

Grounding your Disciple in Gospel Realities (Part One)

By Jay Wegter

Gospel faith is not solely our entrance into the Christian life, it is the daily source of our being *built up* and *established in our faith*. “And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (**Acts 20:32**). “Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, *so* walk in Him, having been firmly rooted *and now* being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, *and* overflowing with gratitude” (**Col 2:6-7**). Therefore, in our disciple-making relationships, we must learn to excel at *re-speaking* the gospel to one another. Bringing each believer to maturity is the corporate task of the body of Christ (**Col 1:28-29**).

The sanctifying and comforting benefits of knowing our identity in Christ is continually realized as we keep preaching the gospel to ourselves and to each other. Victory as an overcomer involves keeping our identity in Christ in view. We should always be matching His all-sufficient Savior-hood with our sinner-ship—always dwelling upon how His redeeming work is a perfect fit for our ruin due to sin. “For it was fitting [*in God’s redemptive plan*] for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens” (**Heb 7:26**). Reckoning who we are in Christ means that our identity in Him will exert an ever-greater sway upon life’s daily choices. Since the true believer is Christ’s sheep, freeman, son, beholder, heir, and overcomer, it means that as we mature in Christ we are *becoming what we really are!*

Regularly reckoning our true identity in Christ is a spiritual discipline vital to spiritual growth, and essential to spiritual victory. Our walk of faith involves presenting to the eye of faith that Christ is our source of: *sonship, status, acceptance, adoption, heir-ship, power, truth, fellowship, love, wisdom, righteousness, and sanctification*. “But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord’ ” (**1 Cor 1:30**).

Our identity in Christ is a battle front because the gospel is utterly counter-intuitive. Everything in our natural reason loathes being an object of pity and mercy—we want our worth, importance, respectability, and acceptance to flow from our own virtues and achievements. We desire to ‘be in charge of’ our own lovability, adequacy, and security. We were born with a satanic religion of self-help which says in effect, “*The more perfect I am the more love I am worthy of—I can do it!*” That’s the world, the flesh and the devil courting us with the ‘boastful pride of life’ (**1 Jn 2:16**).

Regarding the gospel’s counter-intuitive nature, think of God’s redemptive plan—that Almighty God should take pleasure in bruising His Son in our place. “But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting *Him* to grief; if He would render Himself *as* a guilt offering” (**Is 53:10a**). Consider that the Father treated Christ as the worst criminal who ever lived so that believing sinners could be adopted as true children of God. All of this was necessary so that repentant sinners could be brought to heaven without God striking a single blow to them in wrath. It is amazing beyond words that the Son should be sent to earth to reap the eternal consequences of what elect sinners had sown, and to provide the perfect obedience they could not supply. “He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (**2 Cor 5:21**).

Thinking this way does not come natural to us—to consent to let Another, Christ, work for me and to reckon that He has earned every blessing I enjoy is something we must learn to practice by faith. I must train my mind to think this way by preaching the glorious gospel to myself and to my disciple. Only the word of His grace, the gospel, can cut new ‘grooves’ in my thought life. Only by feeding on the gospel can we reckon, as a habit, that our acceptance and fellowship with God are grounded upon who Christ is and what He has done as our Substitute.

As we feed on the gospel, divine grace increasingly becomes part of our reasoning processes. And, as a result, our affections are increasingly conformed to the precious things of God. It is a blessed exercise to *cut these new channels* in our thought life because gospel-reasoning (grace-based thinking) over time becomes a way of re-educating the mind and affections (renewing our minds—**Romans 12:2**). By means of ‘gospel reasoning’, we gain the sweet optimism that God desires to meet with us at the throne of grace for fellowship and intimacy (**Heb 4:15-16**). In addition, the grace-based believer is convinced that God is glorified in giving His people endless installments of mercy, grace, and love. Divine grace then becomes a central subject in our meditations; and not for our comfort alone, for, the grace of God in the gospel teaches me about my completeness in Christ (**Col 3:10**). As such, the gospel is able to lift me out of self-concern in order to be burdened on behalf of others. Thus, the gospel in giving me joy in God, channels this overflowing joy into care for others (**1 Jn 4:19**).

The gospel is vital to the ‘treasure principle.’ As a man thinks in his heart so is he (**Prov 23:7**). The mind of a man always returns to what he esteems as his treasure. No wonder Jonathan Edwards described true religion as existing primarily in the affections. In Matthew chapter six Jesus drove home the treasure principle, explaining in just a few words how life-directing and dominating a man’s treasure really is. A man *reviews his treasure, displays his treasure, adds to his treasure, speaks of his treasure, follows his treasure, and is ruled by his treasure* (**Mt 6:19-21**).

Preaching the gospel to ourselves is a spiritual discipline or habit that is to be learned. This discipline is not simply entertaining general thoughts of Christ and grace. The discipline of preaching the gospel to one’s self and to one’s disciple involves specific ways that Christ’s redemptive work answers our need and ruin, and our yearning and longing. To preach the gospel to oneself is to always be about the business of rejoicing in Christ’s fitness to answer in Himself our spiritual poverty, ruin, yearning, and need. These points of contact between our need and Christ’s sufficiency may be designated “access points” of gospel application. By that is meant that the wealth of Christ is perfectly congruent with the expansiveness of my need.

In this paper, part one of the article, we will look at the first three of six gospel “access points.”

- 1.) *The Gospel is the VOICE of Christ’s love to His sheep*
- 2.) *The Gospel is the VERDICT of God’s justice at the cross*
- 3.) *The Gospel is the VALUE of justification by faith through grace*

I. The Gospel is the VOICE of Christ’s love to His sheep

The true believer needs to know that he or she is beloved of the Lord. Christ as redeeming shepherd restores our ability to be taught of God (**Jn 6:45**). And, He grants to believers the relationship that was lost through original sin, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (**Lu 19:10**). Through regeneration, God’s Spirit renews our teach-ability and guide-

ability. “My sheep hear My voice, they follow Me” (**Jn 10:4, 16**). The sheep cherish their Savior as He is revealed in the gospel. Under the Spirit’s conviction, they were crushed over their sin—and by an act of divine grace they were enabled to ‘hear’ the voice of Christ in the Word of Grace, the gospel (**Jn 10:2-5, 16**). ‘Hearing’ His voice in the Word is a mark of belonging to Him as His beloved sheep.

The gospel is addressed to faith alone; not to the righteous, or the worthy, but to the guilty, the weary, the defiled, the helpless, the condemned, the broken, and the foolish. “*It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners*” (**Mk 2:17**). To “hear” Christ’s voice is to believe God’s testimony that there is love, mercy, righteousness, and cleansing for the defiled who entrust themselves to the Savior. The Father sent Christ to be the slain lamb—the propitiation for our sins (this is the epitome of love) (**1 Jn 4:9-10**). Christ’s love for us was there even while we were helpless enemies of God (**Rom 5:8**).

We refer to Christ’s love as His ‘voice’ because Christ’s love is not a bare proposition, it is personal and transforming. Christ takes up residence in His people by His Spirit. The ‘voice’ is Christ’s Word in the Scripture speaking to the newly created faith that has been planted in the bosom of His child by the new birth. This love is not theoretical for the believer. It is a reality that the believer experiences. “. . . And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (**Rom 5:5**). But, this awareness of His love is not merely a generalized sentiment that God loves us. It is joined to the comprehension that God has moved heaven and earth in the incarnation and the atoning death of His Son in order to purchase an eternal love relationship between His people and Himself. “. . . just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless” (**Eph 5:25-27**). Thus, the believer experiences Christ’s love by ongoing faith in the gospel. Christ manifests His love when the believer is dwelling upon, and contemplating God’s saving acts toward him in Christ (**Rom 15:13**).

Central to God’s plan to communicate His love to us is the doctrine of adoption (1 Jn 3:1). Through union with Christ, the believer is held in the Father’s heart of love (Eph 2:4). The Spirit of Christ is the ‘Spirit of sonship’—the indwelling Spirit produces in the believer the disposition and the consciousness that we are sons of God loved by the Father (**Rom 8:14-17; Gal 4:6-7**). To be focused upon the spiritual reality of your sonship in Christ totally conditions your behavior. By faith, the obedient believer *steps into*, and *walks in* his new life ‘script’ of sonship. All that God is toward me in Christ is the gospel reality which shapes and determines my entire course in life as His child.

To know His love is to be controlled by His love. To be the object of this ‘other worldly’ love (**1 Jn 3:1**) is to be transformed by that love. To be animated by this love is to be driven with a holy unction to pass on that love to God and to others. Receiving His love engenders the desire to reciprocate that love. “We love because He first loved us” (**1 Jn 4:10, 19**). Feeding on the gospel is the means by which we perceive and deepen our understanding of God’s love for us in Christ. We love God and the brethren as a reflex response to receiving God’s love for us in Christ. In this way His love for us keeps us from loving the world (**1 Jn 2:15-17**). Since salvation imparts a relationship of love; the believer has every warrant to go to God for love daily. We often go to God in prayer for our needs, for strength to fulfill our Christian duty, but do we go to God for love? We can and should

excel at this appropriation of His love. It is enlivening to our affection for God to do so. How radical is the rationality of the gospel; that Christ Himself is my eligibility for eternal divine love and favor.

II. The Gospel is the VERDICT of God's justice at the cross

The Christian needs to know that his Heavenly Father's unbending justice is fully satisfied on his behalf through Christ's atoning work. "It is finished" were Christ's last words from the cross (**Jn 19:30**). We must remember that the cross was a kind of *courtroom* in which the justice due the trampled law of God was addressed decisively. Absolute justice had to be accomplished in the case of the sinner's guilt before the sinner could be freely accepted by God. The sinner's transgressions had to be judged in the body and soul of Another—in our Messiah. Christ's work of propitiation was a verdict. He took the wrath of God due our sins and suffered under it in His own person (**1 Jn 4:10**).

Nothing can bring a person's conscience to a full stop—to a place of absolute peace and rest except the justice which satisfies God Almighty. And, nothing satisfies God on behalf of the sinner except the finished work of Christ. Therefore, under God's moral government, a person will never have a clear conscience until he hears, and believes by faith the verdict of God's justice accomplished at the cross (that is the gospel). "How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (**Heb 9:14**). But hearing that verdict and reckoning that verdict are two different matters. Receiving the liberating message of the cross is not a one-time event. Yes, salvation takes place at a point in time, but feeding on the verdict won at Calvary is a lifetime endeavor. Here is one of the reasons why that is so: *the conscience of man is 'wired' for strict justice—it is suspicious of mercy and compassion.* How true this is—the conscience of man is tied to law, to crime and punishment. It is like a private eye hired to collect dirt on you. It is remarkable how much emotional energy we dissipate trying to quiet our conscience with arguments: "I'm generous, considerate, a hard worker, well-liked, kind, a servant, I do my best, etc." But, one of the most common ways man seeks to 'bribe' and balance the conscience into silence is by comparing self to others. But, if the whole human race, outside of Christ, is on an 'escalator to hell', being a few steps above another morally does not change one's destiny—the whole thing is going downward into perdition (John MacArthur). The point being, every fleshly attempt to quiet conscience will ultimately fail.

The blood of Christ alone has the power to cleanse the conscience down to the smallest crevice (Heb 9:14) (*The Person of Christ*, A. A. Bonar). We need to preach the gospel to ourselves each day because we sin each day. There is no effective 'book keeping' for the conscience other than the blood of Christ. The comfort we need in order to serve, love, and worship will only be there if our consciences are clear. One preacher noted that if even one unresolved sin is circulating in the conscience it can kill your joy, numb your confidence before God, weaken your resolve to holiness, erode your hope of answered prayer, and shake your assurance of salvation. Is it any wonder that Paul claimed that he always made it his practice to keep a clear conscience! (**Acts 24:16**).

To preach the gospel to your self is to labor to have the verdict of the cross as the loudest verdict in the conscience. When the verdict of conscience is brought in line with the verdict of heaven—there is overflowing joy, peace, hope, and comfort. "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (**Rom 15:13**). But how many believers really enjoy this liberty of conscience on a daily basis? How many

Christians have as their goal to bring the conscience in line with the verdict of heaven at Calvary? We rob ourselves of comfort by our apathy on this point.

As we trod this vale of tears, what remains of indwelling sin acts up and defiles us. We fall to temptation and the guilt of sin throws mud in the eye of faith. We become temporarily blinded to God's verdict at the cross. God's decisive work through Christ at Calvary becomes remote. That's exactly when experience at preaching the gospel to ourselves is so valuable. We must enthrone the gospel in our conscience again so that the gospel is allowed to make the call (let the 'peace of Christ' umpire, *make the call*). "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful" (**Col 3:15**). If we don't return again to the freedom of conscience promised in the gospel, we sentence ourselves to be stuck in the futile activity of self-justification.

Remember, the Spirit is solution-oriented—He never tires of pointing to the blood. As one Puritan divine said: Guilt harasses us—robs our peace—accuses us—calls for a verdict. But how are we to tell or discern the convicting work of the Spirit from the accusing machinations of the devil? The answer is simple, the Spirit will always point to the blood so that we may repent, be pardoned, forsake the sin, and be restored to fellowship with the Lord. By contrast, the devil is like an irritating horsefly. He accuses without a solution. He wants the child of God to descend into fear, uncertainty, doubt, alienation, legal working, and despondency. Therefore, learn to preach the gospel to yourself and you will instinctively run to the atonement when you fail (**1 Jn 1:9**).

To draw near to God through His verdict at the cross is to have the Lord expose what He wants changed in our lives. Reckoning the verdict at Calvary has the effect of welcoming the Lord's examination of us, granting Him access to the soul so that He may rearrange the priorities of life and the affections of the heart. Many believers aren't sure they want to get that close to the Lord! To draw near to Christ through the gospel is not merely to seek comfort—it is to be examined by Him, and surrendered to Him—governed by His Word. This is of course why your conscience is very much a barometer of your intimacy with the Lord. For, the Spirit is constantly at work in that faculty in the believer. Our task therefore is to cooperate with His sanctifying purposes (**Phil 2:12-13; Jas 4:5**).

There is no exit out of the castle of self but by the gospel preached to self. As long as I listen to self instead of preaching the gospel to myself, I stay confined in the gray castle of self-absorption. What is the answer? Look to the cross again and embrace God's verdict there. Enthroned the gospel in your conscience as 'umpire' to make the call until you are able say to your conscience: God's verdict brings the light and cleansing I need today (**1 Jn 1:7-9**). The gospel preached is God's invitation to us to come out of our dank hiding places, returning into the sunlight of His fellowship (**1 Jn 1:6-9**).

III. The Gospel is the VALUE of justification by faith through grace

The true believer needs to know that his right-standing with God is carried unchangeably by Christ. In His incarnation and passion, Christ identified with our dilemma, ruin, and alienation from God. He became radically identified with us (yet without sin) that we might become radically identified with Him. Christ entered the great *cog works* of God's justice in order to be crushed for sinners. He lived the life of a perfect disciple—all to affect the most magnificent exchange in time or eternity. ". . . So that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (**2 Cor 5:21**).

The wonder of justification is that Christ traded places with us so that under God's moral government Christ might become 'officially' guilty of the sins of His people (Rom 3:24-26). My sin

was imputed to Christ so that He might bear it up to the cross and judge it in His own Person. “And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed” (1 Pet 2:24; 3:18). To be ‘justified in Christ’ is to have sin removed and to have Christ’s perfect righteousness given in its place. God is the ‘Architect’ of this great exchange which took place in our justification. He planned it in His eternal counsels, *having promised before times eternal* (Titus 1:2). Its purpose is to bring us all the way to God and to magnify the Godhead. To be justified through Christ is to be furnished for every good work, and to be fitted for communion with God, and ultimately to be prepared for endless life in His presence.

God’s work in justifying believers is ‘preemptive’ in this sense—God declares the believing sinner ‘pardoned and righteous’ ‘up front’—before good works. This is so significant. Because of our *lust for law* and works righteousness, God knew that we would approach progressive sanctification ‘legally’ (with the motive of trying to earn divine acceptance). But, the gospel order nips this in the bud, for it is God declaring us righteous up front (Rom 4:5-8). This order makes certain that the entire Christian life is ‘all of grace.’ “Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom 4:4-5). This means that the true Christian can pursue sanctification from the position of full acceptance because he is already pardoned and justified by God in Christ. This shapes all of our incentives for personal holiness; it always brings us back to an attitude of gratitude, rather than working for favor through our performance.

We have just seen that the grace of God in our justification is preemptive in ‘beating us to the punch’ in the matter of our good works. But it is also preemptive in another area as well—in the forgiveness of all of our sins (Col 2:13-14). God’s full and free forgiveness up front precedes our role in mortifying what remains of indwelling sin. The new covenant has a boundless provision for cleansing (Heb 8:12; 9:14). We must avail ourselves of this cleansing provision as often as needed. William Romaine reminds us that only pardon, and consciousness of that pardon, can ultimately cancel sin’s hold on us. Says Romaine, “No sin can be crucified in heart or in life unless it is first pardoned in the conscience.” His words are a fitting reminder that guilt cannot sanctify us. In fact, our resolve to pursue personal holiness is best activated by the gospel awareness that we have no guilt or condemnation in God’s sight! Only blood-bought pardon breaks sins’ chains.

Justification through Christ’s righteousness gives us a new identity. The believer ought to reason in this manner: “I have been given a new identity of sonship in Christ, therefore I reject the world’s offers to establish my identity through its offers. Yes, I have an earthly place of employment, a vocation and calling, but my gracious identity in Christ is who I really am.” Regarding this blood-bought identity, how true it is in practice, that the more in tune I am to the gospel, the more consistently I will live out my identity in Christ. This is precisely where the gospel is strategic in fitting us to deny ungodliness (Titus 2:11-14).

Justification is the defining truth of our relationship with the Lord, for to be a justified person is to be a person reconciled to the God of the universe. Paul is the only N.T. writer who uses the word ‘reconciliation.’ He uses that word to describe the relational benefits of having been justified. Reconciliation brought us from a place of estrangement to a place of nearness to God (Eph 2:13-18ff.). Reconciliation speaks of relationship restored, thus being ‘reconciled to God’ is at the heart of the believer’s identity. As Puritan author John Owen says in His book, *Communion with God*, when we

bring our sin to Christ and go to Him for righteousness, we are having communion with God. What a blessed thought that the exchange of our sin for Christ's righteousness continues throughout our earthly life—Christ taking our sin away and giving us His righteousness. This is the continual use of Christ for the reasons God gave Him (Owen). In giving us Christ, God has provided every incentive for maintaining and caring for our relationship with Him (**1 Jn 1:1-6**).

Christ is the very sphere in which the believer lives, moves, and has his being. To be 'in Christ' as our realm of life is to have every benefit found in His Person. We are accepted in the Beloved (**Eph 1:6**). It is by union with Christ that the infinite benefits of His life, death, resurrection, and priesthood become ours forever. When Paul says "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh," (**Rom 13:14**), he is saying that we must reckon Christ as our sphere, our life, our right-standing with God; then trample the world's offers of sinful pleasure. How we need to daily preach the gospel to ourselves; that God has transported across time and eternity His own joy and given it to us in Christ. We cannot exhaust the subject of *who God is toward us in Christ*. As John Flavel said, "Christ is the fountain of life." Christ is inexhaustible, when we draw upon His infinite wealth it does not reduce the principle. God is glorified when we make withdrawals from His infinite treasuries of grace to us in Christ. When we feed our faith, we are in the best position to trample upon the bogus promises of the world (**Is 55:1-3**). Meditating on the gospel is inseparable from godliness.

The Puritans remind us of several things related to the centrality of the gospel:

- 1) The gospel ought to be central because the gospel is how God gives Himself to us in Christ.
- 2) Christ is our 'source Person', the fountain of life; the gospel sets forth union with Christ as our life.
- 3) When we are feeding on the gospel, we are dealing directly with Christ, for He gives Himself to us within the gospel promises of the new covenant.
- 4) The gospel is our 'food' because it answers our heart's hunger by graciously giving to the believer the full availability of Christ who is source of all divine blessing, favor, and presence.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1) Why is our core identity and its source an area of intense spiritual warfare?
- 2) What are the benefits of preaching the gospel to yourself? How is that accomplished?
- 3) What is the connection between being loved by Christ, and the ability to understand, and rest upon the gospel promises in His Word? (Hint: Christ's sheep are those who 'hear His voice'—John 10:4, 16). Locate as many gospel promises as you can in John chapter 10. To whom are these promises made?
- 4) Explain what it means that Christ's sacrifice on Calvary's cross was a verdict. It was a verdict about what? What established the verdict? Who pronounced the verdict?
- 5) How does God intend that this verdict affect the believer's conscience (use Scripture)?
- 6) The righteousness that God is looking at when He justifies a believing sinner is resident in Christ, not in the sinner. How does this truth ensure that salvation is 'all of grace'? How does this truth drive all of the believer's motives in his Christian walk?