LBCOC Small Groups 2022-2023

***Transforming Grace* by Jerry Bridges**

**Chapter 1: The Performance Treadmill**

INTRODUCTION

**Galatians 3:1-3** – *1 You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? 2 This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*

Gal 3:1-3 is a call for believers to continue their Christian lives by the Spirit and not by human effort. This is not a call to a feelings-driven, mystical path of the Christian life. Nor is it a call to ditch obedience and effort. Instead, Paul is calling us to live by conscious dependence or faith in the person and work of Christ; in short, faith in the gospel.

The Galatian churches had strayed from following Christ. They began well, but at some point, they defected from the gospel by requiring adherence to the Old Testament Law as *the* way to grow spiritually. They began to mix in works of the Law (like circumcision and dietary rules) to the pure gospel as the path to real maturity. Ironically, that addition contaminated the gospel, crippling their growth, love, and all the rest of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23).

But Paul doesn’t just tell them to stop their sinning and start doing better. Instead, Paul calls them (and us) to continue in the Christian life “by the Spirit” (Gal 3:3), which is nothing less than ***faith in the gospel of Christ, or faith in the grace of God in Christ.***

This doesn’t mean that our efforts to grow in holiness are unnecessary. They are! We are called *to walk* in the good works that God prepared beforehand (Eph 2:10). We are called *to work out* our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12). We are called *to pursue* sanctification “without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). Bridges will address our obedience later on.

But Bridges is absolutely clear on this point: everything we are and do as believers is by God’s grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone…which alone glorifies God. We can’t miss this point. We can’t get so nervous about believing what this truth *could* result in (e.g., Won’t it make it easier for people to slack off in holiness?) that we don’t hear what the Bible has to say about grace. Open the door of your heart and let the glories of God’s grace truly sink in.

In light of the gospel of grace, we are not to view our efforts to obey God as ways to earn His love. We already have it forever (Rom 5:8; 1 Jn 4:8-10).

In light of the gospel of grace, we must not do good works in order to “make it right” with God after blowing it in some sin. We are already forever right with God because we’re justified by faith in Christ. So, our works are not done to appease a wrathful God (Rom 8:1)…though we need to repent from our sins all the time (1 Jn 1:9).

Lastly, in light of the gospel of grace, we must not view our obedience as a way to earn blessings…though genuine obedience to God tends to make our lives easier (think Proverbs). But God never guarantees a carefree life if we obey Him. Consider all the believers who’ve suffered immensely, like Paul. Consider Christ, who perfectly obeyed God, yet suffered the worst suffering imaginable.

If we have a wrong view of our efforts and obedience in the Christian life, we will actually cripple our relationship with God and hinder our growth, just as the Galatians did. So, we have to put good works and faith in *the right order*. Thankfully, the Bible does that for us.

It puts good works and faith in this order: ***faith 🡪 works***. James 2:14-26 is crystal-clear on this. So, is every other passage on obedience in the New Testament. Our good works are born out of our faith in Christ.

Galatians 2:20 puts it well: *“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”*

We live the Christian life by faith in Christ. Why? Because it’s not *our* life anymore, properly speaking. It’s Christ’s life. It’s Christ living in and through us. Our new lives as believers is the “Christ-life.” And the only way to live that life is by faith in Christ. And that ongoing faith in Christ results in love, which is the heart of obedience (Gal 5:6).

Now, how does this dynamic of faith-resulting-in our obedience actually work? Here’s how…

Faith is the receiving “organ” of the soul that beholds and receives the glory of Christ in the gospel (2 Cor 4:4, 6). We “see” that glory in Jesus loving us and dying for us on the cross (Gal 2:20). The Holy Spirit uses this sight of Christ’s gracious love to transform us, on the inside, from one degree of Christlikeness to the next (2 Cor 3:18). In other words, we become what we behold. And we behold Christ by faith (cf. Psa 115:1-8, esp. v. 8).

So, everything starts with faith – in the word of God, and especially, in the gospel of God. That is the key to receiving the power to fight sin, the delight in holiness, and the willpower to make changes in our lives to please Christ (2 Cor 5:9).

Why would we want to please God anyway? Out of terror, guilt, or to get something from Him? Or is it because we see and know His gracious, unconditional love for us (2 Cor 5:14-15)? Only the latter will move us to a glad and unburdened obedience (1 Jn 5:3-5).

This then is the key to all change, all growth. If we don’t grasp this dynamic, we will end up defaulting to living the Christian life mainly by our own efforts, not by faith.

Now, how do we know if we are living by our own efforts (“by the flesh” as Gal 3:3 calls it) or living by faith in Christ? Here are a few ways we can tell:

*We think we can oblige God* to bless us for the good we do and the bad we don’t do. So, when we’re not blessed in some way after putting in our service at church or being relatively righteous, we get easily sad, discouraged, angry, or cold to the things of God.

*We feel burnt out*. This is the “performance treadmill” Bridges is talking about in chapter 1. We’re anxious, exhausted, tense, overwhelmed, and just not joyful when we think about the church, service, obedience, and the gospel. We then detach from others, from church activities, and from sharing our hearts.

*We feel superior* to others who don’t measure up to our standards. This may be verbally expressed in how we confront mistakes or sins in others. But often it’s held within as we silently judge others and pigeonhole them into certain boxes that they can’t get out of no matter what they do.

*We don’t enjoy the means of grace – Bible reading, prayer, worship, and fellowship.* They become routine and boring. So, we stop engaging our minds and hearts in them. We stop doing them entirely or just go through the motions when we do them. This happens because those means are not taken up out of love for Christ, which itself is fueled by His love for us (1 Jn 4:8-10). This perpetuates a vicious cycle: not receiving love from God, not loving God and others, just doing spiritual things out of habit or duty or guilt or shame 🡪 not receiving love from God, not loving God and others, just keep doing spiritual things out of habit or duty or guilt or shame 🡪 etc., etc.

These are just a few symptoms of flesh-powered, performance-based living. There are many others. The only way out of this is by continually going back to what the Holy Spirit wants us to see – that we are loved by God and Christ, adopted as God’s children, and blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ, all secured in heaven by our Father (Eph 1:3). We have to keep recalibrating our minds and hearts by the gospel. *We must*.

Once our hearts are centered on Christ, we will slowly but surely move toward a concern for His glory and for practical righteousness. Why? Because having tasted the goodness of His grace (1 Pet 2:3), what can we do but put off sin, long for the pure milk of the word, and live for Him (1 Pet 2:1-2)? Our hearts will say, “This is the only reasonable service of worship in view of God’s mercies in the gospel” (Rom 12:1-2).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What do the following verses say about our spiritual condition apart from Christ? Try to be specific in your answer.

* Romans 3:10-20
* Isaiah 64:6

1. What is the difference between declaring temporary spiritual bankruptcy and permanent spiritual bankruptcy (pp. 3-7)?
2. Why is declaring permanent spiritual bankruptcy before God not a terrifying reality in the end? In other words, what are two truths about our permanent bankruptcy before God (pp. 8-9)?
3. Does declaring permanent bankruptcy mean *believers* can’t do anything good or that we can’t please the Lord? Look up 2 Cor 5:9; Titus 2:11-14; and Eph 2:10 to answer this.
4. What are the three stages of the Christian life? Name and briefly describe them (pp. 6-7). Then answer the following questions, looking up each reference:
   * What do we learn about stage 1 from Ephesians 2:8-9?
   * What do we learn about stage 2 from Philippians 1:6; 2:12-13?
   * What do we learn about stage 3 from Phil 3:19-20; 1 Jn 3:1-3?
5. What is God’s grace (p. 9)? How is grace and Jesus Christ connected (Titus 2:11; Gal 5:2-4; Eph 2:4-7)? Explain Bridges’ acronym on p. 11.
6. What do you think makes it so hard for a person to rely on God’s grace rather than on his or her own efforts?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. Do you spend time beholding Christ by reading God’s word consistently? What distracts you from doing that?
2. Do you meditate on the gospel regularly? Why or why not? What helps do you need to do this?