

What is the great denial of the gospel?

Lesson 5

Sometimes when we add to something, we enhance it, like adding icing to a cake. Other times when we add, we adulterate it, like adding water to milk. Some things are so complete in themselves that to add anything is to lessen their value or even destroy them. Can you add something to a vacuum? The minute you add air to a vacuum it ceases to be a vacuum. Can a woman be half pregnant? Either she is pregnant 100% or she is not pregnant at all. So it is with the Gospel. It is total help for total needs. To add anything to the Gospel, even our own good works, is to deny its totality over our lives. This lesson may be devastating to you as you ponder it, but if you allow its truth to sink deeply into your soul, you will be released as never before.

Studying

Read Galatians 1:6-9

Take a separate piece of paper and write out your answer to the questions:

1. What do you assume about Paul's state of mind by his use of the word "astonished" in verse 6, the word "condemnation" in verse 8, and the harsh description "false brothers" in 2:4?
 2. What do you conclude about the believers in Paul's statement in 4:20, "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth...?"
 3. In verse 7 Paul writes, "Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the Gospel of Christ." How can we "pervert" the message that says Christians are "called by grace" (verse 6)?
 4. Why does "perverting the Gospel" always confuse or trouble the church? How is this same form of teaching hurting the church today? What forms do you see it taking?
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Reading

Read the following article entitled "The Left Turn" and make annotation if you like in the margin.

Works-righteousness

The Left Turn

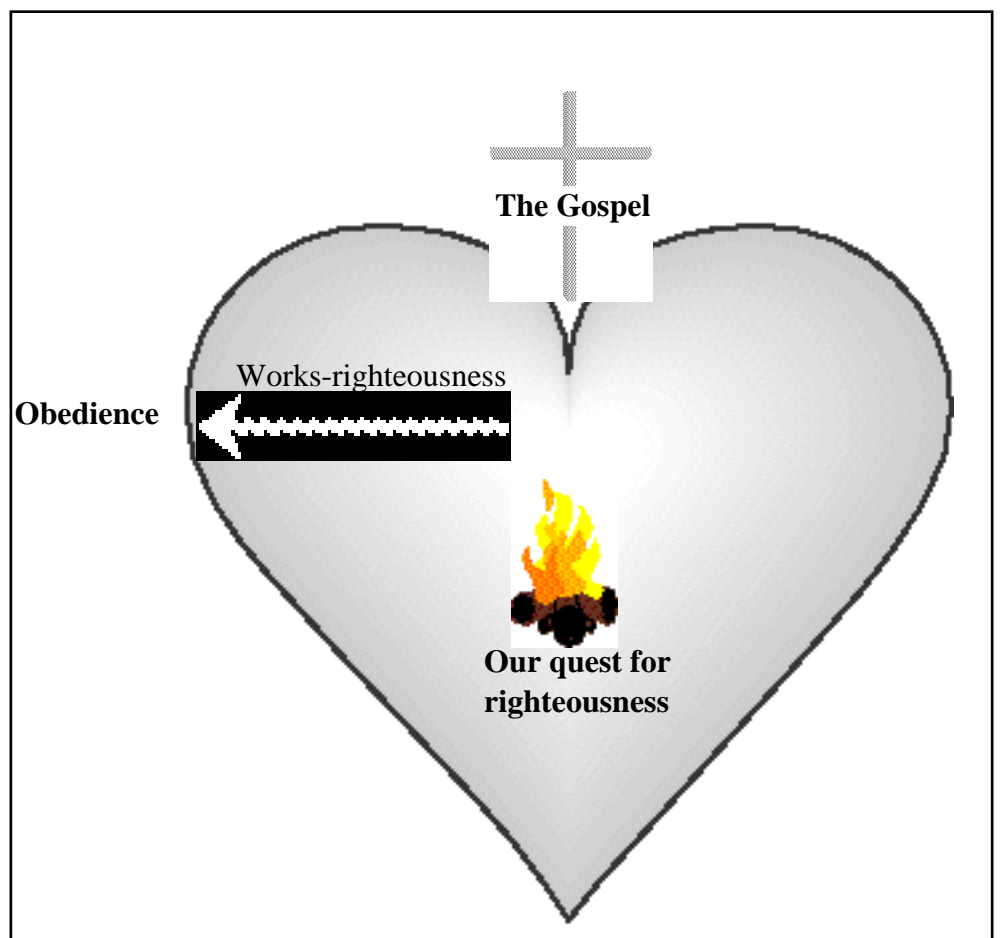
By Paul Thompson

The human situation is characterized by the struggle for righteousness. Everyone has a profound need for a sense of personal value or worth, which seems endless. We described it in an earlier lesson as a fire that burns deep within our souls. We never feel quite enough worth. We are always out to validate ourselves. And like any fire, it must be fueled. Career, possessions, appearance, love, peer groups, achievement, good causes, family and morality are the propellants we throw on the fire to keep our worth alive and well.

The fuel we throw on the fire to keep it going becomes so important to us that it becomes the center of worth, or in theological terms, our object of worship. We worship whatever fuels our fire for worth and acceptability. Even the most ungodly people have a worshipful faith in something. Everybody worships. If we do not find our righteousness in Christ, we will find our worth through something else.

If we were to reverse Paul's statement, "the one who through faith in Christ is righteous shall live," the corollary would be, "The one who through faith in *anything but Christ* is righteous shall die". To put our faith in anything other than Christ's righteousness will eventually fail us and produce death and brokenness.

When we define ourselves through our achievements, we must attain them or else experience some sort of spiritual or psychological death. If we fail, our worth is terribly shaken and we experience meaninglessness and loss. What if we achieve a level of acceptability? We will be no better off than before because we will be driven and controlled by those things that bring us worth. They will push us to work too hard for them, and then when the circumstances of life and actions of others jeopardize



them, we are filled with anger, anxiety, and fear. The reason we are so often tormented by anger, worry, anxiety or discouragement is fundamentally the threat of loss of something on which our worth and value rests. Relational struggles stem from the same source. People need to put others down to convince themselves and others of their personal worth. What we need is a righteousness that is intact, unthreatened in the face of trouble or difficulties. What we need is the righteousness of Christ that comes to us through faith.

The fire burns deep within our souls. We come to Christ and in him to find forgiveness and salvation. Old habits died hard; the burning for acceptability continues. Rather than going to Christ for our righteousness, we begin to create our own righteousness by obedience. The Bible is full of commands and moral precepts. We begin to develop a pattern of conduct that looks good and is acceptable to the religious church crowd. We stop certain activities. We begin to acquire new habits of conduct. We develop a performance-based faith, which means we find our acceptance by what we do. This system of religiosity, when you think about it, is just another form of trying to win God's favor through good works. It is a very subtle form of self-salvation and a denial of the gift of righteousness offered us through Christ.

This is precisely what was happening with the Galatians' Christians. Paul admonishes them for "adding" to their Christian faith. He says to them that by adding to their faith, they were distorting the gospel. What were they adding? They were adding obedience. They were saying that faith in Christ alone was not enough, but that they needed to add to it the old Jewish practice of circumcision.

Now most of us are not Jewish, so the issue of circumcision is mute for us. Yet we are prone to the same temptation. Our greatest sin is adding to the gospel, a subtle belief that somehow we must do something more to gain acceptability with God. A Christian is not only someone who repents of his sins, but also someone who repents of all his attempts at righteousness. This does not mean for a moment that a Christian doesn't take the commands of Scripture seriously. Of course obedience is important. What we must always be asking ourselves is WHY do I obey? Do I obey to earn something from God or do I obey because I am captivated by love?

In the gospel chart you will notice an arrow that points directly toward obedience. I call it the left turn. It's a metaphor for the subtlety of the temptation to add to the gospel. Rather than look to our hearts, examine our motives, we immediately turn toward religious observance as a means to gain our acceptance with God. This is exactly how so many religious and moral people live and approach God. These may be people who have made a genuine commitment to Christ like the Galatians' Christians, but have moved towards a works-righteousness to find acceptance with God. They are the people who say, "You are saved by grace, but you have to obey to become right with God."

In general such people are unhappy and burdened more than the unsaved. For one thing, they may have higher expectations from God and therefore be angry at how their life is going. They think that since they are such good people they have the right to a better life. For another thing, they may be more touchy, troubled and sensitive to criticism since they are in a position to continually hear teaching about how they ought to live. The more they hear about what they ought to be like, the more they will see the gaps in their own righteousness. They may become very critical and judgmental as a way to deal with their own insecurity. Some may abandon Christianity altogether, feeling the burden to be too great.

A prominent Christian writer puts it like this: "Everyday Christians rely on sanctification for their justification drawing assurance of acceptance with God from a past experience of conversion,

recent religious performance, or relative infrequency of their conscience willful disobedience. Christians who are no longer sure that God loves or accepts them in Jesus apart from their spiritual achievements are subconsciously, radically insecure persons, much less secure than non-Christians because of the constant bulletins they receive from their Christian environment about the holiness of God and the righteousness they are supposed to have. Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce defensive assertion of their own righteousness, and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger. They cling desperately to legal, pharisaical righteousness; but envy, jealousy, and all brands of the tree of sin grow out of that fundamental insecurity.”

It is common for new believers to think that when they come to Christ they need repent only of their sins, understanding “sin” only as their badness. It may surprise them as well as a lot of older Christians to read Paul’s criticism against adding to the gospel. Christ plus forgiveness for badness plus living a good life, is often the formula Christians live by. That formula has a fatal flaw. It’s the word plus. Paul says that to add to the gospel is to pervert it. The gospel is total help for total needs. Nothing can be added without destroying it. We need forgiveness for our bad deeds to be sure, but we need forgiveness too, for the best things we have done.

To grasp tenaciously onto our good deeds is to hide ourselves from God. We are saying to God, “Look at what I have done for you. You can have favor on me now. See how hard I’m trying.” To trust in our goodness, even after becoming Christians, is making our good works our savior. We are not letting Christ be total Savior of all our hearts, good and bad.

Reflecting

In your small group, discuss the result of your study of the scripture lesson, the reading, and interact with the following questions.

1. Review the results of your study of Galatians 1:6-9 together.
2. Discuss the following quote from the article: “Our greatest sin is adding to the gospel, a subtle belief that somehow we must do something more to gain acceptability with God.” What troubling questions does this quote bring up? How does the article address these questions?
3. The gospel is news, good news. Discuss the difference between news and advice. Why is “preaching” (“Don’t preach to me!”) associated with advice rather than news?
4. What tendencies do you see in your life where you tend to add to the gospel? Are these tendencies prevalent in the churches that you are acquainted with?
5. If Paul (and Luther) is right, how is the gospel sufficient to address every problem?
Some examples:
 - Indifference of your church members.
 - Sin patterns in Christians that seem impossible to control.
 - Envy, strife and gossip in the church.

- Destructive negative emotions like anger, depression and anxiety.
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Applying

Optional – to do this project will entail an extra week

Listening to the gospel project

Project No. 5

George Whitefield was a powerful open-air evangelical preacher in Britain during the early 1700's. Literally thousands of people came to hear him preach each time he spoke. It is said that his preaching could be heard more than a mile away without amplification. I quote below a synopsis of a sermon he preached on the text in Jeremiah 6:14, "They have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, "Peace, peace when there is no peace." *Read this synopsis carefully allowing its message to impact your soul, and then answer the questions below.*

Intro: How many of us cry, "Peace, peace" to our souls when there is no peace! How many are there who think they are Christians, who flatter themselves that they are in Christ; when if we come to examine their experience, we shall find that their peace is not from God. It is of great importance, therefore, to know if we speak peace to our hearts. I shall endeavor to show you what you must understand and what must happen in you before you can speak peace to your hearts.

1. First, before you can speak peace to your hearts, you must be able to see your actual transgressions against the law of God. We are commanded to do some things and we prohibited from doing other things. Nothing in the law can be bypassed, meaning that the least deviation from the moral law whether in thought, word or deed deserves eternal death. May I ask you a question in the presence of God? Has the fact of your sin ever struck you? Have you ever seen how God's wrath might justly fall upon you on account of our actual transgressions against God? If not, for Jesus Christ's sake, do not call yourselves Christians; you may think you speak peace to your hearts but there is no peace.
2. Furthermore, you may be convinced of your actual sins, but before you can speak peace to your hearts, conviction must go deeper. You must be convinced of the original corruption each of us brings into the world. If we look inwardly, we find pride, malice, and revenge. When the sinner is first awakened, the Spirit of God shows that he has no good thing by nature. Did you every experience this? The indwelling of sin in the heart is the greatest burden of a true Christian. If you have never felt this inward corruption, my friends, you may you think speak peace to your hearts, but I fear there is no peace.
3. Further, before you can truly speak peace to your hearts, you must not only be troubled for the sins of your life and sins of your nature, but likewise for the sins of your best duties and performances. When a poor soul is awakened by the terrors of the Lord, then that poor creature being born under a covenant of works flies directly to a covenant of works again. As

soon as he is awakened and senses a need for God he says, "I will be mighty good now, I will reform. I will do everything I can then be certain Jesus Christ will have mercy on me." Thus the poor sinner when awakened flies to his duties and to performances to hide himself from God. But before you can be certain that Jesus Christ is in your heart, you must be brought to see not only that your sins must be done away with but also your righteousness. You must see that all your duties and righteousness put together are far from recommending God to you. Your obedience and good works are no motive or inducement to God to have mercy on your poor soul. He sees them all as filthy rags and hates them and cannot erase them if you bring them to him in order to recommend you to his favor.

4. I do not know what you think, but I can say that I cannot pray but I sin. I cannot preach but I sin. I cannot do anything without sin. My repentance needs to be repented of and my tears need to be washed in the precious blood of my dear Savior. Our best duties are full of so many splendid sins. Before you can speak peace to your hearts, you must not only repent of your sin, but also of your righteousness. There must be a deep conviction before you can be brought out of your self-righteousness. It is the last idol taken out of the heart. Did you ever feel the need of the righteousness, not just the forgiveness of Jesus? And can you say, "Lord, you may justly damn me for the best duties I ever did perform?" Unless you repent of your righteousness you cannot speak peace to yourself. You must lay hold by faith of the all-sufficient righteousness of Jesus Christ, and then you shall have peace.

In your group discuss this sermon.

- How would this sermon be received if preached in our churches today?
- How does this sermon challenge both the unsaved, godless person and also the religious?
- How does this sermon make it impossible for a legalistic Christianity to grow into a new believer?
- Whitefield says we use our duties and performances to hide ourselves from God. Do you think this a fair assessment of the motives of religious people?
- Discuss the statement: "Pharisees only repent of their sins, but Christians repent of their righteousness." What does it mean to "repent of your righteousness"?