

Grace, Truth, Heart, and Healing

By Scott Sauls

"Beginning with Moses and the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."

—Luke 24:27

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

—John 1:14

WHAT ARE WE ABOUT, ANYWAY?

In a very real sense, the work of Jesus is complete. When it comes to our standing as beloved, forgiven, delighted-in sons and daughters of God, "It is finished," just as he said. His sinless life secured for us a new and irrevocable status—holy and blameless in God's sight. His death fulfilled the requirements of God's justice toward our sins. Jesus lived the life we should have lived, and he died the death we should have died. Because of this, we are free. What a wonderful and humbling reality in which we now live—God does not treat us as our sins deserve, because he has already treated Jesus as our sins deserve.

All this being true, there is still much work that Jesus intends to do! Acts 1:1 indicates that the work of Jesus on earth was not completed with his death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and seating at the right hand of God. Luke writes, "In the first book (the Gospel of Luke), O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus *began* to do and teach." *Began* to do and teach? How could there be more for Jesus to do than he what has already done? That's where we as Christ's "ambassadors" come into the picture. We are now the chosen ones, sent into the world on his behalf, filled with his Spirit to represent him in our homes, neighborhoods, and places of work and play. In short, the work of Jesus continues through Christians.

As Jesus' ambassadors, we are chosen to faithfully represent him. Therefore, our calling is to labor in every way possible to model our ministry and message after his. We are to live as those who are "full of grace and truth," whose churches and ministries, because we are walking in the path of Jesus, will attract the types of people who were attracted to him, and, by unfortunate necessity, will draw criticism from the types of people who criticized him.

This purpose of this essay, then, is to consider what constitutes a ministry that is full of grace and truth. In other words, our task is to align our collective life and ministry to that of Jesus.

CULTIVATING AN ATMOSPHERE THAT IS "FULL OF GRACE"

What does it mean to have a ministry atmosphere that is "full of grace" (John 1:14)? We will consider this question from a few different angles.

First, we must address the barriers created by Christians—barriers that have hidden the *real* Jesus from the world.

Gandhi was once asked why he never became a Christian. His answer was, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." Gandhi had an admiration for Jesus, but simply could not reconcile how Christians were such poor representatives of their master. In his mind, this is what kept him from becoming a follower of Jesus.

If we are serious about being Jesus' ambassadors, we need to listen very carefully to statements like this one. We must examine the most common barriers that stand between the real Jesus and people's false impressions of him—impressions which, unfortunately, have been projected to a watching world by sincere yet misguided Christians. These barriers include:

Condemnation. Writer Philip Yancey often asks people he meets what they think about Christians. The answer he hears, with very little exception, is that Christians are judgmental, intolerant, and holier-than-thou. When the September 11 terrorist attacks took place on the World Trade Center, one very well-known Christian leader confirmed this stance by saying on national television, "If you are a homosexual, a member

of the ACLU, in favor of abortion, or part of the People of the American Way, then I point my finger in your face and say you did this. You made this happen." A Christian friend of mine who is an actor once invited a gay friend over to have dinner with him and his wife. Their guest soon realized (from the Bible on the coffee table) that they were Christians. He then said to my friend, "You are a Christian, and you actually *like* me?" This is tragic, yet all too common.

If we are serious about being Christ's ambassadors, we must humbly own the fact that many people, especially those who are secular or irreligious, believe that Christians dislike them and are against them. Whether this is actually true or not, it is our starting point in the minds of most non-Christian people. If we are not guilty ourselves, then we are at the very least guilty by association with believers who have misrepresented the biblical Jesus to our culture. So we must take personal responsibility, as far as it depends on us, to reorient people's perception of Christians, and especially of Christ himself.

Separation. In a day when many Christians want to separate themselves and their children from people and things that are considered secular, Christ's ambassadors must resist this "us against them" mindset. We must do everything in our power to become friends with as many non-Christians as we can—no conditions attached. This must be a central, core value of our Christian communities. It is helpful to look at the life of Jesus in this regard. Luke 15:1-2 tell us plainly that *all* of the "sinners" made a habit of hanging around Jesus. They *wanted* to be near him, and they wanted to hear what he had to say. Meanwhile, religious folk were accusing Jesus of being a glutton, a drunk, and a friend of sinners (Luke 7:34). We know that these accusations were false—Jesus was tempted in every way but without sin. But he was unapologetically a true friend to the least and the lost—to all who were alien to the religious communities of his day. He seemed to prefer parting ways with religious folks if that was necessary in order to get close to sinners. The one who "welcomed sinners and ate with them" now insists that his followers assume the same posture. "God's grace is for real sinners" must be more than merely an affirmation on our church websites. It must characterize the life and practice of our ministries.

Reputation. There is a price to pay if we get serious about cultivating atmospheres that are full of grace. In becoming a friend of sinners as Jesus was, we should expect significant resistance. We should expect on some level to be alienated from religious people. The simple fact is that when we start doing some of the things Jesus did, some fellow believers will become suspicious of us. Consider Luke 7, for example, when a "sinful woman" enters the home of Simon the Pharisee. In the name of love, and in the spirit of demonstrable grace, Jesus received her very un-orthodox display of affection toward him. He breaks with religious customs, allowing the woman to touch his feet (feet were considered unclean—one could not even ask a slave to touch them for this reason). He breaks with social customs also, receiving her as his disciple. It was scandalous in Jesus' day for a rabbi to receive a woman as his disciple, much less a woman with a scandalous history. Most scandalous, however, is the way that Jesus breaks with moral customs. The woman lets down her hair (this was grounds for divorce—a woman could do this only in the presence of her immediate family). She touches him with the tools of her trade...He allows her to anoint him with a prostitute's perfume and kiss him with a prostitute's lips! Of course we know the rest of the story—Jesus was shunned as a man of ill repute by religious people. To them, giving positive attention to this woman, who to them was clearly "a sinner" was evidence of moral compromise.

This has serious ramifications in for those who wish to represent Jesus well in a modern context. We must come to terms with the fact that if Jesus were a 21st century American, he would not associate godliness with membership in a political party. He would not tell a lesbian she was outside of God's will without also offering her a personal, no-strings-attached friendship. He would not talk about how smoking destroys God's temple while simultaneously devouring his third piece of fried chicken at the church potluck. He would not condemn adultery as being any worse than studying the Bible for the wrong reasons. If we are accustomed to setting up our own Mishnah, our own set of "clean laws" that define one's worthiness to be received into Jesus' company, we need to give serious re-evaluation to our methods and priorities!

Pride. Becoming a friend of sinners begins with the understanding that we are much more like the "chief of sinners" than we are like Jesus Christ. Our approach with all people, no matter who they are or what their history, must assume the posture of "fellow beggars humbly telling others where to find the bread" (Steve Brown). If we really want people to be impacted by the gospel and to enjoy the riches of God's grace, they must first see in us the humility of those who have been, and continue to be, genuinely impacted by grace ourselves. Our humility must be authentic and not just an act. Paul was not above humbling himself. In Romans 7 he gives us a window into his personal struggle with the sin of coveting—a sin nobody would see

unless he told them—and the ways in which the gospel heals that sin. In 1 Timothy Paul identifies himself as the chief of all sinners. If we intend to reflect Jesus in our ministries and our messages, we need to get over our love for reputation and image. Without realizing it, we can begin to build our identities on how good we look—on being “model Christians” that people are supposed to admire because of how put-together we appear to be. This is a trap and it will rob our ministries of power. If people in our midst are going to be changed by the grace of Jesus, they must regularly witness the gospel working effectively in our lives—healing us of our sins and deepest wounds and fears.

Second, our communities must be sinner-safe.

There was a reason why *all* the sinners ran to Jesus on a regular basis (Luke 15:1-2). Though they knew he was against their sin—he never watered down the law’s demands—they wanted to be around him because they knew the reason why he was against their sin—because he was *for* them! If we want to be his ambassadors, therefore, several commitments must characterize us, our ministries, and our message:

Respecting and valuing all people. People must sense us relating to them on the basis of their God-given dignity, not on the basis of their failures. If we are not careful, we can easily fall into the trap of diminishing the worth of a human being in this way: When we think of them, we think first the ways they need to be fixed versus valuing them as bearers of the divine image, made for glory. The following quote from CS Lewis is extremely helpful to this perspective:

It is maybe possible to think too much of your own potential glory hereafter. But it is impossible to think too often or too deeply about that of your neighbors. The weight of my neighbor’s glory should be laid daily on my back. So heavy a weight it is that only humility can carry it. It’s a serious thing to live in a society of immortals. To remember that millions of years from now, the dullest and most uninteresting person you meet may one day be an incredible creature, who if you saw him now you would be strongly tempted to worship...All day long we are in some degrees helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is therefore in light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the proper amount of awe and circumspection that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations, these are mortal, and their life is to our life as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals with whom we joke, work, marry, snub and exploit...your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses. (CS Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*)

A biblical view of sin. Treating people with dignity does *not* imply a reluctance to challenge sin. If we are going to love people as Jesus does, we will be committed to their flourishing, which means we will deeply desire that they be obedient to God! So, the question is not, “Will we challenge sin?” but rather “*How* will we challenge sin, and with what motivation will we challenge it?” We must be on God’s agenda here—He is so vehemently opposed to sin both for his own glory and (how easily we can forget) so very much *for* the person. God’s desire is that we live by his design, which is life to us,

A grace-filled attitude toward sinners like ourselves. Whenever we confront sin of any kind, our motivation must be because we care so deeply for those, like us, who sin. Otherwise, we shouldn’t say anything at all about sin. You are no doubt familiar with the group from Topeka, Kansas who picketed the funeral (!) of Mathew Sheppard (the young gay man who was beaten to death by some of his peers) with signs that read “God hates fags” and “Thank God for AIDS,” among other horrible things. This example is certainly extreme. However, there are going to be seeds in our own hearts that are prone to look down on those to whom we feel superior. It is an evil thing to desire or celebrate someone’s harm instead of his/her well-being. As Jesus stood over Jerusalem (who had rejected his love), he wept for them. Do people, especially people who are “not like us,” sense this kind of love from us? Jesus did much more than merely tolerate sinful people in his midst. He cherished them, and pursued their hearts that they might become free indeed. We have no option but to do the same.

Third, we must keep first things first.

This essentially means two things:

Jesus, and nothing else, must be our "main thing" at all times. Our main emphasis must always be on the Person and work of Christ. Even Paul the Apostle decided to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). Therefore...

Everything else takes a back seat to Jesus. Often we will equate "outreach" to converting others to the norms of our particular tribe (our political views, our theological tradition, our dress code, our ethics, our parenting philosophy, etc.) instead of converting them to a love and adoration of Jesus. But the norms of our tribe must always be secondary to, and in many cases discarded because of, a greater vision for people to see Jesus and know him for who he really is. Additionally, in all things we must lead with the grace of God versus with the law of God. When we require people to "get their act together" *before* we give them access to Jesus and his grace, we fail to follow the methods of the Lord, who welcomed and "graced" people *before* he called them to change (Luke 7:36-50, Luke 15:1-2, John 8:1-11, etc.). A cosmetic, outside-in, second-things-first approach to change contradicts the inside-out, first-things-first approach of the Bible. Consider the following quote from Rev. Timothy Keller:

We (need to) be careful with the *order* in which we communicate the parts of the faith. Pushing moral behaviors before we lift up Christ is religion. The church today is calling people to God with a tone of voice that seems to confirm their worst fears. Religion has always been outside-in—"if I behave out here in all these ways, then I will have God's blessing and love inside." But the gospel is inside-out—"If I know the blessing and grace of God inside, then I can behave out here in all these ways." A woman who had been attending our church for several months came to see me. "Do you think abortion is wrong?" she asked. I said that I did. "I'm coming now to see that maybe there is something wrong with it," she replied, "now that I have become a Christian here and have started studying the faith in the classes." As we spoke, I discovered that she was an Ivy League graduate, a lawyer, a long-time Manhattan resident, and an active member of the ACLU. She volunteered that she had experienced three abortions. "I want you to know," she said, "that if I had seen any literature or reference to the 'pro-life' movement, I would not have stayed through the first service. But I did stay, and I found faith in Christ. If abortion is wrong, you should certainly speak out against it, but I'm glad about the order in which you do it." This woman had had her faith incubated into birth in our Sunday services. In worship, we center on the question "what is truth?" and the one who had the audacity to say, "I am the truth." That is the big issue for postmodern people, and it's hard to swallow. Nothing is more subversive and prophetic than to say Truth has become a real person...We, of all people, ought to understand and agree with fears about religion, for Jesus himself warned us to be wary of it, and not to mistake a call for moral virtue for the good news of God's salvation provided in Christ. (Timothy Keller, *Religion-less Spirituality*)

In summary...

In cultivating a "full of grace" ministry atmosphere, we must carefully consider *how* we are presenting Christ to people who are either not Christian or somewhere along the journey of overcoming sin (that's all of us, isn't it?). The following chart is given as an aid for preparing our community to be in line with the gospel of grace. Obviously, we want to lean against both the religious grid and the secular grid, and saturate everything we think, say, and do from the perspective of the gospel grid.

Different models of ministry and the “hurdles” people feel they must overcome in order to become “insiders:”

Type of Ministry	First Hurdle	Second Hurdle	Motivation	Assessment
Religious	Measure up to our laws! Get on board with our political agenda, our system of doctrine, our customs, our dress code, our worship style, and everything else we regard as sacred!	We will accept you and give you our full embrace...— <u>IF</u> you can get past the first hurdle! (We are tolerant of everyone except those who disagree with us on anything!)	Performing to gain acceptance with the group, God, and/or yourself.	A “truth without love” paradigm—you will either become self-righteous (because you measure up to the laws), depressed (because you don’t), or embittered (because you feel oppressed).
Secularized	Measure up to our laws! Get on board with our agenda of unqualified tolerance!	We will accept you and give you our full embrace... <u>IF</u> you can get past the first hurdle! (We are tolerant of everyone except those who are not as tolerant as we are!)	Performing to gain acceptance with the group, God, and/or yourself.	A “love without truth” paradigm—you will become permissive (in the name of tolerance), and embittered (toward those who aren’t permissive like you are).
Gospel	See how loved you are! We accept you and give you our full embrace... because you are a person of great value...you bear the image of God and God loves you enough to die for you!	Process and respond to the meaning of the first “hurdle” of accepting the love of God—you are now called, as a response to God’s great love for you, to live a life of love and obedience to God’s commands (not the laws of our tribe, per se, but God’s loving, life-giving laws!).	Loving God and other people, because you know you are loved by God and by the group.	“Full of grace and truth” paradigm—you will become free in your heart (because you are fully known, fully loved, and never rejected), and deeply motivated to live by God’s design (because his design has become beautiful and life-giving to you).

CULTIVATING AN ATMOSPHERE THAT IS “FULL OF TRUTH”

Now, we will consider how specifically to encourage an atmosphere that is “full of truth” (John 1:14), to the end that people become convinced over time that there is nothing more wonderful, nothing more exciting, and nothing more life-giving than becoming an obedient follower of Jesus.

As we think about forming environments that are full of truth, we must consider several factors with regard to our use and presentation of the Law of God. As was the case with Paul, our goal for Christ be formed in everyone (Galatians 4:19), meaning that personal character gradually becomes like to his. But this is tricky, because true obedience to Jesus is obedience from the inside-out. It is the kind of obedience that aims not to use God and put him in our debt, but to honor him and taste his loveliness and worth. In short, we must encourage an obedience that responds to the love of Jesus. Any other kind is moralism, not Christianity.

First, we must discern and to reject the three primary misuses of God’s Law.

The three “misuses” that must be resisted are as follows:

The secular misuse. Those who come from this perspective will resist the notion of all people being accountable to a higher power. Secular people may see biblical commands as oppressive and may then replace them with a new law—the law of tolerance. For this person, the sole “absolute” is that there are no absolutes. All people, views, and behaviors should be tolerated, except for those that are not tolerant! The problem with this approach should be obvious—to add to or to take away from the Word of God puts one in great danger (Revelation 22)! It also sets the human community up for systemic and relational chaos. If there is no truth in the world that applies to everybody, then everybody will do what is right in his/her own eyes—acting in personal interest versus in the interest of others.

The religious misuse. Those who come from this perspective tend to view God’s commands primarily in terms of duty. If you keep the commands, you have done your duty. If you don’t, you will be judged and

things will not go well for you. Period. Religious people see God’s Law more in legal terms and less in relational terms. For the religious person, there is very little dancing in the heart over the beauty of God’s commands. In some religious circles, one might be tempted to assume that you are in the center of God’s will to the degree that you are grumpy! The Bible gives such a different picture, however. Psalm 1 teaches us that the Law of God is the believer’s delight! The writer of Psalm 119 says, “O how I love Your law!” The Psalmist *enjoys* God’s commands and in no way sees them as “a burden I must bear” or “a duty around which I must center my life.” While the Law is duty, it is so much *more* than duty! If people are consistently burdened by our presentation of God’s commands, if they are left feeling weighted down versus liberated, it is likely that we are missing the heart of the Law altogether. 1 John tells us that for the believer, God’s commands are *not* burdensome!

The antinomian misuse. Antinomians tend to treat God’s commands as optional. Antinomian means “against law”—the thought being that one can receive Jesus as Savior but refuse Jesus as King. The problems with this are obvious. Jesus himself said, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I say?” James reminds us that “Faith without works is dead.” Martin Luther, the Reformation’s champion of grace, said that we are saved by faith alone, but never by a faith that is alone.

The following chart attempts to distinguish between the various uses (and misuses) of God’s Law. We must labor passionately to present the Law of God, but to do so from a Christ-centered approach and none other.

Approach	Outlook on God’s Law	Law-Substitute	Effect
Secularized	“The Law is oppressive.” The Bible’s commands are primitive and un-enlightened. They take away my freedom.	“Tolerance” and “Freedom.”	Resistance to all authority except self. Disdain for anyone who challenges my personal “freedom” to think, believe, and do as I please.
Religious	“The Law is legal in nature.” The Bible’s commands are everyone’s duty. If you don’t follow them, you will pay.	Treadmill-living.	Self-righteousness and condemnation of others (I think I am keeping the law and others are not), Anxiety (I have failed at the law), or Denial (I can’t deal with the fact that I have failed at the law). Lack of inner joy.
Antinomian	“The Law is optional.” The Bible’s commands are fine and good. They are a good ideal but not necessary for me as a Christian.	Trust in the sinner’s prayer.	Self-deception (I can be a Christian without being a follower of Christ). Self-centered living (proving that I really love sin, not Jesus).
Gospel	“God’s Law is relational and lovely.” The Bible’s commands are a gift, and are the key to enjoying the “abundant life” Jesus came to give! They show me what it is to be truly human!	None.	Confidence in the finished work of Jesus for my standing with God—I’m not crushed when I fail at obedience, but am driven once again into Jesus’ loving arms. I love God’s commands because I know they are motivated by his deep passion for my well-being!

Second, we must receive and share God’s commands as an expression of his love.

Remember, God’s Law is not merely legal. While it does have a legal component, it is also deeply relational. God gives us his law in order to set us free, not to burden us. Consider the following:

God’s commands, rightly understood, are a gift. The overwhelming testimony of Scripture is that the Law of God is beautiful and good. It is not oppressive and freedom-robbing, but life-giving. It is not merely duty but delight. It is not an option but a blessed treasure. It was the only thing that made sense!

God’s commands provide freedom. It is important to understand the original meaning and context of the word *torah* (Law). For Jews living in the time of Moses, this was the word used to describe a loving father’s instruction to his children. When considering any command of God, we must start with the question, “What motivates a parent to tell his/her children to stay out of the street, or to eat vegetables, or to get 10 hours of sleep?” The answer to this question, without exception, is that the parent is committed to the child being healthy and happy. This is the purpose of loving, life-giving parental laws! This is but a reflection of God who gives his Law because he intends for his children to flourish. His Law is our pathway to becoming more fully human, the very best version of ourselves.

God's commands promote human flourishing. God's Law shows us what it is to be truly human. It tells us how we can pursue our potential, how we can be all we can be! If you take a fish out of water, it becomes anxious and afraid. All sorts of distortions are thrust into the fish's existence. Only when you put the fish back in its natural habitat will the fish thrive again. It is no different with a human being concerning the Law of God. The Law is humanity's natural, life-giving habitat! So, when we present the Law of God to our own hearts and to the hearts of others, we must constantly be communicating the following things about it:

- The Law will benefit you! It enhances quality of life and promotes human flourishing.
- The Law will protect you! All distortions in life come from some form of departure from the Creator's design. Just as ignoring dietary wisdom will damage the body, ignoring biblical wisdom will damage the soul as well as relationships. God's Law is our protection here.
- The Law is lovely! We must learn to embrace God's Law as the writers of Scripture did—as beautiful, the only thing that truly makes sense for those who wish to live life to the fullest.

Third, we must emphasize that obedience is motivational, not merely behavioral.

Jesus said it is a good root that makes a good tree bear good fruit. We obey God because of the people we have become on the inside, and for no other reason. We love God because God first loved us. It is only a clear vision of the loveliness of Jesus and the gospel that anyone will obey in a way that will honor God and set the heart free. This has several implications for us:

We must encourage a *want-to* obedience versus a *have-to* obedience. True obedience comes from a heart that loves and enjoys the things of God, not from a heart that is duty-bound. So we want obedience to become second-nature for ourselves and others. Think of Michael Jordan as an example. His is known as one of the hardest working athletes ever—spending unparalleled amounts of time and energy honing his skills (just as we as believers must “train ourselves for godliness!”). But when Jordan got to game time, basketball had become so much a part of him that he dominated the game effortlessly.

Take, for example, the methods often used to get Christians to tell others about Jesus. Evangelism seminars can be helpful in some instances, but to be honest, very few of them lead to a long-term commitment to tell others about Jesus. Why is this the case? It is because many seminars fail to address the *why* of evangelism. Focusing so much on technique, they can miss the heart! Consider the New Testament on the other hand. The Samaritan woman (John 4) went immediately into Samaria to tell as many as she could about Jesus. The Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5), when told by Jesus to go and tell his family what the Lord had done to heal him, instead goes into the Decapolis (Ten cities!) to tell as many people as he could about the healing he had received! What motivated these people to tell others about Jesus? It was the fact that Jesus had become so irresistible to them that they absolutely *had* to tell others! When something becomes meaningful to us, our enjoyment of it is not complete until we have shared it with others.

If we present the Law as primarily a means toward modifying behavior, the behavior will happen on the outside but the heart will not change. Obedience will fizzle as soon as the guilt wears off. On the other hand, if we present the Law as a loving expression of God's care for us, we will begin to see people change at the motivational level, it will produce lasting fruit that is in keeping with repentance. I think it was Steve Brown who once said, “I love to sin, but the reason I choose not to is because I love Jesus more!”

So, our “strategy” for encouraging people to obey God is to show them the beauty of Jesus on a regular basis. When Jesus becomes truly beautiful, truly lovely to people, they cannot help but follow him. We will always give our lives effortlessly to the things that give our lives the most meaning. We don't become like Jesus by trying to be like Jesus. We become like him because we have been *with* him, and in this have tasted his irresistible grace, kindness, and love.

Fourth, we must emphasize the many rewards of obedience.

The truth of the matter is that God's commands, when followed from a gospel-motivation, enhance life. Here are just some of the rewards of obeying God's life-giving commands:

Fulfillment. As Augustine once prayed, “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” Obedience to God's commands gets us in touch with the “true us”—with the design of our Creator, which gives life! Remember Joshua's words, “Do not let this book of the Law

depart from your mouth. Meditate on it day and night, and be careful to do everything that is written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful" (Joshua 1:8)! When we teach any command of God, we must be careful to highlight how that command will bring ultimate fulfillment and blessedness (happiness!) to those who obey.

Inner peace. There is no fear that God's Laws will bite us when we obey them. When we depart from God's design, it brings distortions, anxiety, and disruption to our inner lives. But when we surrender to him, there is inner peace...an integration of life! Remember the fish out of water example.

Intimacy with God. Once we belong to God through faith in Christ, our position with him can never be threatened. Nothing in all creation (including ourselves) can separate us from his love (Romans 8). However, our fellowship with God (our experience of intimacy with him) is always weakened by disobedience, and strengthened by obedience to his commands. Jesus said, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23).

Fifth, we must find joy in owning our failure to follow God's commands.

It is both ironic and wonderful that both obedience and failure to obey can lead to deeper joy and deeper intimacy with God. The rewards of obedience are as stated above. But there are also deep rewards for those who have come to terms with the fact that they fall short of the mark every day:

Joyful humility. As ironic as it may sound, there are few things that are more life-giving than admitting our failure to obey God's commands. As Paul says, "Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more." Knowing that we are saved by grace and not by our efforts is liberating. It also changes us. WE become tender rather than harsh, gracious rather than judgmental, humble rather than defensive. Don't we all want to be this kind of person? The grumpy people in the Bible were those who would *not* face their failures, because they had built an identity based on their performance, offering moral and behavioral resumes to God and other people (and to themselves—remember the Pharisee who prayed "to himself" in Luke 18, so as to feel confident in his own righteousness). This left them in the awful position of either being puffed up with pride (because they thought they were being righteous), despair (because they failed at the laws upon which they built their identities), or denial (because they couldn't handle the thought of being seen as sinful). Those whose hearts were set free, on the other hand, were those like the tax collector who prayed, "God have mercy on me, the sinner," and went home justified and healed (Luke 18:9-14).

God's delight in our imperfect efforts to obey. Isaiah reminds us that even our best efforts to obey God are tainted with motives that are sinful and therefore damnable—like "filthy rags" (literally from the Hebrew, like a used menstrual cloth). Yet, surprisingly, even our weakest desires and attempts to obey bring pleasure to God's heart! Zephaniah 3:17 is breathtaking, "The Lord...will take great delight in you...He will rejoice over you with loud singing!" I'll never forget the scene in the movie *Radio*, where the football coach tries to teach the mentally challenged man named "Radio" how to write his name. The coach writes it down for him: R-A-D-I-O, and then says, "Now you try it." Radio then smiles, takes a pencil and paper, and proceeds to scribble inarticulate nothingness onto the piece of paper. He looks up at the coach and smiles, and the coach, rather than showing disappointment or frustration, looks at Radio and says, "YOU DID IT!" If the people under our care are to ever be motivated to attempt obedience (even while knowing their very best efforts will still fall short), we need to regularly pour grace all over even their weakest attempts to follow Jesus. This is how the gospel is applied to the Law.

Having a big and powerful Jesus versus a small, impotent Jesus. Our failure to keep the Law enlarges our sense of Jesus, who he is, how much we need him, and how willing and eager he is to meet our deepest need. The paradox of the gospel is that the more we see our sin, the more vivid it becomes to our senses, the more vivid the grace and love of Jesus become to us as well. Consider Paul's words in 1 Timothy 1:15-17 to see the truth of this!

TARGETING THE HEART WITH GRACE AND TRUTH

We need to pay close attention at all times to the motivational dynamics of the Christian life—the primary reasons (from a human perspective) why people do not see Jesus as precious, and therefore do not see the appeal of following him with their whole hearts, are in fact motivational reasons. Specifically, the "sin

beneath the sin" of all sins is idolatry—the elevation of a created thing to a place where it becomes one's functional "Lord" and "Savior," the ultimate object of worship and service (Romans 1). Therefore, the key to persuading people to trust and follow Jesus (grace and truth!) rests in persuading hearts that Jesus is more precious and lovely than the idols that we are all prone to worship and serve. Remember, it is the gospel (the fantastically *great* news of Jesus) that alone is the power of God for salvation—it is the only power for true, heart-level transformation.

For every one look you take at your sin, take ten looks at Jesus.
- Robert Murray McCheyne

The reason I preach the gospel to you every single week is precisely because you forget the gospel every single week!
- Martin Luther

The first and greatest commandment is that you "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind."
- Jesus

First, we must directly address why the gospel does not "take" with many—idolatry is that reason.

John Calvin rightly said that the human heart is an idol factory. Our hearts will instinctively erect counterfeit gods or pseudo-saviors to whom we give our allegiance, our ultimate affections, and our obedience.

A working definition of idolatry. An idol is any person or idea, any created thing that captures the loyalties and affections of our hearts more than God himself. An idol is anything that becomes more essential to us than him.

An idol is anything which occupies God's place—it is anything upon which you will base your life. It is what you look to for your sense of meaning, happiness, and validation. When something becomes your idol, you will give it your unquestioned loyalty. You will let it run your life, determine your choices, and govern the use of your money and time. You will give yourself to it effortlessly.

- Timothy Keller

We must assume that everyone is religious by nature. Every human being, whether Christian, religious, agnostic, or atheist, will worship something or someone. One of our primary tasks is to understand what is capturing the ultimate affections of people's hearts. Ecclesiastes reminds us that God has put eternity into the heart of man (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We were created to be in relationship with God. He designed us to love, honor, adore, and obey him. If we don't do this, by necessity we will have to love, honor, adore, and obey something or someone else! Our idols are our "rather-than's" that capture and sabotage our hearts' affections that belong first to God.

Second, we must learn to discern and diagnose the particular idols that exist in our own hearts and in the hearts of those we lead.

How do we do this? There are several diagnostic questions that we need to ask as we minister to people, and especially as we seek to prepare Christ-centered messages (thanks to David Powlison for introducing these and several other excellent diagnostic questions in his article, *Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*):

First, what do people under my care feel they cannot survive or function without? In other words, what do they feel they have to have in order to enjoy life, or to be acceptable as a person? What are the things that they are terrified of losing?

Second, where do people under my care spend their time and money with the least amount of effort? We always, without exception, will give our time and resources effortlessly to the things that give our lives the most meaning.

Third, what do people under my care tend to think and talk about the most? Another way to frame this question is to ask, "Where do their thoughts go when they are driving alone in the car, when they first wake in the morning, when they are falling asleep at night?" What does this say about where the utmost treasures of their hearts are residing?

Fourth, which biblical commands are the people under my care most hesitant to obey? This is always going to be the most revealing question about the nature of a person's particular idols. Whenever we choose to disobey a command of God—any command of God—at that moment in time our hearts are treasuring something or someone more than him.

Fifth, when do people under my care become most angry? What kinds of people, things, or circumstances irritate them the most, and what is it about these people, things, or circumstances that give them such power over their hearts? What, if it happened, would tempt them to become angry with God? (Remember Job's wife, who told her husband to "curse God and die")

Sixth, how would people under my care fill in the blank? "I cannot be happy unless _____." Whatever is on the other side of the "unless" is the idol.

Once we discern the idols, we must labor to make them the centerpiece of our application!

Third, we must wisely and patiently direct ourselves and those we lead to dismantle idols of the heart and replace them with Jesus.

Dismantling and replacing idols requires that we labor in our study and meditation to understand the multitude of ways that Jesus fills the hole in the human heart in a much more adequate, life-giving way than any Jesus-substitute that a person may be prone to worship and serve.

Basically every idol (and every sin) traces back to a self-salvation strategy, which replaces something only Jesus can ultimately provide adequately, with a counterfeit. Some examples include (thanks to Timothy Keller for inspiring these insights):

The certainty idol. Those who "worship and serve" the certainty idol are "nervous types" who are controlled by worry. They simply cannot handle when things are up in the air or seem to be at risk. They (we!) always carry anxiety about losing their health, their money, the spot-free condition of their home, or any other thing that gives them the illusion that they are in control of their universe. To address the certainty idol, we must do so with both "grace" and "truth:"

- Truth: You will never feel secure (be "saved" from insecurity) by putting your hope in things that are uncertain. If you continue to put your hope in your health, your bank account, the well-being of your children, your GPA, you will remain an anxious person. You will either be horrified of losing control, or will fall into despair when you do lose control.
- Grace: Jesus is the sovereign King of the universe. He knows your needs. He works all things (good and bad) for your good. Trust him!

The success idol. Those who "worship and serve" the success idol are generally "achiever types" who don't mind things being "up in the air" (unlike the certainty idol) as long as they win. They cannot deal with failure and are driven by the fear of it. They (we!) are enslaved by their ability (or lack thereof) to "measure up" to peers, to gain the leverage they desire—whether it be on the athletic field, in the classroom, at the office, or any other place. To address the success idol, again we must do so with both "grace" and "truth:"

- Truth: Enough success will never be enough for you. (When Rockefeller was asked "How much is enough" he said, "One more dollar!"). You will be like Harold Abrams in *Chariots of Fire*, who ran, ran, and ran, but eventually realized he had no idea what he was running for.
- Grace: Jesus has already lived the ultimately "successful" life on your behalf! You can now rest in the record he has provided for you in his life of perfect obedience. Your reputation is secure. You will win the ultimate prize because of what Jesus has accomplished in your place!

The relationship idol. Those who "worship and serve" the relationship idol are controlled by an inordinate longing for affection and/or approval. They (we!) don't mind things being up in the air (unlike the certainty

idol), and they don't mind losing (unlike the success idol), as long as somebody is saying "I love you" to them.

- Truth: Even your best relationships will be spoiled if you put them in front of your relationship with Jesus! You will become obsessive, with a false security that the love / approval of others will "save" you. Or you will become anxious and depressed when criticized.
- Grace: Jesus is the lover of your soul. He delights in you and rejoices over you always! He is the one place where you are relationally secure at all times!

In summary, with respect to idols of the heart, the bottom line consists of the following:

We need to master the art of identifying of the heart. We especially need to do so with the people among whom we serve. Our messages should always be addressing the idols of the day with the grace and truth of Jesus (as exemplified above). We need to ask the diagnostic questions mentioned earlier in this section—both of ourselves and those under our care. Then, we need to target our teaching toward the healing of these idols.

We need to master the art of exposing idols of the heart. We need to develop a pattern of leading people to acknowledge their own idols, and to admit humbly that the things they love too much will ultimately wound them, and may even devastate them. In the most gracious manner possible, we need to convince our hearers that the things their hearts are tempted to "over-desire" can never bring them the wholeness, happiness, or fulfillment—salvation!—they desire.

We need to master the art of replacing idols of the heart. We need to develop ways, sensitive to our listeners, which help them to re-direct their deepest loves. We need to masterfully and winsomely communicate in such a way that people begin to see clearly that Jesus will fill their hearts in more adequate and enduring ways than any counterfeit ever will.