

Gospel-centered relationships

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Imagine a child who has grown up in the streets all his life. He knows how to steal, how to fight and how to rummage for food, just to survive. Then one day he is found and adopted by a loving, wealthy family. Together they go to the adoption office, sign the papers, and become a family.

The boy is overjoyed that, after all these years, he now belongs to a real family. Now imagine that as they are exiting the adoption office, the boy then gives his new family a hug, expresses his gratitude, and says goodbye, and then returns to his homeless life, where he rummages once again for food to eat and a place to sleep. Imagine that he stands at night warming himself around a fire, burning in an old barrel, and brags to the other homeless children that he has been adopted and that they should do the same, but then he still lives with them as an orphan, street child. To us that would not make sense, that an adopted child would not be living in his new identity and taking advantage of all the resources that his new father has prepared for him. It sounds ridiculous, but are we not guilty of many times doing the same?

The gospel is the greatest of news, but many times it has been reduced down to “the way that we are forgiven of sin and saved from hell”, end of story. While that is true, that is looking at only a part of the gospel. Many mistakenly see the gospel as two one time events. The first event is that of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The second event is when we believed in Jesus and were saved. For many that is the full impact of the cross and the end of the salvation story, when in reality it is only the beginning.

We consider it “only the beginning” because once we receive Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, the Spirit of Christ comes to live within us, forever. Scripture is very clear about our being in Christ and us being in Him. Just like signing the adoption papers was only the beginning of the family relationship, one’s being saved and forgiven is only the beginning of an eternal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Yes, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the central point of the gospel, but it should impact us, every day, for the rest of our lives. We have not been left to fend for ourselves and figure out how to live the Christian life in our own power. If so, we would be no better off than the adopted son who is

still digging through the trash like an orphan child. He may remember the day he went to the adoption office and signed the papers with his new parents, but he is not experiencing any of the benefits of being a son.

We are not spiritual orphans. We are children of the king. Let's now turn our attention to the scriptures so we can learn to take hold of everything that is ours in the gospel.

In Matthew 22:35-36, a lawyer approached Jesus to test Him with this question, ***"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?"*** Jesus then responded with these words:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."
(Matthew 22:37-40)

Jesus was telling us very clearly that the Christian life can never be lived alone. We were created to share life with others. But it is only through our vertical love relationship with God that we will be able to live out a loving horizontal relationship with our fellow man. The gospel is the key. In the gospel we are changed, and Christ comes to live in us to make loving God and loving others possible. We have been called to "gospel-centered" relationships. As Paul David Tripp has so clearly stated:

"When you forget the gospel, you begin to seek from . . . (relationships) what you have already been given in Christ. You begin to look to (relationships) for identity, security, hope, well-being, meaning, and purpose. These are things you will only ever find vertically. They are already yours in Christ so you have to fight to give the gospel presence in your heart. Also, when you live out of the grace of the gospel, you quit fearing failure, you quit avoiding being known, and you quit hiding your struggles and your sin."¹

Gospel-centered relationships

What does "gospel-centered" mean? Think of it in this way. We are all familiar with the idea of self-centered. We have known self-centered people. We have been self-centered people. That does not mean that we are literally thinking directly about ourselves all the time. We are still thinking about what to wear, what to say, what to think, what to do, but all of those decisions are being made so they serve my selfish desires. Self-centered people are not thinking about what is best for others, or what God desires, they are thinking about only getting what they selfishly want.

As followers of Jesus Christ we are to live "gospel-centered" lives. It does not mean that we are always talking about Jesus or always thinking about the cross, but it does mean that the truths of the gospel are the lens through which we view everything else. The truth of the Gospel has now become the core reality of our lives. Our priorities, our desires, our plans, our responses, and even our emotions are

¹ Paul Tripp, "Pastoral Ministry is War." <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2011/08/08/pastoral-ministry-is-war/>

coming more and more into submission of the truths of the gospel. No one does this perfectly, but as children of God, day-by-day, the way we think, talk and live should be governed by our belief in and appreciation for what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

This is a seismic shift from self-centeredness to Gospel-centeredness. The Gospel becomes the operating system of our life. Our north star. It is the light that now illuminates the truth of the situations around us. The gospel is not only a Sunday topic at church or the focus of a few minutes of devotional reading at night. The gospel is to have implications in every part of our lives.

If we bring ourselves back to the gospel at the beginning of every day, we are humbled by our sin, our sinfulness and our brokenness. Pride is swept away and we no longer think more highly of ourselves than we ought. As Jesus instructs us to do in Matthew 7, we first take note of the log of sin in our own eye before we judge the speck in someone else's eye. As we once again have been reminded of the "bad news" of the gospel we then are lifted up with the "good news" of the gospel. We have been forgiven. We are loved. We have been adopted. We are secure. Christ is in us and we are in Him. We no longer have to earn love or perform for the approval of man. We can stand strong, even in the most difficult of external circumstances, because our strength, our joy, our hope and our peace now come from within. We are in Christ. Our Father treasures us, cares for us, provides for us and loves us. We are secure . . . So we no longer need to devour each other, or put others down to raise ourselves up, or brag about what we have done so everyone knows, or be broken if we don't succeed in some earthly endeavor. Our lives are built upon the rock, and though storms may come and floods may rise, we are held firm on the foundation of Christ.

Because our needs are met in Him, we can now quit using people and just love them as Christ has loved us. That is the beauty of the gospel. The vertical love relationship with our heavenly Father spreads throughout all of our horizontal relationships for His glory and our good. Let me give you some examples.

Suppose there is a Christian man who in many areas of his life is honoring God, but who has traditionally had an **anger problem**. He has been loud, hurtful, manipulative, intimidating, but is becoming more and more convicted of his sin in this area. He wants to change, but in his mind there is a tug of war happening. He thinks of his past and thinks He surely cannot change. He then looks at the gospel and is reassured that we are a new creation. *"The old is passed away; behold, the new has come"* (2 Corinthians 5:17). Therefore, his past can no longer condemn him, define him, enslave him or determine his future. He is no longer bound to the same relational mistakes he has made in the past. With this in mind, he puts his faith in Christ to finish what He has begun in His life. He confesses his need to other trustworthy men who graciously hold him accountable. He shares with his wife and children and they begin to join him in the project. He draws near to God's Word and begins to be strengthened spiritually by it. He surrenders daily his anger and his heart, and gradually God begins to change his desires, and the anger begins to fade away. This man is becoming more gospel-centered.

Another example could be a secondary student. She became a Christian a couple of years ago, but she is struggling as many teenagers do. She is not that attractive, smart, athletic or popular. **She really wants**

the approval of her classmates and is being tempted to cheat, swear, dress inappropriately and do numerous things that are not becoming of a follower of Christ. She is stuck in the middle. She really wants the approval of her classmates. So, how does the gospel affect this situation?

Through the death of Christ, God has already declared the value of this young lady. She was bought with a price. She is a child of God. She is a precious treasure to the King of the universe. God has a calling on her life and has prepared a place for her in eternity. As she reviews the truths of the gospel, she is swayed back towards God. She shares her struggle with her parents and with a few other adult Christian women who she really respects. They all begin to pray for her and check on her periodically. She begins to evaluate the friends that she has. She begins to read her Bible daily. She begins to find a way that she can serve others. She begins taking more time researching what God will have her do with her life in the future. She gets more involved in her church. She may even spend less time on social media, since it tends to stir a discontentment in our hearts where we constantly pursue “more likes or more friends”. As God increases her faith in Christ and her desire for Him grows, her desire for popularity begins to decrease and the temptation loses its power. This young lady is becoming more gospel-centered.

Imagine another situation. A Christian woman who has had years of **bitterness against her parents**. She was treated badly when she was growing up and has never been able to forgive them. She knows that she should forgive them, but feels that if she forgives them, they will have won. That somehow, they will be getting away with it. So, she has never forgiven them. But the more she draws near to the gospel, she can't help but realize the full extent of her own sin. Her own rebellion against a holy God, and the unbelievable forgiveness that He granted her. She no longer can function as if she is the “innocent one” or the righteous judge. Her sin has disqualified her from both. She, too, is guilty and has been forgiven much. She knows she should forgive. She now has a fuller understanding of the gospel in her mind, but how does she get the gospel to take root in her heart? Only God can do that, but he has given us ways to prepare the soil. Out of her longing for reconciliation with her parents and a desire to be freed from the bondage of bitterness, she begins to obey God's Word. She begins to read God's Word daily. She shares with a couple of other Christian friends who she really trusts. She begins to pray for God to bless her parents. She begins to reach out to them, even though in the beginning it is still somewhat superficial. She continues to cry out to God to change her heart . . . and He does.

Another example of the gospel's impact on relationships can be found in **how a single Christian approaches getting married**. The gospel has already determined your worth, your belonging and that you are unconditionally loved. Because of this you are in a good place. You do not have to be desperate. You do not have to measure your worth based on your marital status or people's opinion or the outcome of a date. You do not have to pursue a relationship by dressing immodestly or lowering your commitment to holiness. You trust in the sovereignty of God and cling to the fact that, as you seek God first, He will bless you whether you are single or married. As we revel in God's acceptance, the acceptance of the other person takes its rightful place. If God leads you into a lasting relationship, good, but if not, you are fine because you rest in God. If we know that through the gospel we have Christ and that He is our everything, then we can accept the outcome of possible romantic relationships, because our life is built upon Christ and nothing will ever separate us from His love. But remember this, even if

you find Mr. or Mrs. Perfect, no one is truly perfect, and you will never stop needing the gospel. Those of you who are married know exactly what I am talking about.

The need for the gospel extends even to our **marriages**. Some days of marriage are heavenly and others . . . are not. Marriage is beautiful and gut-wrenching. You have entrusted your heart to someone for the rest of your lives. Because of this they have the power to love you like no other, but they also have the power to hurt you like no other. In these moments we must return to the gospel. There we see once again that we are not innocent. That we have no right to be the judge. That our spouse is imperfect and sinful just as we are. That Christ is our only hope for healing and the only one who can meet our deepest needs. As we are safe in Him it becomes possible to humble ourselves before each other and seek reconciliation. He is our confidence and our security. He is our source of hope in the midst of our pain and in the midst of our sin. Once again our needs lead us back to the gospel.

In regard to **work**, in the gospel we find purpose in our day to day lives as we are called to be on mission with God. No longer do we work merely to pay the bills. We enter our workplace every day knowing that we are torchbearer's, taking the light of Christ to a dark and dying world. Even in the most difficult of situations we can find hope in God, who works all things for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28-29). We find hope in God, who uses even life's difficulties to grow in us character, faith, and a fuller understanding of His grace (Romans 5:1-5). As we view our coworkers from a gospel perspective, we see them as a people to be loved, as blind to the gospel, and as a people in need of a savior.

In times when our relationships are at their worst, through the gospel we know that we have access to God through Christ (Hebrews 4:14-16). Therefore, we can at any time take any need before God's throne and receive His grace and mercy.

Through the gospel we are given the tools to **fight temptation**. Through the gospel we can find **contentment**. Through the gospel we are given a **heart of thankfulness**. Through the gospel **priorities are made clear**. Through the gospel **change is possible**. Through the gospel we are **loved unconditionally**. The gospel is our **true reality**. It is a relationship with God that finally shows us the truth of the world around us and changes everything.

It is helpful and encouraging to know all the benefits of being a child of God, but the essential point of this is to abide with Him. To walk in the Spirit. Just as an orphan child benefits as he stays near his parents, so do we reap all the benefits of the Gospel as we draw near to our heavenly Father. In that relational connection you will gain everything that He has to offer, even if you don't know exactly what all the benefits are.

Our **daily rehearsal of the gospel** allows us to practically walk in the righteousness that has been granted us. Grace continues to move us towards repentance. The unconditional love of God continues to compel us towards good works. We have been saved, but do not be mistaken, the gospel is more than a one moment-in-time event. It is a life-long, life-giving, relationship with God.

As we daily plug in to God's Word, pray, and share life with other believers, we will find ourselves more and more filled with the truths of the gospel and prepared to let it pour out of our lives.

It may be today that you are facing a very difficult relationship with a spouse, with one of your children, with one of your teachers, with a coworker, or a roommate. Cling to the gospel. Cry out for God to do a miracle in your life. That God would allow you to view the situation and even the person from a gospel perspective. Through it, God will refine you and use you as a tool to bring blessing to others. God will be honored and possibly someone will be turned towards Christ.

Discussion Questions:

1. What about this topic of Gospel-centered Relationships did you find most meaningful?
2. In Matthew 22:37-40, we see Christ's greatest commandment.
3. How would you summarize Paul David Tripp's quote in your own words?
4. In which of these examples did you best relate with?
5. In what relationship in your life do you need the gospel's help?
6. What are practical ways that you can daily remind yourself of the truths of the Gospel and draw near to God?
7. How can we pray for you in regards to tonight's lesson?