

THE GOSPEL CHANGES EVERYTHING

Unlike legalism or antinomianism, an authentic grasp of the gospel of Christ will bring increasing transformation and wholeness across all the dimensions of life that were marred by the fall. By removing the primary cause of all of our alienations—our separation from God—it also treats the alienations that flow from it. The gospel addresses our greatest need and brings change and transformation to every area of life. Let's look at just a few of the ways that the gospel changes us.

Discouragement and depression. When a person is depressed, the moralist says, "You are breaking the rules. Repent." On the other hand, the relativist says, "You just need to love and accept yourself." Absent the gospel, the moralist will work on behavior, and the relativist will work on the emotions—and only superficialities will be addressed instead of the heart. Assuming the depression has no physiological base, the gospel will lead us to examine ourselves and say, "Something in my life has become more important than God—a pseudo-savior, a form of works-righteousness." The gospel leads us to embrace repentance, not to merely set our will against superficialities.

Love and relationships. Moralism often turns relationships into a blame game. This occurs when [p 49](#) a moralist is traumatized by severe criticism and in reaction maintains a self-image as a good person by blaming others. Moralism can also cause people to procure love as the way to earn salvation; gaining love convinces them they are worthy persons. This, in turn, often creates codependency—you must save yourself by saving others. On the other hand, much relativism reduces love to a negotiated partnership for mutual benefit. You relate only as long as it does not cost you anything. Without the gospel, the choice is to selfishly use others or to selfishly let yourself be used by others. The gospel leads us to do neither. We selflessly sacrifice and commit, but not out of a need to convince ourselves or others that we are acceptable. We can love a person enough to confront, yet stay with the person even when it does not benefit us.

Sexuality. The moralist tends to see sex as dirty, or at least as a dangerous impulse that leads constantly to sin. The relativist/pragmatist sees sex as merely a biological and physical appetite. The gospel shows us that sexuality is supposed to reflect the self-giving of Christ. He gave himself completely, without conditions. Consequently, we are not to seek intimacy while holding back the rest of our lives. If we give ourselves sexually, we are also to give ourselves legally, socially, and personally. Sex is to be shared only in a totally committed, permanent relationship of marriage.

Family. Moralism can make a person a slave to parental expectations, while relativism/pragmatism sees no need for family loyalty or keeping promises and covenants if they do not meet one's needs. The gospel frees us from making parental approval a form of psychological salvation by pointing to how God is the ultimate Father. Grasping this, we will be neither too dependent nor too hostile toward our parents.

Self-control. Moralists tell us to control our passions out of fear of punishment. This is a volition-based approach. Relativists tell us to express ourselves and find out what is right for us. This is an emotion-based approach. The gospel tells us that the free, unshakable grace of God

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“teaches us to say ‘No’ ” to our passions ([Titus 2:12](#)) if we will only listen to it. It gives us new appetites and affections.⁵ The gospel leads us to a whole-person approach that begins with truth descending into the heart.

Race and culture. The moralist/conservative bias is to use truth to evaluate cultures. Feeling superior to others in the impulse of self-justifying pride, moralists idolize their culture as supreme. The relativist/liberal approach is to relativize all cultures (“We can all get along because there is no truth”). The gospel leads us, on the one hand, to be somewhat critical of all cultures, including our own (since truth *is* objective and real). On the other hand, it leads us to recognize we are morally superior to no one, since we are saved by grace alone. In this instance, the gospel is the grand leveler. Both sin and grace strip everyone of every boast. “All have sinned” ([Rom 3:23](#), emphasis added); “there is *no one* righteous, not even one” ([Rom 3:10](#), emphasis added; cf. [Ps 143:2](#)); therefore, “*whoever* believes in [Jesus] shall not perish but have eternal life” ([John 3:16](#), emphasis added; cf. [Mark 16:16](#); [John 3:36](#); [5:24](#); [7:38](#); [11:26](#)). For *in Christ* “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” ([Gal 3:28](#), emphasis added). Christianity is universal in that it welcomes *everybody*, but it is also particular in its confession that Jesus is Lord, and culture and ethnicity (or whatever other identity) are not. Gospel-relying Christians will exhibit both moral conviction and compassion with flexibility.

Witness. The moralist believes in proselytizing, because “we are right, and they are wrong.” Such an approach is almost always offensive. The relativist/pragmatist approach denies the legitimacy of evangelism altogether. Yet the gospel produces a constellation of traits in us. We are compelled to share the gospel out of generosity and love, not guilt. We are p 50 freed from the fear of being ridiculed or hurt by others, since we have already received the favor of God by grace. Our dealings with others reflect humility because we know we are saved only by grace alone, not because of our superior insight or character. We are hopeful about everyone, even the “hard cases,” because we were saved only because of grace, not because we were people likely to become Christians. We are courteous and careful with people. We don’t have to push or coerce them, for it is only God’s grace that opens hearts, not our eloquence or persistence or even their openness ([Exod 4:10–12](#)). Together, these traits create not only an excellent neighbor in a multicultural society but also a winsome evangelist.

Human authority. Moralists tend to obey human authorities (family, tribe, government, and cultural customs) too anxiously, since they rely heavily on their self-image as upright persons. Relativists/pragmatists will either obey human authority too much (since they have no higher authority by which they can judge their culture) or else too little (since they may obey only when they know they can’t get away with it). The result is either authoritarianism or a disregard for the proper place of authority. The gospel gives a standard by which to oppose human authority (if it contradicts the gospel), as well as an incentive to obey the civil authorities from the heart, even when we could get away with disobedience. To confess Jesus as Lord was

⁵ See Thomas Chalmers, “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection” (sermon, date unknown), www.theologynetwork.org/historical-theology/getting-stuck-in/the-expulsive-power-of-a-new-affection.htm (accessed January 6, 2012).

cf. *confer*, compare

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simultaneously to confess that Caesar was not. Though there have been several studies of late that discuss the “counter-imperial” tenor of various texts, it is important to stress that the Bible is not so much against governing authorities or “empire” as such but that it prescribes a proper reordering of power. It is not that Jesus usurped the throne of Caesar but that when we allow Caesar to overstep his bounds, he is usurping the throne of Christ and leading people into idolatry.

Guilt and self-image. When someone says, “I can’t forgive myself,” it indicates that some standard or condition or person is more central to this person’s identity than the grace of God. God is the only God who forgives—no other “god” will. If you cannot forgive yourself, it is because you have failed your true god—that is, whatever serves as your real righteousness—and it is holding you captive. The moralists’ false god is usually a god of their imagination, a god that is holy and demanding but not gracious. The relativist/pragmatist’s false god is usually some achievement or relationship.

This is illustrated by the scene in the movie *The Mission* in which Rodrigo Mendoza, the former slave-trading mercenary played by Robert de Niro, converts to the church and as a way of showing penance drags his armor and weapons up steep cliffs. In the end, however, he picks up his armor and weapons to fight against the colonialists and dies at their hand. His picking up his weapons demonstrates he never truly converted from his mercenary ways, just as his penance demonstrated he didn’t get the message of forgiveness in the first place. The gospel brings rest and assurance to our consciences because Jesus shed his blood as a “ransom” for our sin ([Mark 10:45](#)). Our reconciliation with God is not a matter of keeping the law to earn our salvation, nor of berating ourselves when we fail to keep it. It is the “gift of God” ([Rom 6:23](#)).

Without the gospel, our self-image is based on living up to some standards—either our own or someone else’s imposed on us. If we live up to those standards, we will be confident but not humble; if we don’t live up to them, we will be humble but not confident. Only in the gospel can we be both enormously bold and utterly sensitive and humble, for we are *simul justus et peccator*, both perfect and sinner!

Joy and humor. Moralism eats away at real joy and humor because the system of legalism forces us to take our self (our image, our appearance, our reputation) *very* seriously. Relativism/pragmatism, on the other hand, tends toward pessimism as life goes on because of the inevitable cynicism that grows from a lack of hope for the world (“In the end, evil will triumph because there is no judgment or divine justice”). If we are saved by grace alone, this salvation is a constant source of amazed delight. Nothing is mundane or matter-of-fact about our lives. It is a miracle we are Christians, and the gospel, which creates bold humility, should give us a far deeper sense of humor and joy. We don’t have to take ourselves p 51 seriously, and we are full of hope for the world.

Attitudes toward class. Moralists, when they look at the poor, tend to see their entire plight stemming from a lack of personal responsibility. As a result, they scorn the poor as failures. Relativists tend to underemphasize the role of personal responsibility and see the poor as helpless victims needing the experts to save them. The poor themselves either feel like failures or angrily blame their problems on others.

The gospel, however, leads us to be humble, free from moral superiority, because we know we were spiritually bankrupt yet saved by Christ’s free generosity. It leads us to be gracious, not

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worried too much about people getting what they deserve because we are aware that *none* of us deserve the grace of Christ. It also inclines us to be respectful of poor Christian believers as our brothers and sisters in Christ, people from whom we can learn. The gospel alone can produce a humble respect for and solidarity with the poor (see [Pss 140:12](#); [146:9](#); [Prov 14:31](#); [21:13](#); [22:22–23](#); [29:7](#)).

In [James 1:9–10](#), the poor Christian “ought to take pride in his high position” but the rich Christian “should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.” Here James is using the gospel on his listeners’ class-consciousness. Everyone in Christ is at the same time a sinner who deserves death and also an adopted child of God, fully accepted and loved. But James proposes that the well-off believer would spiritually benefit by thinking about his or her sinfulness before God, since out in the world he or she gets a lot of acclaim. The poor believer, however, would spiritually benefit by thinking about his or her new high spiritual status, since out in the world he or she gets nothing but disdain.

In a remarkable, similar move, Paul tells the Christian slave owner Philemon that his slave, Onesimus, must be treated as a fellow “man and as a brother in the Lord” ([Philemon 16](#)). Therefore, Paul says, he should welcome and treat his slave “as you would welcome me” (v. [17](#)). By teaching that Christians who understand the gospel should have a radically different way of understanding and wielding power, Paul deeply undermines the very institution of slavery. When both master and slave recognize each other as sinners saved by grace and beloved siblings, “slavery has been abolished even if its outer institutional shell remains.” The gospel “emptied [slavery] of its inner content.”⁶

v. verse(s)

⁶ Miroslav Volf, [A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good](#) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), [92](#).

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THE EXILE AND OUR HOMECOMING

Home, according to Scripture, is a place where life flourishes fully—spiritually, physically, and socially. It is a place where physical life and health are sustained and where our most intimate love *relationships* are nurtured. It is place of rest, of shalom.

HOME/EXILE	YA HWEH/COVENANT	KINGDOM
	AT CREATION MADE FOR:	
a place of rest and shalom	a faithful covenant love relationship with God	God's kingdom and kingliness
	SIN IS/RESULTS IN:	
self-centeredness, destroying shalom	unfaithfulness, causing God's curse and wrath	idolatry, causing enslavement
	ISRAEL IS:	
exiled in Egypt, then Babylon	called to faithfulness but is unfaithful	looking for a true judge/king
	JESUS IS:	
the rejected but resurrected Lord, who breaks the power of death	the suffering servant but new covenant Lord, who takes the curse of sin	the returning true king, who frees us from the world, flesh, Devil
	RESTORATION:	
the garden-city of God	the marriage supper of the Lamb	true freedom under the reign of God

The story of the human race, however, is one of exile and longing for homecoming. Death and disease have distorted and defaced God's good physical creation. Society is a Babel filled with selfishness, self-exaltation, and pride. Exploitation and violence mar and ruin human community. The world as it now exists is not our true home. We were made for a place without death or parting from love, without decay, and without disease and aging. We are, therefore, exiles and aliens here. Why? Because the human race turned

from God to live for itself; our first parents were turned out of the garden of God and banished from the face of God, in whose presence is our true home. We are alienated from God, our true selves, one another, and the creational environment.

Some of the questions that arise when we look at the story of the Scriptures through this theme are these: “How can we be brought home? How can the creation be healed and restored? How can death and decay be overcome?” The gospel answers these questions by telling us that Jesus leaves his own true home ([Phil 2:6–7](#)), is born away from his earthly parents’ home, wanders without a place to lay his head and without a home ([Matt 8:20](#)), and is finally [p 42](#) crucified outside the city gate, a sign of his exile and rejection ([Heb 13:11–12](#)). He takes our place and experiences the exile—the alienated state—that the human race deserves. He is cast out so we can be brought home. This is summed up in [Luke 9:31](#) (the Greek *exodos* is translated “departure” here)—Jesus’ death and resurrection are the ultimate exodus and the ultimate escape from exile. When Jesus rises from the grave, he breaks the power of death and becomes a living foretaste of the new heavens and the new earth that will be our true home. He will reconcile “all things” ([Col 1:16–20](#)) and remake the world into the garden-city of God ([Rev 21:1–8; 22:1–2](#)).¹⁰

This “home” and our sense of it are hinted at in all of our varying forms of homesickness. And it is this sense of home that steers us clear from any number of false home-goings and idolatries.

HOME/EXILE: RELATED THEMES

Rest and Sabbath. Sin has left us restless. How can we enter God’s rest?

Justice and Shalom. The fabric of the world is broken. How can we restore shalom?

¹⁰ There is an interesting way the Greek translators of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint) handle references to the garden, namely, Eden. In places like [Genesis 2:9, 15–16; 3:1, 8, 10](#), and in [Ezekiel 31:8](#), the Greek word *paradeisos* is used to translate as “Eden” or “garden.” This word is used in [Luke 23:43](#) when Jesus says to the penitent criminal on the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (*en tō paradeisō*), as well as by Paul in [2 Corinthians 12:4](#), when Paul reports being caught up to paradise (*eis ton paradeison*), and by John in [Revelation 2:7](#), when one “like a son of man” ([1:13](#)) says to those in the church of Ephesus, “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (*en tō paradeisō tou theou*).

Trinity and Community. We were made for personal and interdependent community with God and his people because we reflect the triune God. How can we become part of this community?

THE COVENANT AND ITS FULFILLMENT

Yahweh reveals himself to be the faithful covenant God. In the covenant relationship, the covenant Lord becomes *our* God, and we become *his* people. A covenant is absolutely binding, and indeed the Lord always does what he says. He is absolutely faithful to his word and promises. In turn, he asks us to also be faithful, to do what *we* say we will do. This poses a problem, for we continually break our word.

Just as the exile/homecoming theme points to our need for the world healer, the Yahweh/covenant theme shows us our need to be saved from our transgressions of the law. This theme raises questions like these: “How can God be *both* faithful and true to his law and word *and* faithful and committed to us? How can God be holy and still love his people? How do the holiness and love of God relate in the covenant?” Isaiah points to a resolution when he speaks of the need for both a covenant Lord and a suffering covenant servant. Jesus takes the curse of the covenant so that the blessing of the covenant could come to us ([Gal 3:7–14](#)). He fulfills the covenant promise of [Genesis 3:15](#)—he is wounded and yet destroys the work of Satan. Jesus fulfills the Abrahamic covenant as well—he truly is the blessing that comes to all nations. His life as the perfect sacrifice fulfills the Mosaic law ([Heb 8–10](#)).

So, in response to the great question “Are the covenant blessings of God conditional or unconditional?”—the answer is *yes*. Jesus, as the obedient and faithful covenant servant, absolutely fulfilled the conditions of the covenant through his life and his suffering in our place, making it possible for him, as our faithful covenant Lord, to love us *unconditionally*. At the cross, both the law of God and the love of God were fulfilled and satisfied. In the city of God, there is no more curse ([Rev 22:3](#)) because the Passover Lamb of God bore the sins of his people. We will be his people—his bride—and he will be our God ([Rev 21:2–3](#)). History is consummated in the marriage supper of the Lamb ([Rev 19:6–9](#)). The ultimate love relationship we were built for will be fulfilled.

YAHWEH/COVENANT: RELATED THEMES

Righteousness and Nakedness. We experience shame and guilt. How can our sins be covered?

Marriage and Faithfulness. We long for true love and closure. How can we find it?

Presence and Sanctuary. We are made to flourish in the presence of God. How can we stand in it?

p 43 THE KINGDOM AND ITS COMING

As the exile/homecoming theme points to our need for the world healer and the Yahweh/covenant theme shows our need to be saved from our transgressions of the law, the kingdom theme shows us the need for a liberator from slavery. As [Romans 1:25](#) tells us, whatever we worship we serve, and since we all must worship something, we are enslaved to various forces and powers in this world. The search for a true leader, judge, and king absorbs much of the history of God's people (see [Deut 17:14–20](#); [2 Sam 7](#)). None of these leaders fully succeed in protecting the people from falling into idolatry, servitude, and exile. This raises one key question: "How can any king be powerful enough to liberate us from slavery this great?"

The answer announced in the gospel is that God himself must come. [Mark 1:1–3](#) declares that Jesus is the divine King returning to take up his kingdom.¹¹ The power of Christ's kingly rule is now present among gathered Christians ([Luke 17:20–21](#)), liberating people from false masters and enslaving idols. Among the disciples, the kingdom is a new human order in which power, money, recognition, and success are properly reordered in light of the registry of the kingdom. It is not that these things no longer matter but that they become transposed by the unleashing of Christ's new creation—by service, generosity, and humility ([Luke 6:17–49](#)). Jesus' kingship is not like human kingships, for it wins influence through suffering service, not coercive power. We enter it not through strength but through the weakness of repentance and the new birth ([John 3](#)) and becoming like a child ([Matt 18:3–4](#)).

Christ's liberating rule is not fully here. All his disciples are to pray for it to come, according to [Matthew 6:10](#), and at the end of time we will receive it in completion ([Matt](#)

¹¹ See also [Isaiah 40:9–11](#); [Mark 1:14–15](#).

25:34). But finally the day comes when the city of God will descend. It contains the throne of God—the seat of the kingdom (Rev 22:3)—from which the renewal of all things proceeds (Rev 21:3–6). This is the ecstatic enthronement depicted in Psalms 96–98. When God returns to rule, even the rivers will clap their hands and the mountains will sing for joy that their liberator has finally come (Ps 98:8; Rom 8:21–22). The freedom and joy of the kingdom of heaven will come to earth.

Although each of these themes emphasizes a unique aspect of the story of the Bible, there is no contradiction—only harmony—among these different ways of communicating the gospel. The Bible’s story line tells us at least four things:

1. What God wants for us (Creation)
2. What happened to us and what went wrong with the world (Fall)
3. What God has done in Jesus Christ to put things right (Redemption)
4. How history will turn out in the end as a result (Restoration)

This story can be—and is—told in multiple ways, using multiple themes, since both sin and salvation are multidimensional. This does not mean the gospel cannot be presented simply, nor does it contradict the earlier statement that “the gospel is not everything.” All of these ways of presenting the gospel must still emphasize that it is news—an announcement of what God has done and will do. However, whenever we flesh out the good news, even in a very brief way, we will put it into the context of one or some of these themes, and when we do this, we will shade things a bit toward some aspects of the biblical story and away from others.

KINGDOM: RELATED THEMES

Image and Likeness. Loving God supremely is the only way to truly love anything else and become your true self, to become truly free (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15).

Idolatry and Freedom. Serving God supremely is the only way to freedom.

Wisdom and the Word. Submission to the Word of God is the way to wisdom.