The “Self-Improvement Gospel”

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Did you know it is possible to be under a curse because you believe the wrong things? What you believe affects your eternal destiny and health in Christ. We see that Paul tells those who preach a false gospel that they are under a curse (Galatians 1:8), and that those who put their trust in the wrong place are also under a curse (Galatians 3:10)! In other words, the judgement of God was on those who rejected the true gospel and accepted a substitute.

There are many who come into our churches today (and some of our members!) who hold to another Jesus and have accepted a different gospel (2 Corinthians 11:3-4). We assume they understand the foundational truths because they call themselves ‘Christians’. Because some don’t understand salvation, there can never be true power or joy or victory in their lives. We want to give techniques and keys to help our friends, but we end up fumbling or overlooking the big truths that undergird all of the others.

I want to focus on a ‘false gospel’ I have seen rampant in the church today.

> Christians were beginning to trust in their own moral effort and goodness. This is the sin of self-righteousness

The Self-Improvement Gospel

This is what I grew up in. It is the 'gospel' of believing that if I prayed more, obeyed more and tried harder, God would be pleased and I would be right with Him. This kind of Jesus is a hard taskmaster; a kind of coach driving you to do better.

Even as a Christian for a number of years, I still held to this faulty understanding. If I just tried harder and ticked all the boxes, I'd find acceptance before the Father. The result was that I often walked in condemnation. I never felt good enough or that I was honouring God enough.

Here are some of the symptoms of the Self-Improvement Gospel:

- You **fall into condemnation** easily. Coming to this kind of Jesus, you feel he would say, 'You can try harder!'
- You are **quick to compare** yourself to other believers, and it either results in pride or a sense of failure.
- When you **see other Christians struggling**, you sometimes think, 'They are not committed; they must get their act together; they must be devoted.'
- You feel **worthless if you aren't involved** in some ministry.
- You thrive off the **validation and encouragement of others**.

The Galatians thought they could please God through an outward checklist, such as circumcision and the keeping of the Jewish law. The reason Paul used such strong words (you are under a curse!) was because these Christians were beginning to trust in their own moral effort and goodness. This is the sin of self-righteousness, which Jesus condemns (see Luke 19:9-14).

We can subtly put our trust in our own moral efforts, such as doing good to others, daily bible reading, prayer, witnessing to others, tithing etc. Of course, we are called to do all of these things as lovers of Jesus, but the religious spirit cunningly says that these things make you acceptable before God. As an obedient Christian, it's easy to begin to trust in your works and congratulate yourself for how spiritual you are, rather than always trusting in Jesus' finished work on your behalf.

> ...it is through Jesus' obedience (**His moral effort** in His life, **and His death** on the cross) that we have been made righteous.

God’s Gospel vs False Gospels

But the Christian gospel is so different! The good news is that we now relate to Him on the basis of grace – His undeserved favour and mercy. The gospel is firstly the bad news that I am a failure and have broken His holy laws. But then it is the surprising news that God takes the punishment due to me and transfers it to Jesus. My sins are on Jesus. My debts belong to Him. His righteousness now belongs to me.

When I really believe my sins have been put onto Jesus, it is called ‘saving faith’. This isn’t just a mental assent, but a wholehearted leaning into Jesus and trusting in Him alone to rescue me. It is not a little bit of me and a little bit of Him. Romans 5:19 tells us that it is through Jesus’ obedience (**His moral effort** in His life, **and His death** on the cross) that we have been made righteous. We are accepted before God because of the Son. Do you really believe this?

In light of this, we are called to respond to this mind-blowing grace in how we live.

- I can lay my life down **in view of God’s mercy** towards me.
- I can show hospitality because I understand **God has welcomed me** into His family.
- I can work hard because of **His Spirit empowering me**.
- I can keep my promises because He is **a covenant-keeping God**.
- I now obey God because I love Him and understand that **He first loved me**.

God doesn’t help those who help themselves. He helps those who are unable to help themselves and who rely on His empowering grace. It’s this deeply humbling truth that we are called to be rooted upon and to consistently remind ourselves of, so that we will become fully flourishing, whole people in the Lord.