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All Out of Breath: Christian Moralism and the Gospel



Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-2, NIV).

In an attempt to challenge myself this year, I have registered to run a half marathon in October. I am nervous to say the least because I have never considered myself much of a runner, especially when it comes to distance running. But I am also very excited! I am excited to try something new; to push myself to accomplish a goal and experience a challenge that I had in the past considered too great for me to achieve. It will be an experience for sure, but I wouldn't be as excited as I am if I were doing this alone. Because I'll be training for and running this half marathon with an experienced marathon runner; someone who knows what they're doing and can help me learn, I am confident that though it may be difficult, it will be possible (even for an inexperienced runner like me).

As with most things in life, if we set about doing something with the wrong focus or lack of understanding, guidance, and direction, we will likely fall to the wayside, get discouraged, and more often than not, quit. Unfortunately, this kind of discouragement can be seen within the church today. In an article published by CNN in May of 2015, Religious Editor Daniel Burke explains that millennials are leaving the church in droves...and not just the church, but the Christian faith entirely.

A survey of 35,000 American adults shows that the Christian percentage of the population has dropped to 70.6% [in 2015]. In 2007, the last time Pew [Research Center] conducted a similar survey, 78.4% of American adults called themselves Christian. –Daniel Burke, CNN

Though this is concerning, and though we can safely assume that this has only worsened over the last 3-4 years, what really troubled me about this article was Burke's definition of 'the Christian life;' the life that these American adults are walking away from.

At its core, Christian life is a set of sacred traditions linking generations of sacraments and Sunday school lessons, youth ministry morals and family gatherings sanctified by prayer. –Daniel Burke, CNN

After circling the issue, Burke never really landed on a solid explanation for this decline in church attendance and religious affiliation throughout western cultures. However, with Christianity summed up to be nothing more than sacred traditions, sacraments, lessons, and morals, I think it is safe to say that the reason millennials and every other generation alike are dropping out of the 'race marked out for us' (Hebrews 12:1, NIV) is because they're all out of breath, trying to run a race with their eyes fixed on morality instead of on Jesus with little to no Biblically-grounded understanding, guidance, or direction regarding the Gospel of true hope and freedom.

Since Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2, NIV) and since without faith, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6, NIV), when the roots of Christianity are grounded in the do's and don'ts of Scripture rather than in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we are bound to lose hope and run ourselves all out of breath while chasing this illusion of Christian moralism.

Christian Moralism

We know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified (Galatians 2:15-16, NIV).

There is this widely popularized and accepted message within many churches today that we need to be and even *can* be 'a better person.' This kind of mentality and approach to the Christian walk subtly identifies the Bible as a mere set of moral guidelines designed to tell us what to do and what not to do in order to be a Christian, thus making mankind the subject and intention of Scripture rather than the glory of God displayed in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6, NIV).

When I first considered this in my own life, I immediately self-justified; believing that I have never and would never believe that the Bible was about me and my moral compass. "I don't do that," I would think to myself. "I know that it is by grace that I am saved and that it is only by that grace that I am a child of God. I know that I am not saved by my own works." When I really stopped to think about it though and

when I considered whether the truths that I claimed to believe about grace and hope and unconditional love actually manifested themselves in my life or not, I came to the painful realization that deep down, 'being a better person' had become the root of my faith instead of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus my life began producing fruits such as anxiety, perfectionism, fear, and pride instead of the fruits of the Holy Spirit – love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23, NIV).

You can grow up in a church, hear a Gospel about freedom, and still work your tail off trying to maintain the image that you're a good person. –Michael, American Gospel, 2019.

Claiming a Gospel of freedom while at the same time running myself ragged, I would try to achieve this 'next level' of Christian moralism. And so, church or anything else related to it became a place where I could feel better about myself; where I could listen to a message that would fill my tanks for another week of one failed attempt after another, and when I did fail I would mentally beat myself over the head with an imaginary rolled up newspaper like Edna did in *The Incredibles*, telling myself that I needed to 'pull myself together!' Ultimately, Christ became obsolete in my faith while I set my focus and hope entirely on my own morality, which dictated how I felt about myself, how I thought others viewed me, and sadly, how much or how little I believed God loved me.

So this begs the question – **why do we do anything at all?** Why do we do certain things like pray, read our Bibles, serve, or minister to the lost? Why don't we do other things like lie, cheat, or steal? Why are we baptized? Why do we take part in communion? Why do we tithe or fast? What is the motivation for our obedience? Because it is not the actions themselves that are the problem. The Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20, the principles found in the Proverbs, and the instruction of the Epistles are all good and necessary. Even Christ said that he did not come to abolish them [the Law or the Prophets] but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17, NIV). The problem lies in our motivation behind submitting to these commands and guidelines. When our motivation for obedience is anything but a deep love for Christ and a recognition of our need for grace, we become easily prone to the tangles moralistic legalism and/or the trappings of prosperity gospel. If we don't know why we condone certain behaviors and condemn others, then we are blindly living by a moral code yet calling it gospel.

A Loveless Gospel and a Gospel-Less Love

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:9-12, NIV).

Action grounded in love is what makes up the Gospel, for God **so loved** the world that He sent His one and only Son to die on the cross for our sins (John 3:16, NIV). We cannot preach love without the Gospel and

we cannot share the Gospel without love. It is because He first loved us that we experience any love for Him at all (1 John 4:19, NIV), and it is because we love Him that we obey His commands (John 14:15, NIV). So when we dismiss love as our foundation and cause for doing anything at all in Jesus' name, we eliminate the power of the Gospel in our lives and in our ministries. When we act out of a deep love for Christ and when we resist the temptations of worldly lusts and sinful pleasures because our love for Christ is so deep that even the thought of disobeying or dishonoring Him with our actions or lack thereof is more costly than the pleasure we might experience, we begin living by grace and love rather than by a moralistic code of religious dos and don'ts. It is when we stop trying to 'live' the Gospel or 'do' the Gospel that we are able to simply *receive* the Gospel of Christ's grace fully in faith. When we dismiss love as our reason for obedience, that is when we move into a moralistic legalism motivated by this list of do's and don'ts and when someone or even ourselves deviates from that code, harshness and austerity follows with no consideration for Christ, His grace, or the Gospel.

There is a flip-side to this though, because on the opposite end of this spectrum is a love separated from the Gospel. While a loveless Gospel leads to moralistic legalism, a Gospel-less love leads to the prosperity gospel; a gospel that preaches that Christ died in order that we might be happy, healthy, and wealthy and not because we were dead in our trespasses and in desperate need of a Savior (Ephesians 2:1, NIV).

So we see that anything read in Scripture that is severed from the Gospel of Jesus Christ incarnate come down to live a perfect life, die a sinner's death, be buried and raised to life in absolute victory over sin and death to give us new life and hope in Him alone...when we detach *anything* in Scripture from this foundational truth, we miss the truth entirely because it is **the Gospel alone** that can move us confidently and humbly down the straight and narrow path that leads to life (Matthew 7:14, NIV).

In a documentary titled [American Gospel: Christ Alone](#), Pastor Phill Howell explains that the Christian life is like a railroad track. We are set on the right path and shown the way to go, but it is **the Gospel** that is our engine and fuel; the thing that actually moves us down the tracks. Yet so often in Christian circles today, people are being shown the way to go (the good things that mark a Christian life), but are not being introduced to or reminded of the means by which to move forward (the Gospel of Jesus Christ), leaving them even more helpless than before.

A Christ-Centered Gospel

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believe in vain (1 Corinthians 15:1-2, NIV).

The message that we need to be, or even *can* be a better person is the most hopeless, damning message anyone could ever hear because it neglects **who we are** while focusing on **what we do**. The Bible circles

the reality that we face a much bigger problem than the ones that manifest themselves in our actions and behaviors over and over again. **Christ did not die to help you be a better person.** He died to save us from the sin that we were powerless against, and to be painfully honest, He died to save us from the sin that we *loved*, and still love. That's the only reason sin has any power over us after all...because we love it and it bears no real consequence to us because we have not perceived the great love of Christ displayed in the Gospel. So then it is passages like Matthew 5:17-48 that rather than helping us making better choices are actually there to remind us of and show us the severity of our inherent sin, our natural wretchedness, and our innate frailty in order to bring us back to our knees in desperate need of grace!

Unfortunately, when all we hear in church sermons and podcasts and lectures is how to not be sexually immoral, how to pray better, how to suffer well, how not to be anxious or depressed, how to have a godly relationship, or how to be faithfully single, etc. without the message ever really coming back to **the Gospel**, we are set on a path that leads to one of two tragic destinations – pride and/or despair.

On the one hand, when we are told to 'be better, and here's how' without any consideration for our need of grace, pride will likely harden our hearts and convince us that we've got this; that we're fine and that our morality has and will continue to save us; that we don't need grace or forgiveness for something that we don't believe we've done based on our own standards and that there is no need for help with something that we believe we can achieve on our own. Yet on the other hand, when we begin to see how helpless and weak we are against our inherent sin and are confronted with the bleakness of our iniquity and see its stark contrast against the holiness of God, our hearts wither in despair, turning to the empty promises of our own morality which has no real power to save in and of itself, but condemns us nonetheless with lies that we didn't try hard enough, that we didn't have enough faith, that we didn't pray enough, tithe enough, fast enough, or read the Bible enough.

The Bible tells us in Matthew 5:48 to 'be perfect, therefore, as our heavenly Father is perfect.' We know that this is impossible. If we have any recollection or understanding of our own sinful ways at all, then we know that if this were the standard (which it is), then we are, without question, hopeless. We know that no degree of moralistic achievement or good standing will do us any good, because even the righteous acts of man are like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6, NIV). Yet, if we look back several verses, we will read the life-giving words of Christ saying that though he did not come to rid us of the requirement of perfection according to God's Law, He did come to fulfill that requirement for us (Matthew 5:17, NIV). Therefore, we know that to follow Christ is not to be a better person by way of our own efforts, but to love and be in relationship with the only person who could ever completely fulfill God's requirement for holiness and righteousness. So instead of asking ourselves 'what would Jesus do?' and then attempting to do that, the Gospel points us back to what Jesus has already done and then tells us to believe in that!

Christianity only becomes unattractive when we take away the only attractive thing about it, which is Jesus Christ and the Gospel of His undying love, grace, and mercy for those who are least deserving (all of us). The beauty of the Gospel and the reason it should be at the center of all that we do is said perfectly in Romans 5:8 and 10 that while we were *still sinners*, Christ died for us. Therefore, if while we were God's enemies, *we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son*, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we *be saved* through his life!

This Christian life does not neglect or sugar coat the reality that we will never be good enough. Instead of putting before us all these sacred traditions, sacraments, lessons, and morals and giving us this false hope that we can actually achieve reconciliation on our own by following these '10 steps to a better life,' the Gospel tells us the truth about *who we are*—*entirely* sinful and *totally* incapable of saving ourselves. Yet it goes on to remind us of a love and a grace that is far *greater* than all of our failures, all of our wretchedness, all of our frailty, and all of our wickedness. We are only reminded of this beautiful grace and love that saved us even when we were God's enemies when we return daily to the Gospel, so that when we do get discouraged by our sin and when we do falter on the edge of despair, we can look back and remember that if He loved us when we were opposed to Him, how much more shall we be saved from our present sin through His life which He freely gives to us.

If you read this and found that any of it resonated with you, please know that there is hope! You don't have to fight a losing battle against your sin any longer. You don't have to bend under the weight of the pride that burdens your heart. There is freedom in the Gospel of Jesus Christ! So return to it. Return to the good news that we are saved by no attempt or effort or even desire on our part, but entirely by the goodness and grace and pleasure of our Lord Jesus Christ. So let us throw off everything— all the moralistic legalism, prosperity gospel, pride, and despair — that hinders us and the sin that so easily entangles us. Let the joy and peace of knowing this Gospel fill your lungs with new breath that you may run with perseverance, fixing your eyes on Jesus Christ alone.