

connecting  
broken people  
to the love  
of christ

COUNSEL FROM THE CROSS

Elyse M. Fitzpatrick and  
Dennis E. Johnson

*Counsel from the Cross: Connecting Broken People to the Love of Christ*

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## Preface

IT IS NO SECRET THAT COUNSELING—whether formalized under terms such as *psychotherapy*, *life coaching*, *intervention*, *personal empowerment*, or some other new-and-improved label—is big business in North America, and it continues to burgeon. As Western culture drifts away from the Creator’s design for human life and community, the intrapersonal and interpersonal effects of our first parents’ original rebellion against God, the one who made them for friendship with himself and gave them everything they could possibly need and more, are becoming more overt all the time. These effects include depression; burnout; international conflict; intergenerational conflict; interracial conflict; marital conflict; class conflict; church conflict; anxiety; fear; behavioral patterns that are simultaneously self-centered and self-destructive; pornography and other forms of sexual exploitation; senseless cruelty and wanton violence in war zones, urban streets, and suburban school campuses; and the list could go on.

As this list implies, the need for counseling—for what older generations of pastors called “the cure of souls”—is as evident in the contemporary church as it is in the culture at large. The shelves of Christian bookstores groan under the weight of publications that promise a religious solution to a wide spectrum of dysfunctions, addictions, and distresses, from anorexia to obesity, from timid insecurity to brash abrasiveness, from chaotic disorder and lack of self-discipline to paralyzing inhibition and driven rigidity. Church staffs expand to include caregivers with specialized education and credentials that evoke confidence in those who limp, wounded or

wayward or both, to Christ's people and their shepherds in search of relief—sometimes even at the cost of repentance.

So why add one more counseling book to your local bookstore's shelves or (we hope!) to Amazon.com's seemingly infinite online inventory? Whether you are a pastor shepherding a congregation of a hundred or a thousand, a layperson to whom others look for spiritual guidance with personal problems and growth in godliness, or simply a follower of Jesus seeking his grace to persevere in faith and faithfulness in a miserable situation, Elyse Fitzpatrick and I want to lay before you a provocative claim: the cross of Christ and the gospel that proclaims it really are "the power of God for salvation [comprehensive rescue] to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). In that cross, on which occurred the execution of God's Son, lies hidden "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:18–24). And in that cross lies the power both to liberate hearts that have been caught in seemingly unbreakable cycles of defeat and to instill hope that *change can actually happen* in us, in our relationships, and in those whom we love fiercely and resent intensely at the same time.

We believe that the cross of Christ exposes both our own and our counselees' utter helplessness and unworthiness. Each of us rightfully deserves the guilty verdict and divine wrath that Jesus bore in our place on that cross. Therefore, when we take the cross seriously, we find our pride, our self-satisfaction, and our smug resentment toward or contempt for others shattered into a thousand pieces.

But the cross also exposes another very surprising truth: the holy sovereign Lord whose authority we have defied and whose glory we have deflected to unworthy rivals *was willing to endure the judgment* that his own impeccable justice pronounced upon us. The cross declares that we are loved with an intensity that defies our capacity to comprehend, not because we are intrinsically lovable but because God is intrinsically love. These are the twin messages of the cross—brutal honesty about our guilt and impotence and the glorious assurance of our welcome by the Father in his beloved Son.

Together they pack divine power, through the Holy Spirit of God, to pry our affections loose from enslaving patterns of self-defense and self-indulgence and to set our hearts free to run, by grace alone through faith alone, toward the goal, “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

Does it sound too simplistic to claim that in the cross of Christ and in the surprising combination of ego-smashing humility and despair-smashing confidence that trust in the gospel produces lies the power to set struggling people free? Can the cross really free men and women from addictive appetites, whether physical or mental, cut through hearts hardened and turned poisonous by long years of bitter grudge-bearing and blame-shifting, and “turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers” (Mal. 4:6)? Can it make self-absorbed husbands into sacrificial servant leaders (Eph. 5:25–33)? Can it make defiant or untrusting wives into daughters of the King, set free to glorify their Lord through “respectful and pure conduct,” adorned in “the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit” (1 Pet. 3:2–4)? Is the gospel *really* a panacea—a cure-all—or is it just one more “medicine show” product, hyped by claims that no elixir could ever fulfill?

We believe that when God the Creator provides a cure-all, it really cures all, and that when he sent his eternal Son as redeemer, he set in motion a new creation power that will eventually eradicate both the sin-twisted self-centeredness of our hearts and the sin-infected wounds that we have inflicted on one another. We believe that the church’s pastors, elders, spiritual caregivers, and members must embrace and rest in the truth that Christ is the one “in whom are hidden *all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:2–3)—yes, all! And we believe that this reality is profoundly relevant to the way Christian counselors address the struggles of those who come to them for help.

*Preface*

So we invite you to join us in a venture of exploration to discover the power to defeat sin and sadness, conflict and bitterness, and self-pity and self-contempt, not by walking *beyond* the gospel that first brought us into the favor and family of God but rather by moving more deeply *into* that same gospel. And we invite you to notice the many ways in which the inspired human authors of God's inerrant Word, the Bible, bring their readers back, again and again, to what Jesus has done for us through his obedient life and sinless sacrifice. They address a whole spectrum of interpersonal conflicts and intrapersonal captivities. Our prayer is that you will join us as we point hurting, guilty, trapped people away from ourselves and toward the only Savior who can rescue them not only from sin's condemning guilt and penalty but also from its tyrannizing, paralyzing grip.

Dennis E. Johnson



## CHAPTER SIX

# The Gospel and Our Sanctification

*And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.*

NEHEMIAH 8:10

WE LIVE AT A TIME in which there are more opportunities for fun and enjoyment than ever before. We have multitudinous options for entertainment and vacations, and many people live as though the whole purpose of life can be summed up in one thought: carefree retirement. Have you noticed that although there seems to be a lot of fun activity, there is very little true joy? We are amusing ourselves to death and coming up empty and joyless every time.

Further, in a strangely convoluted<sup>1</sup> desire to reach the unchurched, many churches have mimicked in their ministries the world's emphases on amusement. Skits, comic sermons, and feather-weight vignettes masquerade as truth, while the souls of "seekers" thirst for a drink of living water and wonder if this is really all there is. Boredom is the great evil that must be avoided at all costs even though someone must have asked at least once, "How many 'Top Ten' jokes can one hear without having to stifle a yawn?" We think it would be safe to say that many people who attend this kind of church may be categorized as Happy Moralists.

On the other hand, there is also a vibrant though sober church that can be identified as serious and disdainful of the airier versions of church-lite. This church is truth-driven and assumes that there are serious realities, particularly about sin and obligation, that must be

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taken to heart and pondered by “the elect.” These dear saints would have an unstated fear about too much joy or happiness and might suspect that too much smiling might lead to frivolousness. We think it would be safe to assume that we’d find the Sad Moralist here.

Where Happy Moralists need to grow in their understanding of the depths of God’s demands and their utter failure to fulfill them, Sad Moralists are tempted to spend their days in mourning and self-condemnation. Even though each type is very different in religious orientation, the Happy Moralist and the Sad Moralist might be surprised to learn that they are alike in at least one way: *they both have something to learn from the gospel.*

The Happy Moralist needs to see the depths of sacrificial suffering that his cavalier self-righteous sin caused the Lamb. The Sad Moralist needs to see the depths of sacrificial suffering that his sober, self-righteous sin caused the Lamb. Both need to see themselves as sinful and flawed. The Happy Moralist needs to be humbled by a clear view of his laxity and self-love. The Sad Moralist needs to be humbled by the discovery that even his self-righteousness and self-loathing are symptoms of a heart too proud to abandon its self-reliance and surrender to the grace of Christ. And both also need to see themselves as loved and welcomed.

Perhaps the Happy Moralist won’t struggle with God’s love as the Sad Moralist will, but that is only because he’s missed the “sinful-and-flawed” portion of the gospel. He needs to be awed by God’s mercy. The Sad Moralist, on the other hand, must see that Christ’s righteousness is sufficient and believe that faith is all that he has to offer (and even his faith is given to him). He is missing the “loved-and-welcomed” part of the gospel. He, too, needs to be awed by God’s mercy.

There’s another facet of the gospel that’s missing from both their lives. Neither lives in the joy that is to be their strength. The true joy that is the core of their strength in the war against sin is missing, so the Happy Moralist won’t have the impetus to put down the remote and follow hard after God. The Sad Moralist will feel burdened

by his sin and estranged from the God who commands joy at his presence. *Rejoice? About what? Is this something else I need to feel guilty about?* he might wonder.

## GOSPELIZED SANCTIFICATION

Before we tell you exactly what gospelized sanctification looks like, let's be sure that you understand what we mean when we use the term *sanctification*. Sanctification or being *set apart* is to be made holy or consecrated for God's use. It describes the transformation of the believer into the image of Christ. Wise pastors of a bygone time captured its biblical meaning well when they described it as "the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness."<sup>2</sup>

Sanctification may actually be spoken of in two ways. First, we might say that our sanctification is definitive, that is, already accomplished in time, as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 1:2, where he refers to the church at Corinth as "those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (see also Acts 20:32; 26:18). At the very moment that the Holy Spirit replaces our dead, stony hearts with living hearts of flesh so that we trust in Christ, the Spirit begins to apply to us the liberating effects of Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul therefore tells Christians that we have "died to sin" and that we have been raised in Christ to "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:1–4). In other words, when he drew us to trust Jesus, God's Spirit decisively, definitively separated us from sin's tyrannical grip and placed us securely in the Father's holy hands.<sup>3</sup> That's astounding, isn't it?

Second, we might say that sanctification is progressive. *Progressive sanctification* is the term used to define what occurs in us day by day as God transforms us by the work of the Holy Spirit. In progressive sanctification, we become in actuality what he has declared is already true of us. To use common parlance, we are *already* sanctified, but our sanctification is *not yet* perfectly evident in our daily lives. Both the *already* and the *not yet* are true of us.

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Although we are still living in the *not yet*, if we are in Christ, we *are* progressing, we *are* changing.

Perhaps the change is as yet minuscule; maybe you don't see it in yourself at all, but you can be sure that if you are his, you *are* being changed. For some, sanctification is painfully slow; for others the process seems to be making a more speedy headway.<sup>4</sup> But however slow our progression seems, we can be sure that we are "being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18). Although our progress may seem painfully slow (especially if we are Sad Moralists), it too is a guaranteed work of the Holy Spirit in us.

Here's how author and seminary president Bryan Chapell defined progressive sanctification:

Sanctification is the work of God's grace in us that allows us to receive the benefits and power of Jesus, which in turn enable us to overcome the evil that can so burden our hearts.<sup>5</sup>

As you can see, sanctification is anchored in our union with Christ. It is possible only through the benefits of the gospel. We cannot and will not ever become genuinely godly men and women unless God's grace has enabled us to receive the "benefits and power of Jesus," the only truly holy person who ever lived. Only in union with him will we be able to progressively grow into holiness, "to overcome the evil" that's still part of our "not yet."

Up until this point, most Christians would agree with what we've said. They'd agree that sanctification is both definitive and progressive. That it's both the *already* and the *not yet*. They would agree that sanctification is only possible through our union with Christ and that it is accomplished by a work of God's grace as he transforms us into the image of the Son.

But the question that must arise now is one of method or mode. We are all agreed that we want to grow in godliness and that it's God's plan to grow us in this way, but exactly how does

that happen? Are there certain perspectives that we should adopt that will enable us to more fully experience this grace? Are there other perspectives that will tend to make the going slower, more difficult? Here's where gospelized sanctification will change our perspective.

The gospel tells us that Jesus' life has been given for us and to us. His holy desires have been implanted in our hearts. We're one with him through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Meditating on these truths will energize our pursuit of godliness because our belief that we are in union with Christ "is the key to overcoming sin in our lives. . . . When any of us lose sight of our privileged position as a result of our union with Christ, we lose our ability to resist sin."<sup>6</sup>

Our union with Christ should refresh our hearts with joy and strengthen our faith to enable us to fight for holiness. Realizing that he has loved us so much that he has made us one with himself should engender fervent love in our hearts, resulting in fervent obedience.

The truth of the gospel—that we are "in" him—isn't meant only for those who are beginning the Christian life. It is meant for all of us *every day*, whether we've walked with him for a few weeks or many decades. In fact, it's such an important factor about who we are that it was one of Paul's favorite themes. Here are two references from Paul meant to encourage us as we pray that God makes us "worthy of his calling" and that we might fulfill "every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power" (2 Thess. 1:11). Please resist the urge to skim over these passages if you are already familiar with them. They are given here so you will believe that change really is possible.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the *grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus*, that in every way you were *enriched in him* in all speech and all knowledge . . . as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will *sustain you to the end, guiltless* in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called *into the fellowship of his Son*, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor. 1:4–6, 8–9)

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*In him* also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by *putting off the body of the flesh*, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which *you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God*, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, *God made alive together with him*, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. (Col. 2:11–14)

As you reflect on those passages, can you see how important your union with Christ—with his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and ongoing incarnation—is? This is where what we are calling “gospelized sanctification” differs from other methods of change. Although all true Christians want to grow in godliness, many of us miss the truth that *the gospel is as necessary to our sanctification as it was to our initial justification*. Without the gospel, without drenching our souls in our union with Christ, the quest for moral improvement becomes just that: another quest for self-improvement doomed to futile failure or, worse, arrogant success. But in the light of the gospel, because of all that Jesus has already done, sanctification becomes another sweet evidence of his grace working in us, making us more and more delighted by his abiding presence and less and less enamored with the world’s enticements. Only the extravagant love shown us in the gospel has the power to draw us away from other loves. The beauty of his grace makes everything else seem listless by comparison.

### DO NOT GRIEVE

During the time of the Jews’ exile from the Promised Land, while they were still in bondage under Persian rule, a group of Jews was permitted to return to Israel to rebuild the temple and the walls of the city. For nearly seventy years the nation had been in captivity, excluded from temple worship and the law. They had felt the judgment of God. God’s displeasure wasn’t some detached topic they studied in a textbook. They had personally experienced his anger at

their sin. Many of their family members had been slaughtered. They had been uprooted from their homes, bound as slaves. They had lost their nation. Children had lived their entire lives in a foreign country, never having known their homeland or freedom. They knew what God's judgment tasted like. He had taught them to be sorry for sin. But now, by God's sovereign grace (Ezra 1:1), exiles were being allowed to return to their homeland and rebuild it.

In 515 BC, after quite a struggle the temple was finally rebuilt, and after that the walls around the city were completed. The Levites along with their leaders, Nehemiah and Ezra, gathered the people together to hear the law. When the people heard the law and understood how they had sinned against the Lord, they were grieved. Again, they were people who had been taught by experience how dreadful the consequences of sin are. They were afraid. But because the day was a holy day, a day of dedication to the Lord, the people were warned, "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength. . . . Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved" (Neh. 8:10–11).

Although grieving over sin would seem apropos, this wasn't to be a day for sorrow. In fact, grieving on this day would have been sin itself because God is both immanent and holy, and in his presence is "fullness of joy," and at his right hand are "pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11). Grieving at this point would have been an affront to his kindness. It would have impugned his goodness and slandered his love. He was with them; he had restored and forgiven them. Grieving would ignore what he had done and would focus all their attention on what they had done or failed to do. And it would also have drained from the people the very joy they would need if they were to grow in obedience.

## MANAGE YOUR SORROW

God commanded his people to corporately mourn over sin only one day a year, on the Day of Atonement (which, in some ways, reminds us of Good Friday). On that day the people were commanded to

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fast both from food and from work. The high priest would appear before the Lord with the blood of animals and with two goats, one that would be slaughtered and the other to be led out into the wilderness. The people knew that blood was being shed to atone for their sin, and they knew that a goat would be abandoned to wilderness wandering and ultimate death for their iniquity. It was a solemn day of complete rest from labor, reflection on personal sin, sobriety at the necessity of the death of animals in their place, and celebration of God's merciful provision. But it was followed by the Feast of Tabernacles, a weeklong time of fellowship and rejoicing at God's providential supply (Lev. 23:26–43).

Does it surprise you that God commands affliction of soul on only one day annually? If you are a Sad Moralist, it might seem as though a life of self-affliction or mourning defines spirituality. In Matthew 5:4, our Lord promises blessedness—deep happiness—to those who mourn over sin, because the end of that mourning is comfort, not ongoing self-flagellation. Yes, we are to be deeply grieved by our sin, but we must manage our grief well lest it become another form of meritorious work.<sup>7</sup> Godly sorrow for sin is appropriate, but sad moralism and endless self-affliction will never motivate us to live godly lives. No, only joy will strengthen us for the war we must fight against sin.

Sanctification is never advanced by self-focused grief or guilt. It is energized by joy and driven by love.<sup>8</sup> This is the distinction that gospelized sanctification emphasizes. Only a remembrance of the gospel will free us from our habitual grief and guilt. Only the gospel can implant the joy and love in our hearts that will free, motivate, and inspire us.

### REJOICE IN THE LORD

The exiles who had returned to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem were to see what that day of remembering the law and rejoicing in God's goodness meant about what kind of God they served. Rather than being swallowed up by our grief or ignoring God's law and living



for temporal comforts or amusements, we, along with them, are to know the joy that is “founded on the feeling of communion with the Lord, on the consciousness that we have in the Lord, a God long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth. . . . This joy is to be to them . . . a strong citadel or refuge, because the Almighty is their God.”<sup>9</sup>

Our ongoing rehearsal of the weight of God’s law, the depth of our sin, and the generosity of his mercy should produce within us a “feeling of communion” with him, a responsive joy that guards our hearts when either temptation to laxity or temptation to sad moralism calls. We can whisper to our souls: *He’s here with me. He loves me. He knows my weakness and failure and yet he’s in union with me. Who could imagine such love? It causes me to overflow with joy!*

The knowledge of such long-suffering or abundant goodness would crush us if we didn’t know that it was *for us*, sinful and flawed as we are. The realization that his love is never ending is a balm to our souls, bringing the joy, comfort, and assurance that is our very lifeblood as we fight for holiness. When we face the uphill battle to grow in our sanctification, we must remember that we are sinful and flawed, but we are loved and welcomed. There is great joy in realizing that even though our sin is much deeper than we’ll ever grasp, God sees every bit of it and yet loves us.

Nehemiah writes that joy functions as a strong citadel or refuge for us. When we are tempted to give in to despair, to give up to self-indulgence or apathy, we have a place of refuge that will protect us from the attacks of a battered conscience. When we read the Word or hear a strong sermon that convicts our hearts, our conscience is apt to begin its attack on our souls. “Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger?” (Nah. 1:6). We are convicted of sin, we mourn over and confess our sin, and yet conscience doesn’t give up. It continues to beat us. “You’re not properly sorry. You’re such a disappointment. God is ashamed of you and angry.”

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How are we to fight against the accusations of our conscience? How can we silence conscience's condemning voice? We take refuge *from God in God*. We quiet our conscience by remembering, "The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him" (Nah. 1:7). We send the law (as means of obtaining God's favor) away, as Martin Luther wisely counsels us: "Send Moses away, with his law, to those who are complacent, proud and obstinate and in these terrors and this anguish lay hold upon Christ, who was crucified and died for our sins."<sup>10</sup>

We remember that the gospel tells us that we don't have any weapons of our own. We have no righteousness, no strength, and no faith to protect us from God's just indignation. We are sinful and flawed. And yet, we don't have to protect ourselves from a holy God because he knows our sin and yet has poured all of his indignation on his Son and has clothed us in his righteousness. He not only knows of our sin because he knows everything, but his perfect Son also knows our sin because "for our sake he made *him to be sin* who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). Think of that! We've got the righteousness of God!

When our conscience won't quiet down as it should, when we've taken ourselves over and over to Calvary in repentance, we've got to declare to our self-condemning hearts, "My righteousness isn't made up of my repentance, my good record, or even my faith. No, I've got the righteousness of God. If that's not enough for you, you proud, demanding conscience, nothing will be! Now, silence yourself before the love of this great God. Rather than spend time thinking about your demands, I now choose to rejoice in all God's done for me."

Our enemy, Satan, wants to point out our sin so that we will curse God "to his face" (Job 1:11). He wants to strip our confidence from us and make us go through life mourning, sad, self-focused, and self-condemning. He wants to make God seem unjust, angry, demanding, and hateful in our eyes. The Devil hates joy. He has never tasted true happiness. Joy at what our Savior has done infuriates him, so he accuses us "day and night" (Rev. 12:10).

How can we respond to his accusations? We can respond by the “blood of the Lamb” and the “word of [our] testimony” (Rev. 12:11). When he viciously attacks, what shall we say? “Yes, it’s true that I am a worthless sinner, but I’ve been given the righteousness of God by the blood of the Lamb. My only testimony is that I’m completely loved even though I don’t deserve it. Therefore I will rejoice because you have been thrown down and have no right to remind me of something that God no longer remembers! My Savior is worth praising and I will praise him now. You have reminded me to do this!”

The joy that this good news brings will keep us safe. It is a strong fortress; it is meant to protect us as we rest securely as God “quiets us by his love” (Zeph. 3:17). Sorrow for sin is good, as far as it goes, but it will not protect us from our conscience or from our adversary’s cruel attack. Hear these words from Nehemiah again: “Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Neh. 8:10). Do not be afraid that freedom from grief will make you lax. We are in union with Jesus Christ; all that he has is ours. He will carefully watch over our souls, convicting us and comforting us as he deems best. We do not need to take on his work of making ourselves righteous but, rather, we can rejoice in what he has already done.

“A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones” (Prov. 17:22). The gospel makes us strong and spiritually healthy. The Great Physician has diagnosed our problem as being worse than we would ever dare to imagine, but he has also supplied all the medicine we need. The gospel is “good” medicine for our souls. It makes us strong and joyful. We have been loved and welcomed. Our utter dependence on him and our joy in the realization of how needy we are cures us of our sinful pride and makes our souls healthy.

## THE RIGHTEOUS SHALL LIVE BY FAITH

Many Christians know that the Reformation was born, at least in part, because the Holy Spirit had illumined Martin Luther’s heart to

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understand the verse “The righteous shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11, both quoting Hab. 2:4). As a conscientious Augustinian monk, Luther, the quintessential Sad Moralist, was radically transformed by the realization that “no one is justified before God by the law” (Gal. 3:11), but rather that the righteousness that pleases God is the perfect obedience of Christ, received through faith alone as a free, unearned gift by those who live by faith in God’s Son and God’s promises. It’s axiomatic that we begin our Christianity by faith in the righteousness that he supplies through Jesus Christ. What most of us miss is that we progress in our sanctification the same way.

What is the faith that we need to hang on to as we seek to grow in godliness? That Jesus Christ has fulfilled every point of the law, that he also suffered torment as a lawbreaker on Calvary, that his Father poured out every drop of his righteous wrath on him, and that the resurrection declares the Father’s approval of Christ’s complete righteousness—divine approval in which we now share by the gift of his grace. We must believe (and continue to “beat it into our heads daily,” as Luther once said) that God is perfectly satisfied in Christ’s sacrifice for us, that we have obtained full adoption, and that God is pleased with us and calls us his “beloved.” These truths will stimulate joy and expand our faith.

So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore *strive to enter that rest*. (Heb. 4:9–11)

The striving that will command our energy is a striving to enter into rest, a striving to live “by faith in the Son of God, who loved . . . and gave himself” for us (Gal. 2:20). Most of us think that our efforts should be focused solely on godly living. While this is partly true, it’s not the whole story. We’ve also got to focus our efforts on “striving” to *enter into the rest* he has provided for us. If our souls are not fully resting in his love and welcome we won’t have the energy we need to fight for godliness. Christianity will be utterly exhausting. This

rest of soul is found only in the gospel message: we are sinful and flawed, yet loved and welcomed.

## THE ROLE OF THE LAW IN OUR SANCTIFICATION

If we live by faith in Jesus Christ rather than by faith in ourselves and our works, we'll know the joy that protects us from accusation and we'll live in the love that will constrain true obedience. Since we no longer view the law as the means to obtain righteousness, since it no longer has the power to either harm or threaten us, we may now use it as it's meant to be used. *We will be free to delight in the law because we are freed from the power of the law to curse us.*

All of the wonderful obligations of the law will then help us on our way toward godly living and sanctification. Since we cannot be made any more perfect in God's eyes than we already are, we are now free to make the law serve us. It will serve us by making us more thankful for Christ when we see how we fail to obey it, and it will serve us by showing us how to love God and our neighbor as we long to. Rather than viewing the law as our enemy, we'll learn to say along with our Savior, "I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:8). From this position of security and rest in God, the psalmist wrote:

The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the testimony of the LORD is sure,  
making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the LORD are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is pure,  
enlightening the eyes;  
the fear of the LORD is clean,  
enduring forever;  
the rules of the LORD are true,  
and righteous altogether.  
More to be desired are they than gold,  
even much fine gold;

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sweeter also than honey  
and drippings of the honeycomb.  
Moreover, by them is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward. (Ps. 19:7–11)

When the law is kept where it belongs—as a means to draw us to Christ and to show us how to love—it is delightful and causes us to rejoice. When it goes beyond this and attacks our conscience, we must silence its threatenings by remembering the gospel and putting the law back in its place. The law is a light on our path, but it is not *the* path, and it cannot impel us toward holiness nor make us love God.

### SAD PASTOR JACK

Although Jack wasn't raised in a believing home, he has loved God from his earliest teen years. A serious and bright student, Jack quickly came to realize that he was called to serve as a pastor. It was to this end that he went to college and seminary. Upon graduation and marriage, Jack landed in full-time ministry, but over time he grew discouraged; he understood deep truth but found himself unable to live out that truth, and that is still where Jack finds himself today.

He is frequently snappish and judgmental with his wife and people in the church office. He continually feels bad about his behavior and tries to control himself, but even when he is able to avoid outbursts, he still fumes inwardly. When he reads (or preaches on) passages about how we are to love one another, the law enslaves, crushes, and terrifies him. He feels guilty, and his guilt causes his anger and faultfinding to grow.

The guiltier he feels about his lack of love, the more unloving he becomes. He labors to become more loving and patient, to punctiliously fulfill the law, but still his anger and self-condemnation crowd out all his good intentions. If you ask Jack how he would characterize his faith, he could tell you all about justification by faith and progressive sanctification. He knows all the right answers, but he has forgotten the gospel.

Some time ago, during a particularly stressful situation, Jack was overcome by feelings of self-condemnation and worthlessness. He no longer had the ability to handle all the problems in the church while trying to suppress or answer his feelings of self-loathing. He didn't have the energy to get up and preach, and his hands shook continually. Observing this, the deacon board decided that Jack was depressed and in need of a leave of absence.

One thing led to another, and soon Jack found himself in a residential treatment center for the severely depressed. Once the therapists at the center had time to get to know him, they concluded that he wasn't deeply depressed, so they put him on medication and released him.

What does Jack need? Does he need medicine? Does he need someone to tell him that the church abused him? Does he need to learn to love himself so that he can love his neighbor? No, of course not. Okay then, but does he need to simply put off anger and put on kindness? Yes, he needs to do this, but not before he has soaked himself in the truth about *what Jesus Christ has already done on his behalf*. He needs to refocus his mind continually on the truth that God loved him and sent his Son to be the propitiation for his sin. Until he does that, until the joy of the Lord becomes his strength, the biblical mandate to love his neighbor will be just as out of reach as it always has been, and just as condemning to his already guilt-ridden conscience.

Jack's life is changing now because he has committed himself to constant fellowship with other pastors who are mentoring and counseling him to see himself in the light of the gospel. They are reminding him of his true identity. Jack is a sinner, but he is also loved immeasurably. Being with other brothers who both confess their sins and lovingly confront his anger and faultfinding is helping Jack to avoid his old habitual self-condemnation. He is learning to encourage himself with words of grace from the gospel. Because he is beginning to realize that he is irrevocably loved and welcomed, his slavery to the law has no more power to condemn or terrorize.

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His friends are teaching him to see that the hours he spends in self-recrimination are not only wrong but also futile. Sadness won't impel obedience; only love and joy can do that. Like the Israelites who were commanded to afflict their souls only one day and then rejoice for a week, for every one day Jack spends looking at his sin and failures, he is to spend a week rejoicing in God's mercy and provision. Although the thoughts of God's love for him used to make him only more ashamed and guilty, now God's love for him serves to bolster his joy.

Jack is now battling on another front too: he is battling the self-condemnation that he feels because he doesn't have as much joy as he thinks he should have. When he starts down that well-worn path to despair, he will need to remind himself, "Of course I don't have joy. I'm sinful and flawed. But I won't get joy by looking at myself. Instead, I'll think about how I've been loved and welcomed in Christ. I'll direct my thoughts away from myself and onto my Savior. If it pleases him, he'll fill me with joy. If it doesn't, that's okay because my righteousness doesn't depend on me anyway. I'm going to praise him instead of thinking about myself."

As he is "renewed in the spirit" of his mind (Eph. 4:23), Jack is beginning to put off his old way of life. His hypercritical judgment of others and of himself is being replaced by a willingness to admit his sin and be patient with others. He sees more clearly that he and they are equally sinful and flawed, yet equally loved and welcomed. He is also seeing himself and his Savior in an entirely new light. He is drinking in great draughts of mercy and dispensing it to others and to himself. The joy of his salvation is gradually growing and shoving aside all his anger, self-condemnation, and self-righteousness, and he is becoming a joyful, merciful, free man.

### LOOKING TO JESUS

In one sense, we are all just like Jack. We all long to approve of ourselves and want to use the law (either God's law or our own standards) as the way to do that. Then, when our inconsistencies



become so glaring that we can no longer avoid them, we slip into some form of self-indulgence. Like Jack, we could fall into faultfinding, self-righteousness, and its eventual self-loathing, or we could just become apathetic and decide to spend more time pampering ourselves in some way.

We are all sinful and flawed. The only answer to our slavery both to sin and the law is our Savior. The writer of Hebrews encouraged his readers to lay aside their sin by “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the *joy* that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

Although Jesus Christ was perfect and perfectly loved doing his Father’s will, joy was a factor in his obedience. He was looking ahead—past the cross, past the shame, past the suffering—to the joy. What was his joy? Simply this: that he would be seated at the right hand of the throne of God, clothed in flesh, *presenting his bride* to his Father. He found his joy in his bride. *You are his joy*. He suffered so that he might bring you the joy of knowing his love and welcome, and he prayed that his joy might be in you and that your joy might be full (John 15:11).

We all want to grow in godliness. We all want to obey the law and know that our lives are glorifying to our Lord. We won’t get there by looking solely at the law and then hoping that our sorrow will motivate us to change. No, Nehemiah’s words are just as apropos for us today as they were when Jerusalem was rebuilt: “Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Neh. 8:10).

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### PURSUING COUNSEL FROM THE CROSS

1) Luke 2:10–12 reads, “And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’” Why is this Savior described as a “great joy”? How does the baby in the manger create joy in your heart? Why did the Spirit have Luke record the nativity scene in just this way?

2) What words would you use to describe your Christian walk? Would *joy* be among them? Why or why not?

3) John 17:13 (part of Jesus’ prayer) reads, “But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.” Why did Jesus pray about your joy?

4) When you recognize sin in your life, how do you motivate yourself to change? After reading this chapter, how do you think you should motivate yourself?

5) Would you say that you are a Happy Moralist or a Sad Moralist? What does a Happy Moralist need to see? What does a Sad Moralist need? How are they alike or different?

6) Summarize what you have learned in this chapter in four or five sentences.



“Discover the power to defeat sin and sadness, conflict and bitterness, self-pity and self-contempt, not by walking beyond the gospel that first brought us into the favor and family of God but rather by moving more deeply into that same gospel.”

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