, study, remember and proclaim the gospel (1 Co 11:26).

On the other hand, legalistic religionists assemble in order to validate their identity through meritorious observances of self-sanctifying legalities. Experiential religion is another system of self-sanctification. Experientialists assemble in order to validate their existence through self-sanctifying outbursts of emotions. Regardless of whether one is legal or experiential, both adherents are missing the heart of God by focusing on what they can do in either their meritorious performance of law or emotional hysterics.

But the gospel is about what God has done in sanctifying us through the blood of the cross. Therefore, when Jesus said, "*This do,*" nothing was ever inferred that He was establishing a meritorious legal religious rite that would contradict the very purpose of the gospel of grace. **"Doing" the Lord's Supper was never instituted as a law in order to undo the grace of God that freed us from law.** What the legalist does, how-

ever, is ignore the grace of the gospel in an attempt to self-sanctify himself every Sunday through his observance of the supposed “law” of the Supper.

The experientialist has focused so much on his own emotional performances in assembly that he feels little motivation to remember the atonement of the gospel by observing the Supper. Subsequently, he ignores the Supper, counting it to be only an occasional religious rite to be performed on Easter or Christmas.

**The assembly of those who have obeyed the gospel is naturally all about the gospel.** When those who have obeyed the gospel through their union with Jesus on the cross, His journey to the grave, and then His glorious resurrection, it is only natural for them to regularly recall their fellowship with the One who revealed the grace of God (See Rm 6:3-6; Ti 2:11). The totality of their lives, including their assemblies with one another, is about the gospel.

If we forget the gospel, or any part of the gospel, as some Corinthians forgot the resurrection, then we *“do not come together for the better but for the worse”* (1 Co 11:17). The gospel is the central purpose for the gathering of those who have obeyed the gospel, and thus, **the Lord’s Supper is naturally the central focus of the assembly of the saints.**

Because some in Corinth were denying the apologetic foundation of the truth of the gospel—the resurrection—their coming together digressed into an occasion for division that is totally contrary to the unifying nature of the gospel

(1 Co 11:18). Because they had questioned the gospel of the resurrection, their coming together was *“not to eat the Lord’s Supper”* in remembrance of the gospel (1 Co 11:20). They were coming together only for a common meal. But they, Paul said, could eat a common meal in their own homes before they came, if all they were going to do was come together for a divisive, gluttonous and drunken meal (1 Co 11:22).

The manner by which the Corinthians ate the Supper manifested that they had forgotten the most fundamental result of the gospel in their relationships with one another. They had forgotten one of the fundamental reasons for their response to the gospel: *“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ”* (Gl 3:27). They forgot the following result of this obedience of the gospel: *“For you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Gl 3:28). The divisive assembly in Corinth, therefore, revealed their denial of the unity that the gospel should produce among them (See Ph 1:27).

The Corinthians had forgotten the unity of the one universal body of Christ that resulted from their common obedience to the gospel. Their eating of the love feast together became divisive: *“For in eating, each one takes before others his own supper. And one is hungry and another is drunken”* (1 Co 11:21). Because they had forgotten the purpose of assembly in celebration of the unifying gospel, they had despised *“the assembly of God”* to come together to celebrate their unity in Christ (1 Co 11:22). It was in this context, therefore, that Paul once

more reminded the forgetful Corinthians of the gospel of remembrance that the Lord had instituted (See 1 Co 11:23-25).

Paul continued to mandate the centrality of the remembrance of the gospel in the assembly of the saints with these words: “*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death* [this is gospel] *until He comes* [and this is gospel]” (1 Co 11:26).

Now this would bring us to the reason why the disciples in Ephesus naturally determined that the phrase “*as often as*” meant every time they came together on the first day of the week. Those, as the Ephesians, who had obeyed the gospel, would naturally do what the Ephesians did: “*Now on the first day of the week when we were gathered together to break bread ...*” (At 20:7).

Some make the mistake of not understanding what “break bread” meant in the Acts 20:7 statement. Luke wrote both the epistle of Luke and Acts to Theophilus (Lk 1:3; At 1:1). At the time, we suppose that **these were the only written inspired documents that Theophilus had in hand**. Therefore, we must understand that when the term “break bread” is used throughout these two documents, **Theophilus would conclude that Luke was talking about a full meal** (See Lk 24:30-35; At 2:42-46; 20:7; 27:35).

The early disciples carried on with the Passover meal, but changed the meaning to a gospel love feast (See 2 Pt 2:13; Jd 12). They continued to take the bread and fruit of the vine during a love feast they ate together. And when there was

no bread or fruit of the vine, as is the case with many Christians throughout the world today, then we suppose they had a moment during their love feasts every week to meditate on what their assembly and life were all about. We say this because surely the preaching of the gospel to the world went even to those regions where there was no bread or fruit of the vine. Regardless of whether there is bread or fruit of the vine to be accessed, the meeting of the saints is always about teaching, singing and remembering the gospel.

In order to enjoy their oneness in Christ, the early disciples ordinarily came together to enjoy a meal together, as was common with all the Christians in Achaia who came together in the city of Corinth (1 Co 11:17-33). However, from the 1 Corinthians 11 context, and because of their sectarian behavior and lack of love, we would conclude that the Christians of Achaia turned the love feast of unity into a fiasco of division. Their love feasts became the opportunity for some to manifest that they had forgotten the loving unity of the gospel (See Jn 13:34,35). Nevertheless, this common meal of the disciples in the first century was the natural result of their common obedience to the gospel, and thus, the background upon which they partook of the Lord’s Supper.

The problem the legalist has is that he will seek for a law for the Lord’s Supper to be experienced when the saints come together on the first day of the week. He will subsequently use bad hermeneutics to make the example of

Acts 20:7 a legal mandate for observing the Lord's Supper every first day of the week. But in his zeal to twist an example into a command in his search for a legality in reference to the observance of the Lord's Supper, he actually, in his self-contradiction, misses the gospel of grace that set us free from law. **He has forgotten that it would be a contradiction to use law to celebrate freedom from law through grace.**

The legalist has forgotten a crucial part of the gospel about which the Holy Spirit reminded some legalistic Christians in Rome: "... *for you are not under law, but under grace*" (Rm 6:14). In view of their efforts to self-justify themselves, the Spirit pronounced the following judgment against the legalists of the Jews' religion: "*For they being ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God*" (Rm 10:3).

The Lord's Supper to some has become a cold legal formality to establish their own self-righteous law-keeping every Sunday in order to justify themselves before God. In doing so, they have forgotten the grace of the heart of God in their futility of establishing their own righteousness. **Law says that we have to observe the Supper. Grace says we want to.** Law makes the Supper a meritorious religious rite. Grace makes it a gospel privilege, and thus, a celebration.

Because the gospel is peripheral to the assemblies of many religionists, the Lord's Supper has also become peripheral. It is relegated to an occasional reli-

gious rite that is periodically observed throughout the year.

Inherent in religion is self-justification, and thus, in one's effort to self-justify himself emotionally, the Lord's Supper does not play a significant role in the life of the religionist. Narcissistic religiosity is inherently exclusive of a total focus on the gospel, and thus, the Lord's Supper in remembrance of the gospel is almost lost among many religious groups who focus only on pleasing the attendees. After all, who really needs a remembrance of the gospel when one can supposedly emotionally receive atonement for himself on the merit of his own Sunday morning performances?

We have now answered the initial question as to why there is no command in the New Testament that Christians partake of the Lord's Supper when they come together on the first day of the week. If we understand the gospel, **there is no need for a command.** If fact, if there were a command given, then we would end up as self-sanctifying legalists in partaking of the Supper in obedience to law, and not as a response to the gospel.

When Christians come together as a result of their common obedience to the gospel, the gospel is the central purpose for which they come together. It is the center of their assembly. Their teaching of the word of God emphasizes the gospel. Their fellowship meal is centered around their common fellowship as a result of their obedience to the gospel. Their singing is in praise of God for the gospel. Their prayers are in thanksgiving

ing for the gospel. Their giving is a response to God for giving His Son. The Lord's Supper **is the climax of an assembly that is centered around the gos-**

**pel.** Why would we need a command for that which is only natural for gospel-obedient children of God to remember?

## Chapter 24

### PARABLE OF THE HEART OF GOD

Jesus' parable of Luke 15:11-32 is usually referred to as "the parable of the prodigal son." But at the very beginning of the parable, Jesus said, "*A certain man had two sons,*" and these two sons had a relationship as sons **with their father** (Lk 15:11). If Jesus' intention were to speak only concerning the attitude and actions of the younger prodigal son, then He would have probably mentioned that the father had only one son who became a prodigal. The parable, however, involves the relationship of two sons with their father, and thus, the focus of the parable is how the father related to the behavior of the two sons.

The fact that Jesus speaks of the behavior of both sons in relation to their father indicates that the lesson of the parable goes far beyond the behavior of either son. He wants us to discover the heart of our heavenly Father in the behavior of the Father toward us as His sons.

Jesus wants us to see ourselves in the parable as we seek to reflect on our gospel living in our relationship with our Father. This is truly a parable that takes us into the function of God's heart that should be reflected in our lives as we live the gospel.

There are three ways by which we can live in this world: (1) religiously, (2)

irreligiously, (3) or by the gospel. In this parable, Jesus illustrates religion through the behavior of the older brother. He illustrates irreligion through the behavior of the younger brother in the wilderness. In the illustrations of both behaviors, He seeks to unveil the heart of "gospel living" that was soon to be revealed to everyone in His audience through the gospel of the cross and resurrection. But in order for His audience to understand how one lives by the gospel after the nature of the heart of God, they must first see the inadequacy of their religious approach to the Father.

In the parable, it was the ambition of both sons to secure the wealth of their father. Each approached the matter from different perspectives. Out of frustration, the younger son demanded the immediate reception of his inheritance, and then went on his way. The other older son sought to secure his share of the father's wealth by remaining in faithful obedience to the father. As the parable reveals, one son lived very bad and squandered his inheritance. The other son lived supposedly very good in order to secure his share of the wealth of the father for his future.

However, we must not miss the point of what Jesus was trying to say to His audience in reference to our Father's

relationship with us as His sons, regardless of how we come before Him. The father of the two sons manifested grace toward the sons who came before Him regardless of the former behavior of either son. We must never forget that our Father does the same to us.

In the parable, Jesus unveiled the heart of God to which we seek to be close because we cannot resist His love to forgive. The father's behavior, not the sons', is the focus of the parable because Jesus seeks to reveal the forgiving heart of our heavenly Father. We are thus driven to live the gospel of grace because we would never merit the grace of God who is defined by love (1 Jn 4:8). Regardless of what we do, we always have His love because we are always His created sons. We must simply live in response to who He is and what we already have because of our origin from Him.

We must also keep in mind that Jesus was, through the parables, leading the people to the heart of God that would soon be revealed at His last Passover/Pentecost feast. With the example of the two brothers, He sought to reach out to everyone who was striving to be close to the Father solely on the merit of their own obedience. Therefore, in the behavior of both brothers, we discover ourselves in our efforts to receive meritoriously the "wealth" that is freely given by the Father through His grace. **The parable focuses on the gospel of grace to which Jesus was leading His audience**, and to which grace all must respond on the basis of our total dependency on the Fa-

ther. We cannot, as either the younger or older son, leverage grace from God through any meritorious behavior on our part. Grace is a free gift that is received only through experiencing its glorious nature.

Two key statements in the parable reveal the underlying motives of the two brothers in order to leverage a forgiving relationship with their father. The younger said to the father, "*I am no more worthy to be called your son*" (Lk 15:21). The older said to the father, "***I have never transgressed your commandment at any time***" (Lk 15:29). Both brothers sought to establish their relationship with their father upon a wrong premise. Both based the foundation of their relationship with their father on meritorious behavior, whether repentance from bad behavior or faithful behavior in staying with the father.

One brother sought to restore his relationship with his father through meritorious repentance, and the other sought to maintain the same through the merit of his faithful adherence to the father's commandments. Both misunderstood the heart of the father in the father's relationship with his sons through grace. Grace is free, not earned. It is difficult for meritorious religionists to understand that our Father's grace is always present for those who want to accept it. But we must not forget that God's grace is not earned through meritorious obedience, neither through meritorious repentance to comply with self-imposed obedience to our own religious rites.

### A. The younger brother:

The saga of the story began with one son straying from the father and one son staying with the father. The younger son said to his father, “*Father, give me the portion of the inheritance that falls to me*” (Lk 15:12). And so the father handed over to him the wealth of his inheritance. The younger son then “*gathered everything together and took his journey to a far country. And there he wasted his inheritance in wild living*” (Lk 5:13). Fortunately, as many young men who have sought to spend some time in the wilderness, the younger brother “*finally came to himself*” after wasting all his inheritance. It was only then that he began to consider his predicament, and then, work out a plan to change his environment (Lk 15:17).

Notice what the younger brother said upon his decision to return to his father: “*I am dying with hunger ... I will arise and go to my father and will say ‘I have sinned ... I am no more worthy’*” (Lk 15:17-19). He was certainly reflecting on what he had done and where he was. But his reflection was on what he would do in order to change the deplorable circumstances of his predicament. Because his focus was on what he would do in order to earn a limited reconciled relationship with his father, he sought a meritorious solution that was based on what he could do. “*I will arise and go to my father*” (Lk 15:18). This was not a repentant response to the “invitation song.” It was the response of one who only wanted to place himself in a better

environment that was based on his performance to do those things he established for himself. He went back to the father to earn something for himself. His return was commendable and right. But how he would establish for himself a relationship with the father that was based on his own conditions was questionable.

The younger brother’s problem was in the fact that he assumed that the father was obligated to receive him back on the merit of what he would do. Upon the merit of his return to be only a servant in his father’s fields, he sought to obligate the father to restore him to a meritorious relationship as only a servant, but not as an heir as a son. His “repentance” was only a return ticket to at least enjoy again the wealth of his father, even though it was from a distance as a meritorious servant in the servant fields.

Though the younger brother’s desire was commendable in knowing where to find a solution for his problems of life, it might be good to consider also the fact that his return to the father was still self-centered and meritorious. His repentance to servanthood was only an outward effort to earn a limited relationship with his father. Though he would return as a servant to work in his father’s fields, he was still comparing his existing situation of feeding pigs in the field with his father’s fields (Lk 15:15).

In order to change his predicament, the younger son assumed that he would simply change locations. Instead of changing his heart, the younger brother wanted to simply change locations from the pig fields to the father’s fields. His

repentance to the servanthood of his father, therefore, was only an outward expression of an inward desire that still focused on himself. He was not dealing with the sin beneath the sin. He thought that if he could only earn a limited relationship with the father, then he would be right with his father on the basis of his servanthood. If he could “self-sanctify” himself through humble servanthood in doing good in the servant fields, then certainly he would have earned the right to be in at least a limited relationship with his father.

Changing his location was in his thinking, not changing his life-style by changing his heart. Changing from pig fields to the father’s fields did not change his heart. His outward change was commendable. However, unless he corrected the sin beneath the sin, he would be the same person in his father’s fields as a meritorious servant as he was in the pig fields.

The younger son assumed that he would be forgiven by the father on the merit of his willingness to serve in his servants’ fields, even if it were service with his father’s servants. He sought to merit his acceptance by the father on the condition of his willingness to work only as a servant. He trusted that the father would thus forgive him on the merit of his willingness to serve in the humble location where only servants labor and not sons.

The younger son’s problem, therefore, goes deeper than being a good servant. The “repentant” younger son was willing to trade his sonship in order to

be just a simple servant in the fields. He reasoned that if he would simply return to service, he would merit forgiveness from the father. His decision to return was based on being received back by the father only as a faithful servant, but not in the position of a son.

So when the younger son did return, he said to the father, *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no more worthy to be called your son”* (Lk 15:21). The younger son forgot that no one is “worthy” to earn sonship from the father. Sonship is by birth and cannot be changed. It does not come through “earned sonship.” Doing better in one’s life is not a condition for sonship, for we can never do enough. The Holy Spirit reminds all of us:

*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ* (Rm 8:16,17; see Gl 3:26-29; Ep 3:6).

The younger son wanted to obligate the father to at least make himself a worthy servant on the merit of his return to the father’s servant fields. He was seeking to earn his way back into the grace of his father as a servant only, forgetting that he was always a son regardless of his performance of the father’s commandments.

We sometimes forget that our location, or circumstances—pig fields or servant fields—will not change our hearts even if we change locations. It is true that the pig fields will humble us to the point of repentance. We can have a

changed mind in the midst of trying circumstances. But trying circumstances are no guarantee for a changed heart. We forget that God is not expecting us to earn our way back into His heart. To Him, we never left. So for us, it is a matter of recognizing where we always were in His heart as His children by inheritance through creation.

The Gentiles, who would later hear this parable, needed to remember this. We are His sons in the pig fields, as well as in the fields wherein we should be as His sons. The heart of God is not limited to our location, neither is His love for us conditioned on how well we would perform as His servants. He still loves us while we are squandering ourselves away in wild living, or living close by religiously in faithful obedience.

The younger son had thus misread the father's love. When this son returned, the father said, *"And bring here the fattened calf and kill it. Let us eat and be merry, for this my son was dead and is alive again"* (Lk 15:23,24). The younger son was dead in his relationship with the father while he was in the pig fields. However, the father's love for his son was the same in the pig field, or at home in his presence. The father's love toward his son was never dead in his relationship with the son, for the son was always his son. Upon the son's return, and before he could even speak one word, his father responded in his love for the son. *"When he [the younger son] was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion. And he ran and fell on his neck and kissed him"* (Lk 15:20).

The younger son underestimated the heart of his father. And for this reason, he was not returning because he was drawn to his father's heart, but for the purpose of removing himself from the pig fields. His bad experience had changed his mind, but not his heart. We might say that his repentance was initially in reference to changing his situation, rather than changing his heart. But when he experienced his father's reception upon his return, it is then that we assume his heart was melted. When we experience the gospel of God's heart, it is then that we truly understand the heart of our Father, and thus, we respond.

The younger son's love by the father, therefore, **did not depend on the merit of the son's behavior of returning to the father**. The younger son could not merit himself back into the love of his father, for the father would always receive a wayward son back as a true son and rightful heir because he had not ceased to love his son. This is simply the heart of a father in relation to all his children. Being sorry for the bad things we do cannot limit the wealth of the love that God is willing to pour out upon us. Love is always there for us in abundance when we are ready to return.

We can only imagine the surprise of the younger son when the true heart of his father was revealed in his forgiveness. The younger son had thought that he had given up his sonship. But the father's loving grace was always there. The son was still the father's son in the pig fields. All the younger son had to do was to come back into the realm of his

father's heart. No meritorious conditions, as the younger son assumed, were necessary in order to receive the fattened calf and the celebration feast. No meritorious conditions were necessary to be worthy of the father's love. The younger son did not earn the celebration for his return. It was always there anticipating his return. The calf simply continued to fatten until the day the son returned.

### B. The older brother:

In their struggle to receive that which both sons so earnestly desired from the father, the older son may have been further away from the heart of the father than the younger son who took his wealth and ran away to a far land. **The older brother was far away from the heart of his father because he thought he was so close.**

In another parable Jesus spoke of the older brother: "*Now He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised [judged] others*" (Lk 18:9). As the Pharisee in the parable, the older brother would say to the father in reference to the younger brother, "*God, I thank You that I am not as other men*" (Lk 18:11). The Pharisee boasted of his obedience in comparison to the wayward ways of the tax collector: "*I fast twice a week,*" the Pharisee bragged. "*I give tithes of all that I possess*" (Lk 18:12). The conclusion to the behavior of the older brother's attitude would be as Jesus concluded the parable concerning the self-righteous religionist:

*I tell you, this man [the tax collector] went down to his house justified rather than the other [self-righteous Pharisee]. For everyone who exalts himself will be abased. And he who humbles himself will be exalted* (Lk 18:14).

**It is difficult to repent of self-righteousness.** It is difficult to turn from one's confidence in his own self-righteous goodness. The self-confident religionist finds confidence in his religious experiences and performances of religious rites. He prides himself in an assortment of self-proclaimed self-righteous deeds that he has faithfully performed and bad things he has not done. But in all these merits of self-righteousness, he has forgotten that living the gospel begins first by recognizing the inadequacy of our meritorious spirituality, which is simply religion in action.

The older brother had forgotten that grace teaches us to stay close to the Father because we want to live in appreciation of the Father's grace. The grace of the Father teaches us that He has always stayed with us, even while we were in sin (See Rm 5:8). It is not that we stay close to the Father because we are meritoriously obedient to the commandments of the Father, but because it is there that we find grace for our dysfunctional obedience. Our confession of our violations of His commandments is what keeps us close to the heart of God (See 1 Jn 1:6-10).

When the older son heard the noise of the celebrations for the returned brother, "*He became angry*" (Lk 15:28).

His anger revealed the self-righteousness of his heart and moralism by which he judged his younger brother. He complained to the father, *"I have been serving you. I have never transgressed your commandment at any time"* (Lk 15:29).

He had sought the father's approval and wealth on the basis of his own faithful behavior as a true son. He thus sought to obligate the father through his own good behavior as a faithful son. He too forgot something that is essential to being a faithful son. He based his faithfulness on his meritorious obedience as a son. He subsequently compared his moral obedience to that of his wayward younger brother. He reasoned that faithful obedience should merit a reward. He thought that he had earned a fattened calf. He forgot, however, that the father also loved him because he was his son, just as he had always loved the younger son who had just returned to His presence.

Herein was revealed the self-righteousness of those Jews who thought they had an advantage with the heavenly Father over the Gentiles because of their meritorious obedience. Jesus thus cautioned His disciples in view of the self-righteous religionists among them: *"Take heed that the light that is in you is not darkness"* (Lk 11:35). *"Therefore, let him who thinks he stands [in his own self-righteousness] take heed lest he fall"* (1 Co 10:12). *"For they [the self-righteous] being ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God"* (Rm 10:3). And for this reason, Jesus, as in this par-

able, spoke to self-righteous religionists *"in parables because seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand"* (Mt 13:13).

Because of his "self-righteous faithfulness," the older brother, as the Pharisees, placed himself in a position of being a moral judge of the younger brother. Descendants of the older brother today would be saying to the descendants of the younger brother, *"We have faithfully been good and not done bad things. We have not strayed, but stayed."*

In our "faithful" and supposed perfect performance of the Father's commandments, we too are seeking to continue our sonship with the Father. And by doing such, we seek to obligate God to respond to the performance of our faithfulness with a reward. In our self-righteously established sonship we seek to establish ourselves, as the older brother, as moral judges of all the younger brothers who have done this or that which we judge to be contrary to our moral and doctrinal code of brotherhood that we have self-righteously established for ourselves. **Because of our supposed righteousness, we have convinced ourselves that we have earned the right to morally judge others.** We seem to forget this statement by the Holy Spirit: *"For Christ is the end of law for righteousness to everyone who believes"* (Rm 10:4). In establishing our own self-righteousness, we have ignored the righteousness of God. We need to remember the exhortation that James made to some self-righteous judges: *"There is one lawgiver who is able to save and to destroy. Who*

*are you to judge another?*” (Js 4:12).

The error of the elder brother was that he trusted in the performance of his obedience to the Father’s will, and thus, he became a moralistic judge who condescended to the “issues” of the younger brother. Descendants of the older brother see issues everywhere by which they would judge others. **They denominate themselves aside as a unique sect of moral judges who would cast judgment on all those who do not conform to the standard of their religious rites.** They forget that the Father has other sons living out there in the wilderness of religion for whom He is waiting to return to His loving grace.

It is important, therefore, that the older brothers do not denominate themselves into a unique religion of rites to which they would seek to convert others. Older brother Christians must not deceive themselves into believing that they have earned the right to judge others. We must remember that when we invite others to come to the Lord, that we are not inviting them to join our denomination of moral judges. Our invitation to others must not be to “our religion of judges,” but to the grace of God that exists apart from religious performances that are created after our own desires.

Older brothers are often blinded by their own religious self-sanctification by which they seek to obligate the Father to reward their faithfulness with a fattened calf. In making a moral judgment against his wayward younger brother, the older brother thought he had earned the father’s

favor. And in doing so, he sought to move the focus of the father away from the younger to himself. At least, he wanted to put restrictions on the younger in order that his acceptance by the father come through merited obedience. His anger originated out of his heart when he compared his own self-righteous faithfulness with the unrighteous behavior of his younger brother. But in his jealous comparison, he found himself with an unrighteous heart of anger.

In our efforts to be righteous before God, we must be cautious that we do not assume that our behavior puts the Father in debt to reward us. We must remember that we are His sons by grace. This is the message of the gospel. *“For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God”* (Ep 2:8). We receive fattened calves by grace, not as a payment of debt.

When we live the gospel of grace, we are of the heart of our Father who is seeking to throw a feast for all his sons, wherever they may be. As those who are invited guests to this feast of celebration, we must go out and compel others to come. The Father says, *“Go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in so that my house may be filled”* (Lk 14:23; see 14:15-24). Now we know why the older self-righteous and religiously contented brother never went searching for his young brother while he was in the pig fields. When we are content with our own self-righteousness, we are not moved to go looking around in pig pens for those who are looking for a way home.

## Chapter 25

# GLORIFY THE SON OF GOD

During His ministry, Jesus made a specific **promise** to the apostles, as well as a **declaration**. In the context in which both were stated, His following promise was made specifically to the apostles:

*But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in My name, **He will teach you all things and bring all things to your remembrance that I have said to you** [apostles] (Jn 14:26).*

Jesus had personally spoken many things to the apostles during His ministry. Of all these things, the Holy Spirit would remind them a few weeks later. But in conjunction with this, the Spirit would teach them all things that the Father wanted to reveal to the church through the apostles.

On the same occasion when Jesus was personally with the apostles immediately before His arrest and crucifixion, He identified the “all things” that the Spirit would reveal to them: “*When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, **He will guide you into all the truth***” (Jn 16:13). This promise made the apostles the source of all truth that would be delivered unto the church. This truth was recorded in the New Testament, and thus, it is with us today and will be with us until the good news announcement of the last trumpet.

We live in a world where some overzealous people have forgotten the func-

tion of the Holy Spirit in reference to the motivation that must stimulate life changes. Though the Spirit played a significant part in the establishment of the early church, especially in the revelation of all truth through the apostles, and the miraculous gift of teaching that aided the early Christians, we must not forget one very important declaration that Jesus made in reference to the function of the Spirit. In the following verse where Jesus spoke of the Spirit of truth, we must not forget what Jesus said in John 16:14: “*He [the Holy Spirit] **will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will declare it to you.***”

On the Pentecost of A.D. 30, Peter and the apostles preached Jesus, not the Holy Spirit. The people were cut to the heart by who Jesus was and is, not by the Holy Spirit. It was the message of Jesus (the gospel), not the Spirit, that moved the people. When the people asked the apostles “*Men and brethren, what will we do?*”, they were not asking what they could get from the Spirit (See At 2:37). They were asking what they could get rid of, that is, get rid of their sins that caused them great guilt. They asked the apostles “*what must we **do**,*” not how they might receive the Holy Spirit.

Since it was the heart of God that was crucified on the cross through the Son of God—not the Holy Spirit—then it was Jesus who was glorified as our Savior on the cross. And it was in obedience

to the gospel of the cross that the obedient repentant could receive the remissions of their sins (At 2:38).

The people were promised to be given the “*gift of the Holy Spirit*” upon their obedience of the gospel of Jesus. However, this promise did not come to them until **after** they were cut to the heart by the gospel. When they did receive the gift of the Spirit, the Spirit would not supplant the Son of God as the primary motivation for the people to repent. They did not receive the Holy Spirit until after they repented and had been obedient to the gospel in baptism. Jesus commissioned the early Christians to preach the gospel, not the Holy Spirit (Mk 16:15). It was through obedience to the gospel that people would be saved (1 Co 15:1,2). When people start glorifying the Holy Spirit more than Jesus, they often start minimizing the significance of the gospel of Jesus as the primary motivation for life change. Any true Pentecostal outreach is always based on Jesus.

Throughout the history of the early

growth of the church that Luke recorded in Acts, it was the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ that moved people into obedience of the gospel. The early messengers did not preach “a gospel of the Holy Spirit,” nor a “gospel of miracles.” Therefore we, as Paul, have determined “*not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified*” (1 Co 2:2). Our message to the world is about Jesus and Him crucified. The Spirit is the serendipity to obedience of the gospel. But the main event is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is the gospel message that moves the hearts of men to respond to the heart of God that was revealed on the cross. As the gospel of God’s heart moved about three thousand people on the first day of the beginning of the body of Christ, so the same will move men and women today to be cut to the heart. When we preach Jesus Christ and His crucifixion for our atonement, we can expect no less a response as that in the first century as we go forth into all the world.

### **MARK 16:15,16**

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