

How do you grow in the Christian life?

Lesson 6

Once we have come to Christ and found salvation, how do we grow as Christians? Most people would answer with something like this. We are saved by grace and we grow in Christ through obedience. Discipline, most people say, is at the heart of Christian discipleship. While we should not deny the role of discipline in the Christian life, Paul's analysis of Christian growth takes us to a deeper level. He tells us that the familiar refrain, "try harder" is a subtle form of self-salvation. To say "try harder" is to rely on performance rather than on the grace that saved us in the first place. You may find this lesson puzzling at first; in fact, some may outright reject its truth. Growth in Christ does not come through trying harder, but by repenting of our trying. It comes not by obeying more but by believing more. Do you want to come into the full joy of the Christian experience? If you long for something more, ask God's Holy Spirit to illumine your heart, and then with an open mind dig into this lesson.

Studying

Read Galatians 3:1-18

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

1. Read the passage a few times through. Circle all the "faith" words that have to do with belief. Notice the contrast Paul makes between "works of the law" and "believing what you heard." Who is Paul talking to in this passage? What error had they fallen into?
2. How were the Galatians converted (5:1)? What was the "truth" they had obeyed to become Christians?
3. How had the Galatians received the Holy Spirit (vs. 2)?
4. Why on two occasions does Paul call the Galatians foolish (vs. 1, 3)? What were they doing to qualify that harsh rebuke? To answer, notice the various contrasts Paul makes between "believing what you heard" and "observing the law" (vs. 2, 3, and 5).
5. In verse 3 Paul speaks of "finishing in the flesh." In Galatians 5:17-18, Paul is making the same comparison. What is Paul warning these Christians against?

Reading

Read the following article entitled "Turning toward Repentance" and make annotations in the margin.

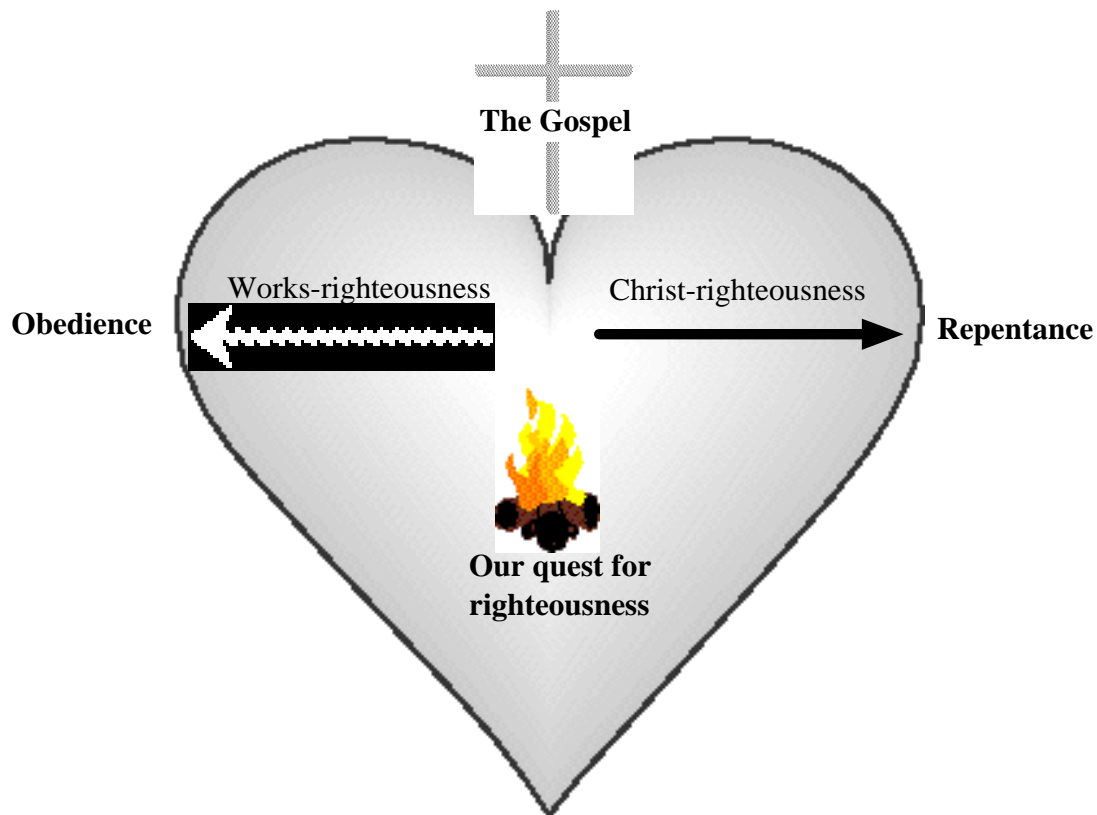
Repentance

Turning Toward Repentance

By Paul Thompson

When we put our trust in Jesus Christ and His saving work on the cross, we receive the gift of His righteousness. We are totally forgiven and accepted through Christ. Soon however, we discover that we have dragged a whole host of old habits into our Christian experience. We may have been given the gift of righteousness, but alas, we don't live, feel and act very righteous.

You are a Christian, but you still can't stand your mother-in-law. You still keep grudges. You still struggle with anger. You still have sexual fantasies. So, how do you move beyond your bent to sinning? How do you begin to live out your Christian righteousness and drop all those pesky habits? Or to put it more theologically, how do you transition from being accepted by God into actually living a righteous life?



What we normally do is take the "left turn." We go directly to obedience. We say to ourselves, "I need to stop these bad habits. I need to read the Bible more. I need more discipline. I need to go to church more faithfully. I need to witness." Your life becomes a seesaw of good resolutions and dismal failure. The results of an effort-based Christianity are fatal. Our lives can become a superficial play-act. We develop some very doable rules and if we follow these, we say, we are good Christians yet we know that in spite of our efforts something is deeply wrong. Or we can move into cynical mediocrity. We become nominal Christians, going through the motions of

Christian duty, but with no joy. Our lives become powerless and routine. We may just gradually wither up as Christians and drop out all together. This is the sad legacy of “the left turn.” Paul in his letter to the Romans uses the term “hardness of heart,” meaning the final result of a rebelliousness that is born and nurtured through obedience-driven religion.

Take a moment as you read this to reflect honestly on your own Christian experience. Do you feel something of the slippery decline of “the left turn” in your life? Are you thirsting for something more? I’m going to take you to Galatians chapter three for a refreshing drink. If you drink deeply of Paul’s teaching here, you will never be the same again.

Paul is asking the Galatians to define the basis of their faith. What do they really rely on? For instance, in verses 10 through 14 Paul is posing two conflicting options. We can either “live by” the law or we can “live by” faith. The phrase “live by” means to rely on. We “live by” whatever we put our trust in. The Galatians’ Christians “believed” in Christ but were relying on obedience. That, Paul argues, is an oxymoron. Either you believe in Christ totally or you believe in obedience. You can’t have it both ways.

Notice the questions he asks. “Did you receive the Spirit (salvation which comes by the Spirit) by observing the law (obedience) or by believing what you heard?” (vs. 2). Then after calling them “foolish” he asks again, “After beginning with the Spirit (salvation) are you not trying to attain your goal by human effort?” (vs.3). Then again in verse 5, “Does God give you His Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law (obey) or because you believe what you heard?”

These series of questions are calculated to awaken these Christians. How did they become Christians? That’s obvious enough; they became Christians when they stopped relying on the law (obedience) and began trusting in Jesus work. How then are they to grow in Christ? Paul’s logic is radical in its simplicity. He says we grow in Christ the very same way. We grow in Christ exactly the same way we entered the Christian life: by relying totally in his saving work.

This teaching runs counter to so much of what we hear today. We have been taught that we are justified by faith, but that we are sanctified by obedience. We grow in Christ by trying, by discipline, by effort, by sheer grit. We have been taught the theology of “the left turn,” that what brings us into the kingdom of God is faith and what advances us in the kingdom is obedience. Paul calls this foolish.

Take a closer look at verse 5. Paul is speaking here to Christians in the present tense. Keeping the law or breaking the law is not the issue—it’s relying on the law. It’s putting our trust in our own obedience. It’s resting in our performance. It’s basing our sanctification on obedience. That, although surprising, is our most persistent sin.

Growth in the Christian life begins by admitting that our main sin is relying on our own efforts for self-salvation and repenting not just of our sins, but of the motives and aims of our best deeds. When the Bible says our “righteous deeds are as filthy rags” (Is. 64:6), it does not mean merely that they fall short of perfection and are partially sinful. It means that they are actually sinful in themselves, since they are ways of seeking to merit God’s favor. Our good deeds at heart are a means to put God in our debt and to proudly maintain control of our lives.

What does it mean to “turn right” towards repentance? The gospel is total help and any attempt to help God by adding obedience is to reject his salvation. But beyond that, we need to see that the motive for all our good works is to defend ourselves against and maintain independence from

God. Our good deeds are a way of denying that we are so sinful that we need to be saved totally by grace.

Growth in the Christian life begins, then, by repenting not just of law-failing, but also of law-relying. To become a Christian and grow in Christ is not just to repent of our sins, but also to repent of our own righteousness. We must change not the amount, but the direction of our repentance.

The term repentance conjures all sorts of notions in our minds. Two metaphors may be useful in explaining its meaning: one from an operating table and the other from the blacksmith's shop.

Sin is like cancer. It has the effect of growing and spreading. Repentance is like a surgical procedure that cuts deep enough to get the tumor out. We are all masters of rationalization that excuses behavior, often making our sin the result of another's actions. When King David repented of his sin, he made no excuses. He recognized that his sin was against a holy God and that he and he alone was responsible. To cut deeply means that we go deeper than the act itself. We need to ask the question of motive. Why do we sin? As we look deeper into our hearts, we begin to realize that even our good deeds are weighted with all sorts of selfish motives and manipulation. To cut deep leaves us no option but to repent both of our sins and our good deeds.

Often when we sin, we spend a lot of time hitting and abusing ourselves, like a blacksmith trying to straighten a piece of metal with a hammer. This kind of repentance does not produce change, only self-contempt and hardness. The repentance the Bible speaks of is more like exposing your heart to violent heat.

In order to recast something made of metal, you have to melt it down. If you hammer it, you will only make it worse. Many Christians constantly wound themselves with the fear of God. They say, "What will happen to me if I don't change my ways?" Biblical repentance, however, is melting your heart before the mercy of God's grace. In repentance, we don't need to put ourselves before the fear of punishment. Jesus paid all that. We need to put ourselves before the loving mercies of God and allow our hearts to be melted by His love.

Reflecting

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

1. Get into the text of Galatians 3:1-18 by discussing together the Bible study questions.
2. "Believing the gospel is to repent, not just of failing to obey the law, but of relying on the law—not just for sins committed, but for achievements done as self-salvation." Discuss this statement together. How has a performance-based Christianity crept into your life and into your church?
3. Paul says, "All who rely on the law (performance) are under a curse (vs. 3:10). Describe that "curse" in a practical everyday sense.

4. Luther wrote, "We think, how many errors and sins and wrongs I have done! But the real evil is that we trust our own power to be righteous and will not lift up our eyes to see that Christ has done for us." Do you agree with Luther that our righteous actions are what get in the way of what Christ has done for us?
 5. How would repentance from relying on your good works affect your Christian life? How would that make you grow in grace?
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Applying

Optional – to do this project will entail an extra week

Reliance Project

Project No. 6

What do we really rely on? In our lesson we learned that we can either "live by faith" or that we can "live by the law." We can rely on the work of Christ and the gift of His righteousness or we can rely on our own striving. It's very easy in church on Sundays to say, "I rely on Christ," but during the week our functional trust is in something else. How can we tell where our trust is placed? Our emotions always give us away. Like a thermometer, they measure the level of threat in our hearts. If you are angry or anxious, or proud and cynical, if you are sad and despairing, something is going on in your heart that says "I have to have this or I can't live." If you are experiencing a tremendous calm and stability even in the face of great odds, it tells you something else.

For this week's project, we are going to keep a close check on five areas of our emotions. Throughout each day this week, keep a mental note of what you have been feeling, and then during the evening ask yourself the following questions. Write down your broodings.

1. Was I anxious or angry?

Some goal deeply buried in your heart was saying to you, "I can break you—you are nothing if you don't have me". What was that goal?

2. Was I proud or cynical?

Something in my heart was saying, "I have made you—you are great because of me." What makes you feel superior or better to other people? Be specific.

3. Was I bored and indifferent?

Something in my heart was saying, "I can satisfy you—but you must have more of me." What is your heart addicted to? What can't you get enough of?

4. Was I tempted and losing control?

Something in my heart was saying, "I can satisfy you—but you must find a way to get me." What don't you have which your heart says it must have to be happy?

5. Was I despondent and discouraged?

Something in my heart was saying, "I made you; I'm gone and nothing else can help you." What have you lost that your heart thinks it needs?

Discuss in your group:

1. In which of the five areas above do you experience the most intensity of emotion? Discuss your emotions (if you feel free) and what you discovered they point to.
2. Discuss "the left turn" solution to these emotional needs. What is the "right turn" solution?
3. Luther wrote, "The Christian life is continual repentance". What do you think he meant? And why do you think this is true?

4. *Read this paragraph aloud:*

"Only when we begin to draw our righteousness (our worth and acceptability) from faith in Christ do we really begin to live. This means meeting every life challenge and problem with joyful repentance. It takes all our lives to learn that underneath every problem and difficulty is residual self-righteousness (self-effort). Why are we angry? Why are we bitter? Why are we worried? Something more important than Jesus is operating as our functional righteousness and worth. We are trying to find our acceptability in something other than in Jesus."

- How do we learn to meet every problem with "joyful repentance"?
- How do we make our righteousness in Christ a living reality?