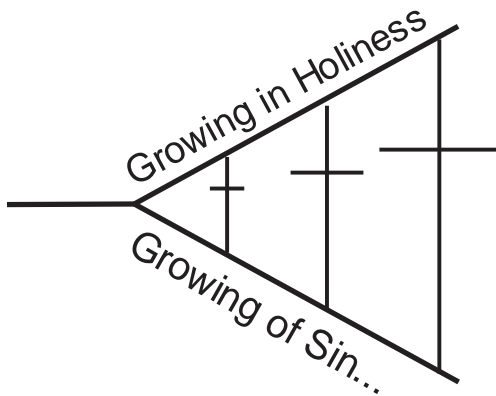


LOSING YOUR RELIGION—FINDING THE GOSPEL CENTERED LIFE[©]
LESSON TWO: SHRINKING THE CROSS

PRETENDING AND PERFORMING

BIG IDEA: This week focuses on “shrinking the cross”, which is to say that something is lacking in our understanding, appreciation or application of Jesus’ sacrifice for our sin. This is manifested in two main ways: **pretending and performing**. Pretending minimizes our sin by making ourselves to be something we are not. Performing minimizes God’s holiness by reducing his standard to something we can keep and thereby get his favor or the favor of whatever we worship. Both are rooted in inadequate views of God’s holiness and our identity.



I. PRETENDING: Luke 18:18-23

SPEAKING WELL OF OURSELVES: Look what I have accomplished. Look what I have experienced. This worked for me; it will surely work for you.

WORRY: I know how my world should be run, but things are not happening the way I know they should. Thus, I give in to worry.

FEAR: I am capable. I can make it on my own. I can protect myself. Yet when I do not make it, I give in to fear. My boasting sets me up for a fall.

COMPLAINING: I know what is best and right.

SPEAKING OF MY SIN: Look how humble I am; Look how insightful I am.

DESIRE FOR HOLINESS: Look how holy I am. It would be nice to be more holy; then I would make a good impression.

REFERRING TO MY SUFFERING: Look how I stand up under hard circumstances.

COVERING OVER MY SIN: Look, I am better than you think.

KEEPING QUIET ABOUT SOMETHING, HOPING FOR A GREATER IMPACT: When people find out, then they will really be impressed—since I did not draw any attention to it!

JUDGING OTHERS: Look how much better I am than others.

II. PERFORMING: Functional Saviors – Where do we get our righteousness?

Luke 18:9-14

Q. What do you count on to give you a sense of “personal credibility” (validity, acceptance, good standing)?

JOB RIGHTEOUSNESS: I’m a hard worker, so God will reward me. (*Vacation story: work extra hard before I left and work overtime when I got back)

FAMILY RIGHTEOUSNESS: Because I “do things right” as a parent, I’m more godly than parents who can’t control their kids. (*We are not going to be those parents who count to 3!)

THEOLOGICAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: I have good theology. God prefers me over those who have bad theology.

INTELLECTUAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: I am better read, more articulate, and more culturally savvy than others, which obviously makes me superior.

SCHEDULE RIGHTEOUSNESS: I am self-disciplined and rigorous in my time management, which makes me more mature than others.

FLEXIBILITY RIGHTEOUSNESS: In a world that's busy, I'm flexible and relaxed. I always make time for others. Shame on those who don't!

MERCY RIGHTEOUSNESS: I care about the poor and disadvantaged the way everyone else should.

LEGALISTIC RIGHTEOUSNESS: I don't drink, smoke, or chew, or date girls who do. Too many Christians just aren't concerned about holiness these days.

FINANCIAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: I manage money wisely and stay out of debt. I'm not like those materialistic Christians who can't control their spending.

POLITICAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: If you really love God, you'll vote for my candidate.

"Without an understanding and pressing the gospel into our lives, we will either be naïvely utopian or cynically disillusioned. We will be demonizing something that isn't bad enough to explain the mess we are in, and we will be idolizing something that isn't powerful enough to get us out." Tim Keller

TOLERANCE RIGHTEOUSNESS: I am open-minded and charitable toward those who don't agree with me. In fact, I'm a lot like Jesus that way!

These sources of functional righteousness disconnect us from the Gospel. They allow us to find life in what we do and keep us from facing the broken places in our life and our sin. They become our platform by which we make all our judgments about others.

Playwright Arthur Miller in *After the Fall* character Quentin says:

"For many years I looked at life like a case at law. It was a series of proofs. When you're young you prove how brave you are, or smart; then, what a good lover; then, a good father; finally, how wise, or powerful or [whatever]. But underlying it all, I see now, there was a presumption. That one moved...on an upward path toward some elevation, where...God knows what...I would be justified, or even condemned. A verdict anyway. I think now that my disaster really began

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when I looked up one day...and the bench was empty. No judge in sight. And all that remained was the endless argument with oneself, this pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench.... Which, of course, is another way of saying—despair.”

“The really unbearable thing for us is grace.... It is exactly the opposite of everything our religious sentiments are looking for.... We do not want grace.... It does not satisfy religious needs.... We are possessed by an obsessional desire to justify ourselves, to declare that we are righteous, to be righteous in our own eyes, to seem to be righteous in the eyes of others.... Saying that God loves us grants us no reassurance. We would prefer it if he gave us fifty things to do, so that when we had done them, we could be at peace. We do not want an ongoing relationship with God. We prefer a rule.” Jacques Ellul

III. FILLING THE GAP WITH THE GOSPEL

Luke 18:13-14 – His prayer, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.”

“Far too easily we settle for holiness rather than wholeness, conformity rather than authenticity, becoming spiritual rather than deeply human, fulfillment rather than transformation, and a journey toward perfection rather than union with God. Far too often we confuse our own spiritual self-improvement tinkering with the much more radical agenda of the Spirit of God. The call of the Spirit—which is always gentle and therefore easily missed—is an invitation to abandon our self-improvement projects that are, in reality, little more than polishing our false self and become the unique hidden self in Christ that we have been from all eternity. The call of the Spirit is always a call to return home, to settle for no other habitation or identity than that of being in Christ and knowing the reality of Christ in us.” David Benner

Wretched man that I am! ... Romans 7:24

APPENDIX READING FOR LESSON TWO - GAP FILLING

What happens, then, if you are an elder brother (**performance centered**) and things go wrong in your life? If you feel you have been living up to your moral standards (**performance**), you will be furious with God. You don't deserve this, you will think, after how hard you've worked to be a decent person! What happens, however, if things have gone wrong in your life when you know that you have been falling short of your standards? Then you will be furious with yourself, filled with self-loathing and inner pain. And if evil circumstances overtake you, and you are not sure whether your life has been good enough or not, you may swing miserably back and forth between the poles of "I hate Thee!" and "I hate me."

(Performance centered) Elder brothers' inability to handle suffering arises from the fact that their moral observance is results-oriented. The good life is lived not for delight in good deeds themselves, but as calculated ways to control their environment.

Elisabeth Elliot recounts an apocryphal story (not in the Bible!) about Jesus that conveys the difference between a results-oriented selfishness and a faithfulness born of love.

One day Jesus said to his disciples: "I'd like you to carry a stone for Me." He didn't give any explanation. So, the disciples looked around for a stone to carry, and Peter, being the practical sort, sought out the smallest stone he could possibly find. After all, Jesus didn't give any regulations for weight and size! So, he put it in his pocket. Jesus then said: "Follow Me." He led them on a journey. About noontime Jesus had everyone sit down. He waved his hands and all the stones turned to bread. He said, "Now it's time for lunch." In a few seconds, Peter's lunch was over. When lunch was done Jesus told them to stand up. He said again, "I'd like you to carry a stone for Me." This time Peter said "Aha! Now I get it!" So, he looked around and saw a small boulder. He hoisted it on his back and it was painful, it made him stagger. But he said, "I can't wait for supper." Jesus then said: "Follow Me." He led them on a journey, with Peter barely being able to keep up. Around supper time Jesus led them to the side of a river. He said, "Now everyone throw your stones into the water." They did. Then he said, "Follow Me," and began to walk. Peter and the others looked at him dumbfounded. Jesus sighed and said, "Don't you remember what I asked you to do? Who were you carrying the stone *for*?"

Like Peter, elder brothers (**performance centered people**) expect their goodness to pay off, and if it doesn't, there is confusion and rage. If you think goodness and decency is the way to merit a good life from God, you will be eaten up with anger, since life never goes as we wish. You will always feel that you are owed more than you are getting. You will always see someone doing better than you in some aspect of life and will ask, "Why this person and not me? After all I've done!"

When we are enslaved to a performance view of ourselves and life – we are always measuring, always comparing. – Excerpt from Prodigal God by Tim Keller

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