

Church Course 3: Communities of Grace

"_____ is in many ways the greatest enemy of Christianity. It is your _____ who today are the greatest enemies of the Cross of Christ."
DM Lloyd Jones

Why? **Biblical analysis of the human condition:**

Remember: essence of sin "they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25)

Post-fall human nature is such that "there is no-one righteous not even one; there is no-one who understands, no-one who seeks God". Romans 3:10-11

Sin rejects God, sin is profoundly 'anti-God' and hostile to him.

This can be expressed in one of two ways:

- An 'irreligious life' – living with no conscious regard for God whatsoever
- A 'religious life' – that is, the conscious effort to earn God's approval or acceptance through our own efforts – what is known as 'works-righteousness'. I, not God, am my Saviour
- The Gospel says: Salvation comes from **the Lord** Jonah 2:9
- Religions says: Salvation comes from '**me**'

In response to 'cheap grace' there was a saying often said in recent years, "You cannot have Jesus as 'Saviour' if you do not have him as 'Lord' (the so-called 'Lordship' debate)

But it is also so very true "You cannot have Jesus as 'Lord' if you do not have him as 'Saviour'.

The Gospel and religion are irreconcilable enemies.
'Works-righteousness' is deeply hostile to the gospel of grace.

In the gospels, the Pharisees so often embody 'religion' and 'works-righteousness'. Read through the gospels carefully and you will see the truth of the opening statement by Lloyd Jones.

Constantly, at every turn the most bitter opponents of Jesus are the Pharisees.
For example:

"But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus" Matt12:14

This is significant – Phariseeism is not just at odds with Jesus – it hates him, it wants him dead.

We say again – religion is the most bitter enemy of the gospel.

We see its origins back in Genesis 3v7

“they realised that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves”.

Following their sin, Adam and Eve now experience ‘shame’ and they also hide from God.

- Religion = the attempt to ‘cover the shame’ of our sinfulness by our own efforts without dependence upon God.
- Religion = the attempt to save ourselves.
- Religion wants to avoid God’s judgment but has no desire for God.
- Religion wants to receive the blessings of God but has no desire for God Himself.
- Religion may welcome Jesus as an example to follow but reject him as a Saviour/Substitute who does for us, in our place, what we cannot do ourselves.
- It has a deep-rooted hostility to the gospel of grace.

‘Works-righteousness’ is fuelled by our pride, if we think we are successful that inflames our pride, if we think we are failing it makes us feel crushed and despairing.

Although Phariseeism is deeply hostile to the gospel, in many ways it appears to mimic Christianity and so can be much harder to spot than a life of openly immoral rebelliousness.

Characteristics of Communities of “Religion/morality/Phariseeism/works-righteousness”

- Proud – self-righteous
- Judgmental, critical of others/those who are different, attitude of superiority
- Exclusive – cliquish – very hard to get ‘into’ from outside.
- Mono-cultural
- Focus on outward behaviour neglect of/indifferent to the heart
- ‘Sin’ = sinful acts not sinful thoughts/attitudes/desires
- Unkind/unforgiving towards failure and the sins of others
- Relationally superficial – a relational distance prevents others seeing our sin
- Accusing of others as a way of establishing your own ‘self-righteousness’ (See the Pharisee in Luke 18)

- Relate to God as a distant impersonal Judge/law giver – little or no concept or experience of intimate communion and loving relationship with God as Father
- Breeds either pride, despair or deceit
- Motivates through pride, guilt or fear
- Hates to repent
- Feels sorrow – not at sin but at sin being exposed

“godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret but worldly sorrow brings death” 2 Cor 7:10

- Joyless – emphasis on ‘mere’ duty
- ‘Bargain relationship’ with God – “I will do this if you do that”
- Other.....?????

In Matt 16:11-12, Jesus says, “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees... he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees”

Why does he use the image of ‘yeast’?

The Great Threat for ‘Gospel’ Churches is the Yeast of Phariseeism

‘Phariseeism’ is a parasite that loves to feed on gospel churches, turning the ‘younger brother’ into the ‘elder brother’. It can spread so quickly and infect a whole church, Jesus warns us to be vigilant in watching out for it. Remember it mimics many aspects of true gospel-holiness.

Why are we so prone to Phariseeism?

Our sinful nature has an inbuilt tendency to reject God’s grace and to embrace ‘works-righteousness’.

Sin expresses itself in pride = sin hates the idea that we are utterly dependent on ‘God’ for our salvation and that we can do nothing or contribute nothing ourselves:

Cast your deadly doings down
Down at Jesus’ feet
Stand in Him, in Him alone
Gloriously complete

Sin expresses itself in unbelief = we find it so hard to ‘believe’ the gospel and live in the light of the gospel.

Romans 1:17 “the righteous will live by faith” – but ‘works-righteousness’ is our ‘default’ way of living.

We get confused or ‘forget’ the Gospel.

We confuse 'justification' with 'sanctification'.

Justification = a once-for-all declaration by God that we are 'righteous' in his sight because our sin has been forgiven and we have been clothed in Christ's 'righteousness'. We cannot be more or less justified; our status of being 'justified' cannot change. We are justified 'by faith' – we may not 'feel' justified, we are declared 'justified' even though we continue to sin.

Sanctification = process of becoming more Christ-like. It begins the moment we are justified and continues all through our lives. We can grow in 'sanctification', our 'degree' of sanctification varies.

The problem is we all too often assess our 'justification' in the light of our 'sanctification' and not the other way round. That is we assess our 'standing' before God in the light of our performance (how well or how badly we think we are living the Christian life) instead of Christ's righteousness imputed to us when we were justified.

"We need to hear the gospel every day of our Christian lives. Only a continuous reminder of the gospel of God's grace through Christ will keep us from falling into good-day-bad-day thinking, wherein our daily relationship with God is based on how good we've been." Jerry Bridges

The root of the problem is the daily battle to 'believe' the gospel and to live by faith.

As we grow in the Christian life and come to understand more of what it means to be holy, as we become more aware of the commands of God and as the Holy Spirit works in us showing us more of our sin and convicting us – the great danger is that we 'forget' the gospel or we think of the gospel as something that non-Christians need, rather than understanding we need it everyday of our lives and we need to keep preaching it to ourselves all the time.

If the gospel moves into the background – we fall into the trap of Phariseism.

"Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus apart from their present spiritual achievements are subconsciously radically insecure persons – much less secure than non-Christians because they have too much light to rest easily under the constant bulletins they receive from their Christian environment about the holiness of God and the righteousness they are supposed to have. Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce defensive assertion of their own righteousness and defensive criticism of others....but the faith that surmounts the evidence and is able to warm itself at the fire of God's love instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources is actually the root of holiness." Richard Lovelace

Look at these two different ways in which Paul understands and views himself

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more; Circumcised on the 8th day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; in regard to the law a Pharisee, as for zeal persecuting the church; **as for legalistic righteousness, faultless**

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – **of whom I am the worst.**

Why are these two assessments so different?

What differences would there be in how these 2 Paul's relate to others?

Which is the authentic/true Paul? What might be the danger with such self-understanding? How is that danger avoided (1 Cor 4:2-4)

Characteristics of a Community of Grace

- Humility
- Repentance – the gospel empowers and enables me to repent
- Absence of self-righteousness
- Absence of judgmentalism and condemnatory attitudes
- Never surprised by the depth of human sinfulness
- Lack of pretence
- Honesty and openness
- Vulnerability – I can admit to failure and weakness
- A community of such people would be deemed a 'safe place' for those who feel sinful, ashamed, failures, guilty, condemned, despised, outcast and unloved
- Very real sense of unity and equality
- Joy – freedom – laughter – the joy of being set free from guilt and shame, burdens being lifted
- Acceptance of others and forgiveness of others – if one such as I have been forgiven – who am I to withhold it from others
- Lack of envy and insecurity – who I am 'in Christ' defines me – not how others see me – or how good/bad my performance is
- Hopefulness – there are no 'hopeless cases' no 'lost causes' – 'I was lost but Jesus found me'.
- A place where cultural, racial, social barriers of every kind – are torn down – all sinful – all forgiven
- Its very messy! Its not a place for perfect people or people who pretend to be perfect but for sinners discovering grace – with all kinds of needs, hurts, problems, and sin.
- No 'bargaining' but 'sacrificial' – "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him" CT Studd

- Bold risk-taking (see parable of 10 Minas Luke 19)
- A very powerful 'apologetic' for the power of the gospel – 'look how lives are being changed'
- A very powerful 'apologetic' for the power of the gospel – 'look how these people who ought to hate each other, love each other'.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to 'apply' the gospel of grace to the hearts and lives of God's people and to his Church.

"He (the Holy Spirit) will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you" John 16:15

"Be filled (and go on being filled) with the Holy Spirit" Eph 5:18

Case Study: Philemon A Motivation For Godliness

Background: Onesimus – a slave of Philemon has run away but has been converted by Paul – v10.

- 1) What difference has that made to Onesimus? V11
- 2) Slaves were despised and disregarded – how does Paul demonstrate a completely different attitude to Onesimus now that he is a brother to him in Christ? How does Paul view him? V10,12, 16b
- 3) What relationship did Philemon have to Paul v1, v17 and especially v19b
- 4) What is extraordinary in the way Paul speaks of Onesimus, the runaway slave to Philemon his slave owner? V13
- 5) Given those factors – as Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon, wanting Philemon to accept Onesimus and to welcome him not condemn him – how could Paul have approached Philemon, what method could he have used? – v8. What would Paul have been doing if he had? What would he have been appealing to in Philemon?
- 6) What does he do instead? V9 What is Paul appealing to there?
- 7) What difference does that make? V14 And what would be the consequence of that? What does Paul hope to be the outcome of the letter? V15-16, 21
- 8) How else does Paul display 'gospel-driven' motives and behaviour? V18

"Now the tax-collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" Luke 15:1-2

Jesus was a magnet for sinners – the more a church exudes the gospel of his grace – the more 'lost people' will be found.