

Two Gospels

The gospel of man or the gospel of Jesus Christ?

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Translated from French by the author

[version 1.02: October 2016]

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Note: All quotes of Biblical passages are my own version, based on the original texts as well as comparisons of various translations in modern languages.

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This work deals with the same subject matter as “Sinful Religion” but goes at it from a different angle. The two essays are thus complementary, each one making the subject a little clearer than the other one alone, by its way of presenting the material. The basic theme in both of them is the difference between “the gospel of man and the gospel of Jesus Christ” (to use the terms from the sub-title). “Sinful Religion” should be available from the same sources as this text. If it is not, it can be downloaded for free from www.davidshutes.com.

Introduction: Which gospel is the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Christians believe in salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. We preach that Jesus died and rose again, and that salvation is attained by believing in him. All of that is correct, and important, and almost unanimously agreed on by all those who call themselves Christians. What is much less understood, however, is that that is not sufficient: It is not all the totality of the gospel message. It is all well and good to speak of salvation by faith, because of Christ and not because of our own efforts, especially in a world where religion is so thoroughly marked by human works and human merit. But we also need to know *what* salvation is offered to us in Christ. That, I am fully persuaded, is the biggest issue confronting Christianity as we enter the 21st century.

There are many different religions in the world, of course, with many different messages. It is extremely difficult to try to sort out all the multitude of teachings proclaimed on every side by so many different religious groups, both Christian and non-Christian. Nevertheless, in a very real sense, there are only two fundamentally different messages. All the religions that man has invented throughout history proclaim one of these messages, in one form or another. Only Jesus Christ announces the other one.

The first religious message tries to show us how to deal with our sufferings, our problems, everything that prevents us from being happy. This message teaches us that, with the aid of God, or gods, or spirits, or “the universal principle” or whatever other concept of divinity that particular religion uses, we can seriously reduce or even totally eliminate all these difficulties. The primary motivation of those who practice pretty much all forms of religion, then, is the desire to avoid suffering. Life is hard and, if divine help can make it less hard, then the rules and restrictions of religion are cheerfully accepted. This message is found in every society and in every period of history, because it is simply the message that the sinful human heart naturally wants to hear. That's why it can be called “The gospel of man.”

The other message shows us how God, through Jesus Christ, can change our hearts in order to deliver us from sin. The primary motivation of those who accept this message is thus not the desire to be delivered from suffering but the desire to be delivered from the corruption in their own hearts. Holiness is incomparably more important to such people than comfort, prosperity or personal well-being.

It is very important to understand that the use of “Christian” terminology does not necessarily mean the message itself is truly Christian. It is very easy to speak of the death and resurrection of Christ, of salvation by faith, and of various other Biblical principles, and yet proclaim a different message from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Since man's gospel is the direct result of the disposition of man's sinful heart, it infects the Christian message just as easily as it infects any other religious message. It is very easy for this man-centered “gospel” to take the place of the gospel of Jesus Christ without anyone even noticing, unless they pay careful attention.

That is why Paul, in 2 Timothy 3:5, speaks of those who “hold to a form of godliness but deny its power.” The “form” includes a lot of Christian vocabulary. But the true power of the gospel of Jesus Christ lies in its ability to *deliver us from sin*. Denying the power of the gospel thus means seeking something other than being delivered from sin, despite holding on to a generally “Christian” religion.

In fact, the whole passage in 2 Timothy 3, from the beginning of the chapter, shows very well and in a number of ways the difference between man's gospel and the gospel of Christ: “But note this: In the last days there will be very difficult times. Men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, haters of what is good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid such people” (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

Paul says these people are “lovers of themselves,” meaning that their priority is their own well-being. They are also “lovers of money,” so they are looking for prosperity. Especially, they are “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,” a clear statement that they are motivated by what makes them feel good rather than

what draws them nearer to the heart of God. All of that is an exceedingly appropriate description of some teachings that, despite talking of “salvation by faith in Christ,” nevertheless promote riches (“lovers of money”), personal well-being (“lovers of themselves”) and seeking God's blessings rather than seeking God himself (“lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God”). It is very clear that those who follow man's gospel have other priorities than holiness and fellowship with God.

Those who truly love God, however, want to draw nearer to him. They do it out of love for God, rather than a simple desire to obtain the blessings he can give us. They know also that sin prevents us from knowing this deep intimacy with God. Their deepest desire is thus for holiness, in order to draw near to God and to be like him. They are willing to do without riches or success, they are willing to continue to face trials and difficulties, as long as they can draw closer and closer to God.

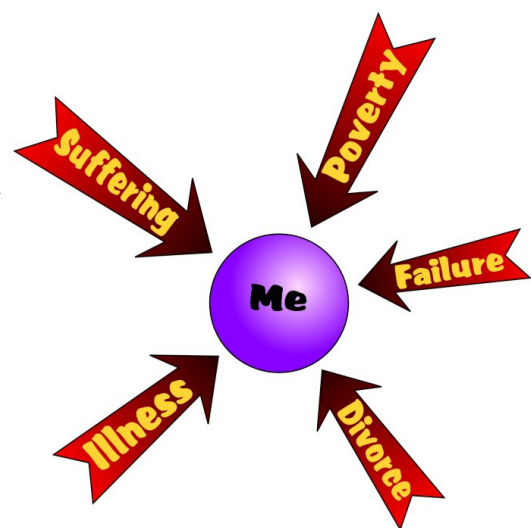
It is therefore extremely important to be able to distinguish between these two messages. Timothy was a church leader well grounded in Christian doctrine. If Paul even warns someone like him that he must be on guard against this danger, that shows that it is not always as easy as one might think to tell the difference. Those who don't turn to God first and foremost for himself will always put their immediate well-being ahead of holiness in the way they live their faith. Those who want to truly draw near to God himself thus need to be very careful not to let themselves be influenced by this trap of Satan.

The conflict between these two messages is much older than Christianity. Almost from the very beginning of the Old Testament, God calls us to seek after him personally, to love him as our first priority, and to live in holiness. But man always tries to twist God's message and seek after protection, deliverance from problems, and prosperity. Even today, the conflict between these two ways of looking at spiritual priorities goes far beyond Christian circles. Nevertheless, what needs to concern us the most is the form this conflict takes in our churches. “What do I have to do with judging those outside the church? Is it not those inside that you are to judge? God will judge those who are outside. 'Expel the wicked man from among you.'” (1 Corinthians 5:12-13).

Identifying man's gospel

If we have a good grasp of the nature of man's gospel, we will recognize it when we see it, even if it is disguised as a “Christian” message. It is therefore very useful to understand the basic idea of this religious approach. Man's gospel takes many forms, some of which have nothing to do with Christianity – those forms are not the ones that are a danger for us, so we won't spend much time with them (except for noting that the fundamental spiritual motivation of escaping the sufferings of this life is the same no matter whether the form is similar to Christianity or far removed from it). But those forms that imitate the Bible message the most closely are worth looking at in more detail.

If we want to understand the fundamental goal of this type of spirituality, we have to start with the problems we all face in life. These problems are quite varied, depending on the situation, the culture, the period of history, and the person's particular motivation, but they are always there. Today, in Western culture, someone might be facing unemployment, poor health, or loneliness. In other countries, health problems might be at the top of the list (though not the *same* illnesses), closely followed by poverty. None of that changes much of anything because the specific type of problems we face is not the point. The point is that whatever these problems are, they keep us from being truly happy and enjoying life to its fullest. It is important to note that these problems come from outside our own person. (Even health problems are the result either of an illness that invaded our body, or an accident, so they are not



fundamentally a part of our person, either.) These problems come at us like a band of armed assailants, constantly attacking us. They are a part of the circumstances in which we live, rather than a part of our fundamental nature.

The difficulties we face in life are usually what concerns us the most. Because they affect our daily lives, our attention is normally focused on them. We are of course conscious that there are shortcomings that are part of our own person, and which we would like to change, but it is fairly rare that these faults are our primary concern. If we *are* troubled by our own shortcomings, it is almost always because of the difficulties they pose in the situations we face. I might be bothered by being timid, for example, but if I am, it is pretty much because I don't have many friends and feel lonely, because of my timidity. Our character faults are not what actually bother us, normally; they are merely factors that cause problems in the situations we face.

Because of that, the "salvation" that most people seek the most easily and naturally is simply being delivered from those problems that come from outside. They affect us, in very personal ways, but they are not actually part of us. They come from outside, from the situations we face in our lives. Thus, the fundamental problem that needs to be dealt with is not *us*, but the difficult circumstances in which we live.

The whole point of man's gospel is for God to give us what we desire

The goal of this type of religion is thus to find the way or ways that will allow us to obtain from God (or from the gods, or the spirits, or whatever else we believe in) the help we need with our problems: We want God to get rid of those things that bother us, but he doesn't seem to want to do it. The point of religion, in this outlook, is thus to discover what will cause God to help us. The means that will accomplish that are extremely variable, depending on the religion in question, but that is always the goal. It might be through sacrifices, or good works, or rituals, or by the right kind of prayers or praise or worship, or by any number of other methods, but those are only the means. The goal is always the same, that of convincing (or even of forcing, in certain ways of thinking) God to give us the blessings we desire, the relief from whatever it is that troubles us.

Submission to the will of God is not a fundamental part of this type of religious thinking. It might be there, but it is never the goal. When man's religion includes obedience to God, it is always seen as an obligation, imposed on the believer in return for the blessings received. Obedience, then, is simply one of the means of convincing or even of manipulating God so he will give us what we desire. In this outlook, obedience does not flow from the deep conviction that God, in his infinite wisdom and perfect love, knows incomparably better than we do what is good and right, but only from the necessity of doing what we have to do because otherwise we will not receive the blessings we are looking for.

The basic outlook here is not seeking to know what God wants from us, because we love and trust him, but doing what is necessary so that he will do what we want. We have problems, we want to be delivered from them, we want God to do it. It is clearly *our* will that should be done rather than God's will. This approach to spiritual life is exactly the opposite of that which marked the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead of "not my will but yours be done," it is "Not your will, but *mine* be done."

The essence of man's gospel is thus a preoccupation with our personal well-being, an overriding desire to be delivered from the difficulties we face, and the quest for God's blessings. God, in this thinking, is ultimately reduced to the role of a servant: We love him for what he can do rather than for himself. We are looking for the most efficient ways of influencing him, so that he will give us what we desire, and we obey him only to the extent that that seems to be part of the required means for getting God to give us what we want.

The Lord becomes the servant

In man's gospel, though it might not be obvious to everyone, God is reduced to the role of a servant. Since it is man's will that is supposed to be accomplished rather than God's – even when very "spiritual" means are used so that God will act – is it ultimately man who is in control and God who acts according to man's desires. This is a serious and fundamental problem in the very nature of man's relationship with God. In

reality, God is Lord, not a servant.

There might be those who do not see this as a problem, basing themselves on the principle that Jesus, in coming into this world, “took on the form of a slave” (Philippians 2:7; see also verses such as Mark 10:45 and Luke 22:27). On this basis, people might claim that the idea of God as a servant is not a part of man's gospel, but of the true Biblical message.

That is not at all the case, however. In his grace, God chooses to be of service to us in quite a few different areas. That is the nature of his love. But we must not confuse magnanimity and servitude. Just because God desires to help us does not mean it is up to us to tell him what he has to do and how.

The difference is well illustrated by the passage of John 13:1-16. When Jesus wanted to show the apostles the attitude they needed to have in being willing to serve others, he did it by washing their feet. When he got to Peter, Peter didn't want him to do it. He knew that Jesus is the Lord and that the job of washing guests' feet is not something for the Lord. He tells Jesus in verse 8, “You shall never wash my feet!” But Jesus simply replied, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with me.”

At that point, Peter changed his approach. Since Jesus insisted on this role as a servant, Peter started telling him all that he should do: “Then not just my feet, Lord, but also wash my hands and my head” (verse 9). Jesus wouldn't go along with that, though. Just because he wanted to show the apostles how to have a servant's heart in the ministry didn't mean he was going to do for Peter what Peter should do for himself. In one sense, Jesus is indeed a servant; he said so himself. But he is a servant who decides what service he should render, not a servant who takes orders.

That does not mean that any believer who asks something of the Lord is necessarily operating on the basis of man's gospel. We have the right to ask the Lord's help when we are in difficulty. That is good for us, because it reminds us that we are dependent on him: Without God we just can't handle our own lives right. But asking a favor of his grace is not at all the same thing as trying to find the best way to force him to give us what we ask. In 2 Corinthians 12:8, the apostle Paul asked God to deliver him from his “thorn in the flesh.” He even insisted on it in his prayers, since he says he “pleaded” with God, and did so three different times. But he also realized that God has every right to say no. In his wisdom, God replied: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.” Paul accepted that, because he knows that God is not a servant who does our bidding. It is exactly the other way around: It is our place to do *his* will.

The idea that we can figure out how to tell God what he has to do is indeed a part of man's gospel. It is even one of the most prominent aspects of that spirituality. “I ask for your help, in your grace, but you have the right to say no because it is your will that should be done and not my own” simply is not part of the motivation of the sinful human heart. If religion does not guarantee us a way of receiving the blessings we desire, those who live according to the values of this world simply are not interested in it. Man's gospel always and necessarily reduces God to the level of a servant: He is strong and competent servant who can do wonderful things, but he better do the wonderful things *we* want him to do. Otherwise, he just isn't worth bothering with. That's the whole nature of man's gospel.

“Another gospel” that doesn't actually exist

We need to add one last, important word on this subject before moving on: We must not think that man has to choose between this gospel and the gospel of Jesus Christ, as if the two were in competition with each other. Man's gospel is the invention of the deepest desire of man's sinful heart, a heart that wants God's help in dealing with our problems but does not want to submit to him any more than is necessary. ***There is nothing more to this “gospel” than that.*** It is what sinful man *wants*, but there is no reality to it.

The reason for that is very simple. God will never accept this role as a simple servant, where he is worshiped, praised and obeyed simply in order to appease him, so he will be happy with us and give us something in return. Satan has always tried to convince the human race that this is how religion works, and he always proposes religions that fit right in with what the sinful heart wants to believe anyway, but there is no real

“salvation” in man's gospel, no matter *how* widespread it is, because *it isn't true*. God is not our servant. His intent is not to do what *we* want him to do, because he has other priorities for us right now than making our lives easier by getting rid of our problems for us. Sure, he will do that one day, when we will be with him and the most important things (that we will be looking at shortly) will have been dealt with. But to make that a priority right now would clearly be a case of putting the cart before the horse.

Paul wrote to the Galatian believers: “I am amazed that you are turning away so quickly from the one who called you by the grace of Christ, and turning to a different gospel” (Galatians 1:6). They wanted to “do what was necessary” (in their case, circumcision) so that they could receive salvation from God in return for what they had done. This is thus very clearly a form of man's gospel. But Paul added immediately, in verse 7: “which is not really another gospel; it is just that some people are troubling you, wanting to distort the gospel of Christ.”

“Which is not really another gospel.” Man's gospel is just lies and illusions. It does not actually correspond to any spiritual reality. The real spiritual choice for salvation is not between the gospel of Christ and man's gospel, but between the gospel of Christ and nothing at all. Those who try to do everything they can in order to receive God's blessings and avoid suffering always end up facing the same problems as everyone else in the world. God gives salvation by grace to those who accept the gospel of Christ, but he gives nothing at all to those who are just trying to manipulate him for selfish, material goals. In this sense, then, even though it is so widespread in people's thinking, man's gospel does not even exist.

The fundamental principle of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Surprising as it may seem, most Christians are not able to answer the question: “What is salvation?” If the question is asked, most people will give an answer that has to do with faith in Christ. But that is the answer to a *different* question, “How can we receive salvation?”

There is a profound and important difference between these two concepts. Think of a salesman trying to convince a client to buy something. When the potential buyer asks him what the product is and why he needs it, the salesman answers by explaining the conditions for payment. The client repeats his question because he wants to know just what this thing is, and the salesman tells him what a great offer it is. And so on. The client will end up thinking that either the seller doesn't know just what it is he is selling, or else he doesn't want to say because there is something about it that he wants to hide. In any case, that way of “selling” won't be very efficient.

And yet, that's what happens too often with Christians. “What is salvation?” “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” “Yes, but just what is it that I am getting into?” “By grace you are saved, through faith.” We know how salvation is received, but we appear to be much less clear on just what it is.

If we ask the question a different way, there is a better chance of getting an answer, but that answer will almost always be incomplete. “Why do I need to be saved?” “Because you are going to go to hell for your sins and only salvation will allow you to escape that awful destiny.” In other words, salvation is a way of escaping hell. It isn't really anything more than “eternal fire insurance.”

It's not that that is exactly *wrong*, but it is woefully incomplete. And if it is incomplete, that means that those who give that kind of answer don't really know what salvation is. They know in general how to receive it (and even that depends on what they have been taught; many talk about the really serious sins you have to avoid, the good works you have to do, or even talk explicitly about deserving salvation, depending on what their churches teach), but they have only a very vague idea of what salvation *is*. This is a very serious problem: If you don't know just what salvation is, it is pretty much impossible to know when the message of “salvation” that someone announces is not the salvation that Jesus offers us. This is how man's gospel has come to contaminate “Christian” thinking so greatly and so easily: As long as the *means* of salvation is more or less right (faith in Christ), the message is usually accepted as “Biblical.”

The most important points of the gospel in a nutshell: Matthew 1:21

One of the best formulations of the gospel in the whole Bible is found almost at the very beginning of the New Testament. It is very complete, including both the means of salvation and the nature of salvation. Chronologically, it is situated even before the birth of Christ. This announcement comes from the angel who explained to Joseph how his fiancée came to be pregnant, even though he had never yet slept with her. The passage is in Matthew 1:20-21: “While he was thinking on these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. And she will give birth to a son, and you shall call him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’”

The angel, in explaining why this extraordinary event is happening, sums up the entire life and mission of Jesus Christ by saying that Jesus will save his people from their sins. This summary doesn't give all the details, but gives us an excellent reminder of the most important points: Jesus saves us from our sins.

The angel speaks of *sins* (plural), but we could just as well speak of *sin* (singular). *Sin* is the fundamental principle, the disposition of the heart. *Sins* are the actions, words, thoughts and attitudes by which sin manifests itself in our lives. They cannot be separated from each other. Sin has to manifest itself, and it does it by sins. Sins cannot be the result of anything but sin; if the manifestations are there, the root is there as well. The Bible often speaks of sins, because they are what is visible, so that we can understand them more easily. But the Bible also speaks of sin, in the singular, as the heart attitude that produces these sins. The way Jesus saves from *sins* is by saving from *sin*. If the root is dealt with, the manifestations will have to disappear.

Sin is a bit harder to understand than sins. Sins are relatively easy to spot: lies, violence, mean behavior, and so on. You can name them, you can see them. It is also worth noting that at any given moment, it is at least possible to avoid any particular sin: You can choose to tell the truth, instead of lying, for example. You can refuse to steal, and instead buy something honestly, or choose not to kill someone who bothers you, even if you are angry.

But the same thing is not true of sin, the fundamental principle in our lives. I can choose not to manifest sin by a given harmful act or word, but I cannot choose not to be a sinner in my heart. And if I am a sinner, that will inevitably show up sometimes in the way I act, speak and think.

That's why, all too often, Christian teaching puts the accent on *sins* instead of on *sin*. It's easier to forbid a list of bad actions than to correct the root problem, the heart attitude that causes us to commit those bad actions. That is made even worse by the difficulty we have to really understand what sin is.

What is sin?

There are various ways of explaining sin, several of which are quite acceptable. The most useful explanations, however, do so in terms of our relationship with God. The root of sin, as we see in Genesis 3, is tied up with our attitude towards God. The best way to understand the fundamental problem of sin is thus by looking at the place God has in our lives.

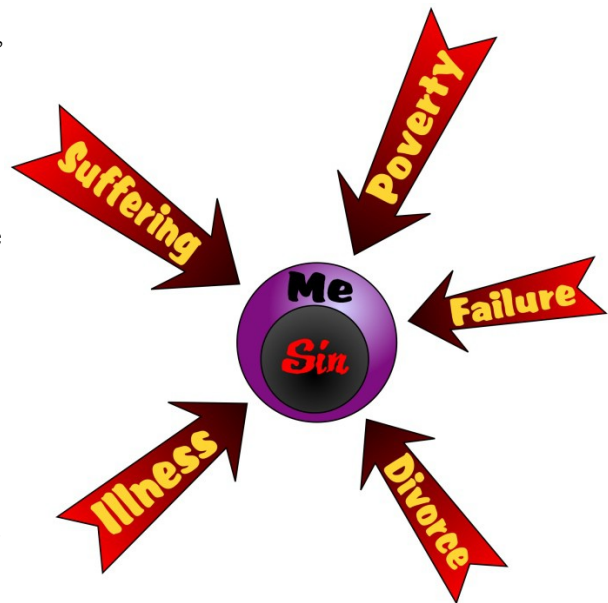
It should be noted that sin is not always – and not even usually – a total refusal of God. If so many people who want nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ are nevertheless attracted by man's gospel, that shows that sinners can very easily be interested in God. Sin is not necessarily the refusal of God in our lives, but it is always, at the very least, *the refusal for God to have his place as God in our lives*. Lots of sinners want God in their lives, to help them out with their problems, but they sure don't want him to be *God* in their lives.

In Romans 1, Paul explains what the root problem is that the gospel is supposed to solve, and that's exactly the point he makes. After showing in Romans 1:19-20 that it is obvious to anyone who wants to believe it that God exists, he writes in verse 21: “For even though they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

“They did not glorify him *as God*.” Sinful men are often quite willing to “glorify God.” That's why there are so many temples, idols, and impressive religious rituals. Wanting to “glorify God” enough that he will deliver them from their problems (following the principle of man's gospel), they are willing to do quite a bit, even difficult and costly things, in order to prove how important God is to them. He is in fact very important to a lot of unrepentant sinners, but not *as God*. They will glorify him, but not by letting him have the place he should have in their lives.

Sin is this refusal to let God really be God in our lives. It results in all kinds of bad actions, which are “sins,” but the root of it all is in the refusal to let God have the place he ought to have. “Not your will, but mine be done” sums up the attitude of unrepentant sinners towards God, even (one might even say: especially) when they practice some religion. What counts the most for sinners is that God delivers them from their problems, rather than his complete and uncontested control in their lives.

In addition to the problems that come at us from all sides, there is thus another major problem for every human being: sin. It is solidly rooted in our hearts, and it is worse than all the problems outside of us, because it is right in us, poisoning us from the inside-out. Even if all the other problems could be totally eliminated, this one, this corruption deep inside every one of us, would still be there. “But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and those are what defiles a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matthew 15:18-19). *Sins*, which are fairly visible, come from *sin*, which is much harder to see but which corrupts the disposition of our entire heart.



This root problem, this interior problem, is God's priority in salvation. We want him to get rid of the problems around us; he wants to get rid of the problem in us. We want him to change our circumstances; he wants to change our hearts. That's why the whole gospel of Jesus Christ can be summed up in this one little sentence: Jesus saves us from sin.

This way of formulating the gospel message has quite a few interesting implications which will help us to better understand what salvation is all about. Let's take a look at some of its most important implications.

It is Jesus who saves from sin: salvation by faith.

This part of the formulation deals with the *means* of salvation: It is Jesus who saves us, rather than ourselves. Salvation does not come from us, from our efforts, from our good intentions, from our righteousness, from our sincerity, from our prayers, or from anything else that originates in us. It is a free gift from God that we could never deserve, because we could never do what it takes to deserve it.

Although the Bible says it is impossible to be saved by our works, it nevertheless shows us clearly what would be necessary to do it: You have to keep the law. The reason it says that is not in order to make people think there are two different ways to be saved, but so that we can see why, in reality, there is only one.

Paul writes in Romans 2:13, “For it is not those who hear the law who are righteousness before God, but those who keep the law will be justified.” A statement like this might seem strange, coming from the man who is so well-known for his defense of salvation by faith alone, but that is what he wrote: “those who keep the law will be justified.”

We must not misinterpret what he wrote, though. He didn't say "those who *try* to keep the law will be justified," or "those who keep *most of* the law will be justified." In order to be saved by your own efforts, you have to keep the *whole* law: "For whoever keeps the whole law, and yet stumbles in just one point, has become guilty of it all" (James 2:10).

That is actually very reasonable. The root problem is *sin*, not just *sins*. If there is even one single sin in a person's life, that means that the principle of sin is still there in his heart. Those who concern themselves the most with works can easily begin to think that, because a lot of the worst and most visible manifestations of sin have been eliminated, the problem isn't there any more. Or at least, not very much. But as soon as you look at the root attitude in the heart, even one sin shows that the general problem has not been dealt with. So James is right: If you stumble in just one point, you are wholly guilty, because you are still guided by the principle of sin.

The rich young ruler and salvation by works

That's what Jesus tried to show the young man whose story is told in Matthew 19:16-22, Mark 10:17-22 and Luke 18:18-23. He doesn't appear to have been very successful, but that was still the point.

The young man asked a question, which is best understood by putting together all the bits of it found in the different texts: "Good teacher, what good thing should I do in order to inherit eternal life?" Note that he did not ask, "How can I be saved?" or "How can someone find grace?" He asked what *he* had to do, by his own good works, in order to "inherit" eternal life. An inheritance is not a gift of grace, or an unexpected gift. It is a right. He wants to know what he has to do so that, because of his own efforts, he will have the *right* to eternal life.

Jesus starts by pointing out to him that only God is good. He is not telling this young man that he shouldn't have called him "*good* teacher," because he is indeed good, being wholly without sin. But he uses the young man's form of address as a springboard for explaining that God's goodness is incomparably greater than that of any ordinary human being. That is why "more or less good" can never be enough for him. A perfectly holy God cannot approve of someone being "only a little sinful." Who among us can ever measure up to the God who said: "Be holy, for I am holy"? If this young man realizes how good God is, in a way that none of us can ever be, he will see that there is no answer to his question: No one can ever do enough good things to have the right to eternal life.

Jesus adds that he would have to keep the commandments. Not "Do your best" or "Keep the most important ones." He would have to keep all of God's law. At that point, the young man should have understood, especially after the reminder that no one is good the way God is good, that he hadn't done that. But instead of admitting that he was incapable of keeping God's commandments perfectly, he simply said: "Teacher, I have kept all of that since my youth." Impregnated with the religious outlook of the day, he honestly believed that his efforts were sufficient. He is aware that he is lacking something, even so, but he doesn't believe the problem is in how well he keeps the law.

And yet, that was indeed the problem. The law also says: "You shall have no other gods before my face." Jesus knows that this rich young man has another god: his money. Jesus does not say that money takes the place of God for everyone, but he does know it is a widespread syndrome. Many, many people care more about earning a lot of money than they do about drawing near to God in holiness. (The widespread popularity of the gospel of prosperity shows how true that is.) What Jesus tells this young man to do is not a general principle that he wants everyone to follow, but it is what is necessary for this young man who has let wealth take the place of God in his life: "Sell everything you have, give the money to the poor, and come follow me."

Jesus is trying to make him see that it is impossible to keep God's law perfectly, that it is only by following Jesus that he will find grace and thus the way to eternal life. But the young man, instead of accepting that, simply goes on his way, saddened. God's demands are just too great for him.

We should not be too quick to judge him, though. Each one of us is in the same situation, in one area or another. We all have priorities, ways of acting, ways of reacting, habits, ways of talking, or something that is the result of sin in our lives and that we just can't get rid of. What is important is to understand that the young man's question doesn't have any answer in the real world: "What can I do, on my own, so that I have the right to eternal life?" Answer: "Nothing."

It is Jesus, and Jesus alone, who saves us from our sins. Since God cannot approve anything less than perfection, none of us can save ourselves or even help Jesus do it. Our best efforts to that end are totally insufficient for a perfectly holy God.

But Jesus can save us, and he is willing to do it. By his death he has paid the price for all our sin, and by his resurrection he demonstrates his victory over the condemnation for sin, since he has conquered death which is the result of sin. He simply asks us to believe that he has done all that is necessary, and to accept the salvation he offers us. The very nature of saving faith is to believe that Jesus' death and resurrection are sufficient for us.

Salvation by faith: What kind of faith?

Faith is not just believing something. You can believe something that isn't true, but that doesn't make it true just because you believe it. Faith is not some kind of spiritual force, either, where the "quality" of your faith is what will make the difference. As James reminds us, even demons believe very firmly that God exists (James 2:19). That doesn't save them in any way.

Salvation comes through faith because of the *content* of our faith, not because of its *quality*. The content of saving faith is that we "believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up for our sins and was raised again for our justification" (Romans 4:24-25). The idea that the quality of faith is what counts comes from man's gospel, where the goal is to influence God by what we do: In that outlook, if we believe strongly enough, God will act. A number of Biblical passages (taken out of context, of course) are used to show this principle, but the true Biblical principle about faith has to do with the *object* of faith (we believe in *God*, because he is the one who acts, rather than our faith acting on its own power) and the *content* of faith: Saving faith is trusting in the death of Christ to fully pay the price for our sin.

Jesus is thus the means of salvation in the Biblical gospel. He, and he alone, saves us from sin. The means of salvation is an essential part of the message, because any idea of human worthiness puts us directly into man's gospel where we try to influence God by our actions, our righteousness, or some other quality, so that he will give us what we want. The only role man plays in salvation is to believe that Jesus, all by himself, did all that is necessary in order to redeem us from sin. (And even in our belief, it would be impossible for us to believe in Jesus and turn to God without God's work in our hearts, but that is not our subject here.)

It is correct, then, to insist on faith alone as the means of salvation. Any message which does not contain this principle is not the gospel of Jesus Christ, but man's gospel. Nevertheless, if we want to be faithful to the Biblical message, it is not enough to speak only of the *means* of salvation. And there we touch on the greatest error of modern theology: Too often, we think that any message that proposes salvation by faith in Christ must be Biblical. But that is not at all true. Faith as the only means of salvation is an essential part of the gospel, but it is not the totality of the gospel. To see the rest we need to turn our attention to the other aspects of the gospel that are contained in the formulation: "Jesus saves us from sin."

Jesus saves us from sin: the hope of perfect holiness.

"Save" means "deliver" or "set free from." If you save someone from drowning, you deliver him; he is no longer drowning. Saving someone from poverty means doing what is necessary so that he is no longer poor. Saving someone from illness means healing him, so that he is no longer ill.

If we apply this principle to the way the angel announced the gospel to Joseph, we see an important element of salvation, which is announced time and time again in the Bible (including in the Old Testament) but which is lacking all too often in our understanding and our proclamation of salvation: If Jesus delivers us from sin, the result is that we will no longer be sinners, period.

Very often, the way the gospel is proclaimed reduces salvation to mere forgiveness. “Believe in Jesus and you will be forgiven for your sins, so you can go to heaven instead of going to hell.” This is not exactly incorrect, but it is neither the totality of the gospel, nor the most important aspect of what the Bible says about salvation. The gospel message, according to the angel's announcement (and according to what the rest of the Bible teaches) is not “Jesus forgives us for sin” but “Jesus *saves* us from sin.” Forgiveness is a part of it, but it is not even close to being the most important part.

Saved from sin or only saved from condemnation?

Condemnation for sin is a fact. God, being perfectly holy, can never tolerate in his presence or in his kingdom those who are not holy. Many times, in one way or another, the Bible says “No man can see God and live.” We are impure, we are sinners, but God is absolutely holy. A sinner can only be expelled from the presence of God: “Depart from me, you who do evil” (Matthew 7:23).

If we are expelled from the presence of God, we necessarily find ourselves in a place where God is not present, where sin is thus rampant, and where sinners (starting with Satan himself) do all the evil they want. That all adds up to a horrible way to live, a place of suffering, an unbearable situation. Being condemned for sin is really the worst thing that can happen to us.

Condemnation is thus one of the problems we face, along with so many others. It is an extremely serious problem, it is really *the* most serious problem, but it is still part of the difficulties that come from outside of us and which affect us and cause us suffering. Unlike the others, though, this problem is a direct result of the problem inside us, sin.

Once we understand that, we see why God's first priority for us is not simply to deliver us from condemnation. Eliminating condemnation without dealing with sin itself would mean putting the accent on personal happiness instead of on holiness. That puts us squarely in the framework of man's gospel. But if God first deals with the problem *inside* us (sin), that will immediately eliminate the problem of condemnation. But it can't work the other way around; if sin is not dealt with, then condemnation cannot be eliminated because, in our present state, “No one can see God and live.”



Condemnation for sin, with all the suffering it implies, is a much greater preoccupation in the minds of those who believe the Bible is true than sin itself. It seems much more important to be delivered from condemnation than to be delivered from sin. That is why we so easily reduce the gospel to a simple message of forgiveness. But what really matters is to be delivered from sin, not just to be forgiven.

Perfect holiness is essential in order to stand before God

It is only this knowledge that salvation entails being delivered from sin, and not just forgiven for sin, that allows us our Christian hope: the perspective of standing before God himself one day. How could a God who is perfectly holy welcome us if sin was still present in our hearts? Forgiving sin means recognizing that it

exists, but choosing not to condemn the sinner. How then is it possible for God to forgive sin, without that requiring him to compromise his holiness?

The usual answer is that “He sees us through the lens of Christ’s righteousness.” That would mean that salvation, when it comes right down to it, is really nothing more than a kind of “legal fiction” whereby God acts towards us *as if* we were without sin, even though we are, in fact, still sinners. But salvation is much more than forgiveness. Jesus saves us from sin, meaning he delivers us not only from its condemnation but also from the very presence of sin in our being. The result of salvation is the total elimination of sin in us.

Why are we then still sinners, even though we have come to the Lord? It is because the process of salvation is not yet completed. “We are saved in hope,” Paul tells us in Romans 8:24. He then adds: “Hope that is seen is not hope.” Being “saved in hope” therefore means that the process has begun, which gives us the assurance of being able to go to the end if that is truly the salvation we want, but that what we have right now is not yet the totality of God’s work in us.

This is how we can come into the presence of God one day: When he has finished his work of salvation in us, we will no longer be “forgiven sinners.” He will have completely and definitively eliminated all trace of sin in us. Jude 1:24 says that God “is able to keep you from stumbling and to cause you to stand in the presence of his glory, blameless and with great joy.” If we are blameless, that means there is no sin in us. It is not simply that God does not blame us for our sin, when he could condemn us for it if he wanted to, but that there will no longer be anything to blame us *for*.

Without this holiness, without totally eliminating sin in us, it would never be possible for us to “stand in the presence of his glory.” The verb translated “stand” does not just mean having an appearance. Jude is not just talking about how God sees us, as if the way God sees us is one thing but reality is something different. The idea is very clearly one of “standing in his presence.” One day we will actually come before God, in all his glory. The only thing that will make that possible, without us being expelled from his presence because of his perfect holiness is the fact that we, too, will truly be blameless and sinless. The saving work of Christ, the salvation that *saves* from sin and does not limit itself simply to *forgiving* sin, will be complete.

This is not just an obscure doctrine. It is the very nature of the salvation that Jesus offers us, and that he has made possible by his death and resurrection. Many Biblical passages present this truth clearly: Jesus can transform us, purify us, sanctify us, and make us holy as he is holy, and that is exactly what he wants to do in our lives. The goal is not just to deliver me from a huge problem that could cause me a lot of suffering – condemnation for sin – but to deliver me from a problem that, by nature, defines my very mindset: sin. The worst problem is not the terrible things that happen to me, or even the terrible things that await me after death. The real problem is *me*. Man’s gospel wants God to do his work by changing the circumstances in which we find ourselves. God wants to do his work by changing us first of all.

The believer’s motivation flows from his understanding of the gospel

All of that is absolutely fundamental in understanding the gospel. Jesus died so that we can be changed, transformed, delivered from the sin that characterizes our motivations and our actions in this life. That is the salvation that he offers us. If we don’t want it, if we merely want to be delivered from illness, poverty, a hard life, or suffering, that means that *we don’t want the salvation Christ offers us*.

That is an extremely serious problem. God does not force anyone to come to him against that person’s will. He works in our hearts in a way we cannot fully understand, by his Spirit, to call us to himself and, without that work, no sinner would ever have the desire, on his own, to turn to God and truly let God be God in his life. A sinner can easily want God’s help in dealing with problems. But wanting him as the uncontested Master of our lives? No. That is the exact opposite of a sinner’s root motivation.

Nevertheless, if we don’t want that transformation, if to the very end we refuse the salvation he offers us, he will not save us against our will. That is why Jesus wept over Jerusalem, just a few days before he was crucified: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you, how I have

longed to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were unwilling!” (Matthew 23:37).

“I wanted ... but you were unwilling!” Without God's work of calling us to himself, no sinner would ever turn to him, but even with that calling, those who simply don't want the salvation he offers will not be saved. That is why “many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14).

The final result of the work of the cross of Christ in us will be the perfect holiness that is the only condition on which we can enter into God's presence. That is our true hope, infinitely more important than merely looking forward to a life where “there will no longer be death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4). Sure, the thought of a life without those sorrows is attractive to us all; there's nothing wrong with looking forward to it. But if that is our primary motivation, if our top priority is to be delivered from suffering instead of being delivered from sin, that means we have not truly understood the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Understanding that Jesus saves us from sin, that that is the most important aspect of his work (which is why the angel puts the accent on that when he sums up in a few words the whole reason for Jesus coming into this world), also means understanding the goal we must pursue, the goal that is the reason we accepted this salvation in the first place. Man's gospel proposes as its primary goal to deliver us from difficulties; Jesus proposes to deliver us from sin. It is absolutely essential to grasp the distinction between the two, and to see clearly how Christ's program for us is radically different from what man's gospel offers, if we want to really enter into God's plan for us. If we are following after some other spiritual goal, even if we are doing it “by faith in Jesus,” we are not on the road that Christ opened for us, the road that will finally bring us into the very presence of God, blameless and holy because he will have totally transformed our being.

The role of obedience in the Christian life

Among other things, understanding the true nature of the gospel message (*delivered* from sin and not just *forgiven* for sin because God wants to bless us; Acts 3:26 shows clearly that the primary blessing God wants to give us is to turn us away from sin) will change the way we think of obedience to God, in a very profound way. Depending on whether we want to be delivered first and foremost from sin or from our personal problems, we will have a very different attitude about obeying God.

If the primary goal is to be delivered from sin, and knowing that sin twists our desires, attitudes and priorities, it is obviously a good thing to let ourselves be guided by a God who knows infinitely better than we do what is good and what is right, and who cares for us and wants what is best for us. It is not for nothing that the Apostle Paul, who had resisted God's leading for so long, later wrote that God's will is “good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). Obeying God is thus a *privilege*, rather than a *burden*. It is only when we think our selfish desires for personal comfort, success and ease are actually correct that we start thinking that obeying God is going to deprive us of something that is really worthwhile.

Now, this by no means implies that every true believer will immediately and joyously accept God's will in every area of his or her life, or that a person is not a true Christian simply because, sometimes, they have a hard time accepting God's leading. This difficulty in obeying God's leading is not good but, unfortunately, it happens – precisely because our hearts *are* twisted by sin. All too often, even when we are really sincere about wanting to walk with God and be delivered from sin, we find excuses for avoiding God's leading and trying to do something else.

Nevertheless, despite all that, if we truly want to walk with God we will realize, intellectually at least, that it is better to do God's will than to follow our own sinful inclinations. We will understand that having God there to guide us is a *good* thing. When we act wrongly, when we don't know what is right, it is extremely useful to have someone to show us the right path. Little by little, even if our initial reaction is sometimes to complain when God directs us in a different way from what we want to do, we will realize that there are very good reasons for which it is *his* will that ought to be done, rather than our own.

Despite our natural (and sinful) tendency to resist obeying God, obedience is neither an uncomfortable constraint that is imposed on us, nor something that we “give to God in return for all he has given us.” Even when it costs us to obey (for example, when someone chooses to be honest even when cheating could have saved them a lot of trouble and a lot of money), we won't obey simply out of fear of being punished, or so that God will give us some kind of reward, but because we know that his will is *right*. The goal of salvation, as we have seen, is to deliver our hearts from the sinful attitude that always wants its own way, instead of glorifying God *as God*. The primary, guiding attitude that develops in the heart of someone who has truly accepted that goal, an attitude that builds up little by little over the years, is the same as what Jesus himself expressed so beautifully when faced with the painful choice of the cross: “Not my will, but yours.” Obedience to God is the practical manifestation of that attitude in our lives.

Jesus saves us from sin: a total transformation of the heart.

- Salvation is Christ's work, not our own; that shows us the *means* of salvation.
- Salvation delivers us totally and permanently from every trace of sin; that is the *nature* of salvation.
- As salvation transforms our character, that will necessarily result in major changes in our lives; that is the *manifestation* of salvation.

Jesus saves us first and foremost, as we have seen, not from the problems of this life or even from the problem that faces us beyond death (that is, from condemnation) but from sin. And if we understand how sin manifests itself, then we will also understand, in a very practical sense, what salvation looks like.

In man's gospel, the demonstration of the reality of salvation is seen in deliverance from problems and in the personal well-being that results from that. Thus, a person who is not delivered from illness, from poverty, or from some other problem, is seen as a person who has not really experienced salvation. Since the means of salvation in man's gospel is to be found in our actions that influence God so that he will be favorable to us and help us, a person who has not been delivered from problems is necessarily a person who did something that does not please God (or who, seen from another angle, *didn't* do something what would please God). That is what Job's three friends spent so much time trying to tell him (without much success, even though Job wasn't able to show them what was wrong with their outlook). It is also what is said very often to this day, unfortunately, even in some churches that claim very strongly to believe the Bible.

In the gospel of Jesus Christ, the demonstration of the reality of salvation is simply the extent to which we have progressed towards holiness. Blessings, deliverance, success, joy, even forgiveness for sin, are all secondary aspects. The salvation that Jesus put in place consists primarily of deliverance from sin. As that deliverance from sin progresses in our lives, it will show itself in the changes that result in our hearts and in our character.

Total deliverance from suffering, from illness, from all the myriad types of problems that we face, will only come about when the problem of sin is finally dealt with. Until then, God allows us to continue to face all sorts of problems, even extremely serious ones, because eliminating them is not his primary goal. These difficulties can push us closer to God, teach us more of what it means to be dependent on him and him alone, and even be an encouragement to others who see our faithfulness despite our trials. As such, they are very much a part of what he allows in order to eliminate sin.

When sin is finally and completely dealt with, when it has been thoroughly eliminated from our hearts, the sufferings that result directly or indirectly from sin will no longer have any reason to exist and God will eliminate them, too: “They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9). It is only when every last heart in the whole world is thoroughly characterized by the holiness and love and goodness that flows from the person of God, when God is 100% present in every last nook and cranny of every life, that there will no longer be any “hurt or destruction.” As long as sin is still around, even if God *did* eliminate all the hurts and harm that result from sin, they would simply start right back up again, because sinful hearts hurt others. That's a fundamental part of what sin is. That also shows why God's first priority is to eliminate sin, rather than trials

and difficulties. The elimination of suffering will only happen when Christ's eternal kingdom is set up on earth.

Sinners act out of selfishness rather than out of love

Unfortunately, this is what sin always does: It hurts others, because a sinner's top priority is his own well-being. "Me first, others later – maybe."

We see this principle already in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve had only just chosen to sin but, as soon as Adam got worried that God was going to punish him, he said: "It's my wife's fault." Instead of protecting his wife, he is looking out for himself first, even if that means that the wife he is supposed to love has to bear the brunt of God's punishment all alone.

In looking at the means of salvation, we saw that no one can be saved by keeping God's law because no one can keep it perfectly. We also saw that, in theory, if a person *could* really keep the whole law, that would be sufficient. We can thus say that the law codifies the behavior that God can approve, the behavior that no human being other than Jesus himself has ever been able to live fully. Thus, if we want to know what a person without sin looks like, we can see that by looking at God's law.

At first, the law of Moses seems incredibly complicated. Spread out over four books (if we consider Genesis simply as the historical background for the law), it is composed of hundreds of commandments. Already the very length of the law makes it a very hard subject to master.

On top of that, a good part of the commandments in the law are of a symbolical nature: "For the law has only a shadow of the good things to come, not the actual reality of those things" (Hebrews 12:1). This principle is found also in Colossians 2:16-17: "Therefore do not let anyone judge you over what you eat or drink, or concerning a religious festival, a new moon or sabbath days. These things are shadows of what is coming, while the reality is in Christ." That means that if we want to understand the meaning of these "shadows," we have to go into the spirit of the law, and not simply the literal words. And it is absolutely essential to pay close attention to the historical context in order to understand that "spirit of the law."

But when you go to the trouble of working all that out in detail, it turns out that the fundamental principle of the law is not actually all that complicated. Jesus (more than once; the passages are found in Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-31 and Luke 10:25-28, and it should be noted that the incident in Luke is not a parallel passage to the texts of Matthew and Mark but relates something that happened several months earlier) and Paul (also more than once, in Romans 13:8-10 and Galatians 5:14) both summed the entire law of God up in one word: love. The law is long and complicated because it describes the implications of love in a very large number of different situations. But the basic idea is always the same, the principle of true love one for another.

Sin is primarily the refusal to let God really be God in our lives. That necessarily involves refusing his law as the guiding and unconditional principle of our lives. A sinner can very easily accept God's law in one area or another, or in certain specific situations, but he will do so only because he sees how it is advantageous for him to do so. But that doesn't mean he is truly submitted to God's law: "The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; it does not submit to God's law and in fact isn't even able to do so" (Romans 8:7). Sin thus manifests itself fundamentally through selfishness, the refusal to really care about others and put their well-being ahead of one's own.

Salvation – deliverance from sin – manifests itself primarily in love for others

If the goal of God's salvation is to deliver us from sin, that means that this refusal to live on the basis of true love for others will disappear. In other words, as sin disappears, love appears. That is what the Bible shows, many times. Salvation becomes a reality in our hearts through the work of the Holy Spirit. The greatest demonstration of the work of the Holy Spirit, by definition, is the fruit of the Spirit. And the first and primary characteristic of the fruit of the Spirit is love.

Holiness is often seen as something more or less mystical, but it is actually quite simple and practical. Leviticus 19 begins with the commandment: “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). The chapter as a whole deals with the commandments of the law, showing how they apply in daily living. It ends by summarizing the teaching of the whole chapter: “Thus shall you observe all my statutes and all my ordinances, and do them. I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:37).

The chapter thus ties holiness to obedience: If we want to be holy, as God is holy, we must obey his laws. More than that, though, this is also the chapter in which we find (in verse 18) the famous commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This principle is even repeated towards the end of the chapter, with reference to foreigners among them (lest they think that loving one's neighbor applies only to family and friends): “The foreigner who lives among you shall be to you just as one who is native-born: You shall love him as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt” (verse 34). Leviticus 19 thus ties not only holiness and obedience together, but also love for others.

In a sense, then, true holiness, true obedience to God's laws and true love are all simply different aspects of the same behavior: Holiness manifests itself (among other ways) in obedience to God's law, and obedience to God's law manifests itself (among other ways) in love for others. The ultimate demonstration of salvation is thus very simple to identify. It is not in spiritual gifts, or in the energy put into serving God, or in beautiful prayers or powerful sermons, but in love. That is where we can really see that salvation has become a reality in someone's life. The greatest “men of God” are not those with impressive titles and degrees, or those who are pastors of huge churches, or those who accomplish impressive miracles or mighty works for God, but those who put the well-being of others before their own well-being.

The heart of a true believer is a servant's heart

Jesus insisted on this principle, even for the twelve apostles, a number of times:

- Jesus called them and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in power among them abuse their authority. It is not so among you, but whoever wants to be great among you shall be your servant and whoever wants to be first among you shall be your slave” (Matthew 20:25-27; see also Mark 10:42-44).
- “Do not be called directors, for you have one Director, Christ. The greatest one among you will be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (Matthew 23:10-12).
- And he sat down, called the twelve, and said to them “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the last of all and the servant of all” (Mark 9:35).
- [Jesus] said to them: “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and the ones with authority over them are called 'Benefactors'. It is not so among you, but the greatest among you must be like the youngest, and the one who rules must be like the servant. For who is greater, the one at the table or the one serving him? Is it not the one who is at the table? Yet I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:25-27).
- And when he had washed their feet and taken his clothes and reclined again with them, he said: “Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and you are right to do so, for that is who I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you ought to do as I have done for you” (John 13:12-15).

If Jesus placed such importance on this idea, if he insisted on it so often in order to make sure his disciples understood it, it is because this principle of service is right at the very heart of the gospel message. Man's gospel encourages us to be impressed with blessings, and with great accomplishments. The gospel of Christ has a very different priority: holiness, which manifests itself in love for others.

That means that no one should brag about his “spiritual progress” if he is not learning more and more, day after day and year after year, to love others in this way. “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you should love one another” (John 13:34). John reminds us just how Jesus shows his love for us, lest we think it is merely a question of strong feelings that bind us together, in 1 John 3:16-19: “We came to know love by this, that he laid down his life for us. We, too, ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material goods and sees his brother in need but closes his heart to that need, how can we say the love of God

abides in him? Little children, we should not love just with words or with the tongue, but by actions and in truth. This is how we will know that we are in the truth, and reassure our heart before God.”

There is no holiness without the love that gives itself to others, that puts the well-being of others before its own desires. There is no salvation without this love. This is the exact opposite of man's gospel, which puts the accent entirely on one's own well-being, but it *is* the gospel of Christ, the gospel that delivers us from sin and makes us able to love as he loved.

This love that gives of itself, even for those whom we don't necessarily appreciate very much, is so different from normal human motivation that it can only come from God. At the same time, if God is at work in someone's life, that kind love will necessarily develop more and more. That is why John can say, not only that all true believers will show this love, but also that *only* true believers can really do it: “Dearly beloved, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4.7-8).

The nature of the salvation that Jesus gives us is to be delivered from sin and thus to become holy. One fundamental manifestation of holiness is true love, a love that gives itself for others, a love that seeks what is good for everyone. Sin necessarily refuses to love in this way. The elimination of sin in our lives is thus seen first and foremost in a heart that learns to love.

The gospel of Jesus Christ in Paul's theology: faith, hope and love.

- But now these three abide: *faith*, *hope* and *love*; but the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).
- But by *faith* we are waiting, through the Spirit, for the *hope* of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but faith operating through *love* (Galatians 5:5-6).
- Therefore, since I heard about your *faith* in the Lord Jesus and your *love* for all the saints, I never cease giving thanks for you, mentioning you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and reveal to you a full knowledge of himself, that he may enlighten the eyes of your heart, so that you can understand the *hope* to which he has called you, the rich and glorious inheritance he has for the saints (Ephesians 1:15-18).
- Having heard of your *faith* in Christ Jesus and your *love* for all the saints, because of the *hope* that is laid up for you in heaven, that the word of truth, the gospel, had already made known to you (Colossians 1:4-5).
- We constantly remember before God our Father your work of *faith*, your labor of *love* and your enduring *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:3).
- But let us be sober, because we belong to the day, putting on the breastplate of *faith* and *love* and the helmet of the *hope* of salvation (1 Thessalonians 5:8).
- Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the commandment of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our *hope*, to Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. As I urged you when I left for Macedonia, stay on in Ephesus so that you can tell certain people not to teach false doctrines, nor to attach themselves to fables and endless genealogies, which only lead to speculation rather than to God's work in faith. The goal of this instruction is *love* from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere *faith* (1 Timothy 1:1-5).

There can be no doubt about it, the apostle Paul regularly groups faith, hope and love together. In 1 Corinthians 13:13, he even refers to them as three principles that the believers should know and, even more telling, associate in their minds. Obviously, in his oral teaching as well as in his writings (since he expects the Corinthian believers to recognize “these three” as fundamental principles in the Christian life), he used them very often as the framework of his message.

The nature of faith, hope and love in Paul's theology

We know quite well, from Paul's writings, what he means by each of these terms:

Faith, of course, is fundamental in his teaching. He uses the term faith to refer to a full confidence in the work of Christ, who has done for us everything that is necessary for our salvation. Faith contrasts with

“works”: We count of what Christ did and not on what we do. A few examples should suffice as a reminder of what Paul says about the nature of faith:

- You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? Before your eyes, Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. The only thing I want to hear from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by faith in the message you heard? (Galatians 3:1-2).
- For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith. It does not come from yourselves; it is a gift from God. It is not the result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).
- I, too, could trust in the flesh. If anyone thinks he has grounds for trusting in the flesh, I have even better grounds: circumcised the eighth day, of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of pure Hebrew descent. As for the law, I was a Pharisee. As for zeal, I persecuted the church. As for legalistic righteousness, I was blameless. But whatever was a gain to me, I now count as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I consider everything as loss because of the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord. For him, I accepted the loss of everything, and now consider it all as mere trash, in order to gain Christ and be found in him with a righteousness that is not my own, based on the works of the law, but with a righteousness that comes from God alone, by faith – faith in Christ. (Philippians 3:4-9).

Hope, also, is a subject that Paul develops regularly. He understood clearly that the goal of salvation is to deliver us from sin. The final end of the process, therefore, is what he calls our hope. He speaks of it in his epistles a number of times:

- But now he has reconciled you, through death in his physical body, that you may stand in his very presence, holy, blameless and without reproach (Colossians 1:22).
- The mystery that has been hidden from other ages and generations but which is now revealed to his saints, to whom God chose to make known the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ (Colossians 1:26-28).
- Not that I have already obtained it, or have already been made perfect, but I press on in order to take hold of that for which I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:12).

His writings are also full of practical teaching about the kind of love that, in his theological system, is an absolutely indispensable aspect of an authentic Christian life. A few examples:

- Love is patient, love is kind, it is not jealous, it does not brag, it is not proud, it does not act unbecomingly, it does not seek its own advantage, does not take everything wrong, does not rejoice over people being hurt but rather rejoices over the truth, it protects at all times, trusts in all circumstances, hopes in all situations, endures in all conditions (1 Corinthians 13:4-7 – it would be quite appropriate to quote the whole chapter).
- Brothers, you were called to freedom, only do not use this freedom to indulge the flesh. Instead, serve one another in love, for the whole law is summed up in one commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:13-14).
- Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and dearly beloved, put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another, and forgive one another if anyone has a complaint against another – just as the Lord forgave you, you should do the same. And over all of these is love; it is the perfect bond of unity (Colossians 3:12-14).
- The goal of this instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (1 Timothy 1:5).

Three essential and inseparable parts to the gospel

These three principles are so closely interwoven in Paul’s theology that they cannot really be separated. We can start with any of the three and show that, for it to be real and complete, it has to imply the other two:

- Since faith is confidence in the work of Christ, and since the goal of the work of Christ is to deliver us from sin, saving faith necessarily implies the hope that looks to the day when we will be with God, totally free from sin. At the same time, when we accept the gospel message by faith, we are accepting to be delivered from sin (since that is the nature of the gospel). Thus, our faith will necessarily manifest itself in a transformed life, a character that is marked by the love of God for all those around us. True faith thus implies both true hope and true love.

- Hope can only come from faith, since the goal of perfect holiness can never be the result of our own efforts; it can only come from the work of Christ. Even though the reality of salvation in our lives is seen in our commitment to pursuing this goal, to letting ourselves be transformed, our efforts contribute nothing to our salvation, which is entirely the work of God. Our efforts are the *manifestation* of deliverance from sin, not the means of producing that deliverance. We need only believe that God can do this work in our lives, and accept it, which is what faith is. Thus, there is no true hope without true faith. Furthermore, as we advance towards our hope, this goal of perfect holiness, love develops more and more in us. On the day when we finally reach the goal and our hope becomes reality, love will be perfect in us and will characterize our entire mentality for all eternity. True hope thus implies both true faith and true love.
- Since love is the fulfillment of the law of God (“Love does no harm to its neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law,” Romans 13:10), it can never really be demonstrated by our efforts, because we are incapable of fulfilling the law of God. Our own love thus has very strict limits, while God's love is limitless. This means that only the transformation that comes from God can ever allow us to love perfectly. Since that transformation is the result of the work of Christ, which must be accepted by faith, there can be no true love, in the divine sense, without faith. And since the love that develops in us is the work of a perfect God who completes what he starts, if he is transforming us so that love develops in our hearts, he will take that transformation to completion, to the day when perfect love will fill our whole beings. True love thus implies true faith and true hope.

All of that means that if one of these three elements is deformed, the other two will be as well. Too often, we have tried to build our entire theology just on faith, but the result is pretty bad. A “faith in Christ” that is not accompanied by the hope of being totally delivered from sin and living in perfect love simply becomes a pretext for seeking whatever deliverance that happens to suit us (deliverance from condemnation and the suffering that goes with it, deliverance from illness, deliverance from poverty, deliverance from failure, deliverance from the difficulties of life...). That puts us squarely in the framework of man's gospel. There are even those who explicitly teach that salvation does not have to be accompanied by repentance (in plain language that means that we can accept a salvation that proposes to deliver us from sin, without wanting to be delivered from sin!), because they have separated faith from hope and love.

A message based on just one of these three points is a deformed message

“Faith in Christ” is not enough if we want to really live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. Saving faith is confidence in the work of Christ, and his work is summed up in the principle we saw already in detail: Jesus saves (delivers) us from sin. Merely “believing in Christ” is not the whole gospel, if that belief is not the acceptance of the true gospel that Jesus put in place, a salvation that has as its primary goal to transform us, to purify us, to make us holy.

In the same way, “love” is not enough, if our “love” is just sentimentalism, appreciating our friends, or our own efforts to “do good things.” The love that counts is the love that gives of itself without counting the cost, because the well-being of others counts for more than your own well-being. There are those who try to build their whole theology simply on the principle of love, but if love is divorced from faith in the work of Christ and the hope of true holiness, it can never be the perfect love that comes from God alone.

Paul did not invent these three principles. We saw that all three of them are already clearly implied in the announcement the angel made to Joseph, even before Jesus was born, and which sums up the whole reason for which he came into this world: Jesus will save his people from sin. But Paul gave names to the three principles, and explained the relationships between them. He showed that Christian theology is not complete if all three are not in place, but that the three of them together, correctly understood, do indeed convey the entire message of the gospel.

We can thus illustrate the relationship between these three principles by three rings, linked together in such a way that they cannot be separated but, at the same time, a way that means that if any one of them is removed, the entire structure falls apart. If one breaks down, the others will be lost as well. And that is the case for

every one of the three.

The three of them together form a harmonious and stable structure, where each element is kept in place by the other two. But removing any one of them changes the whole structure: Faith explains the *means* of salvation (it is *Jesus* who saves us from sin), hope explains the *nature* of salvation (Jesus *saves* us from sin), and love explains the *outworking* of salvation (Jesus saves us from *sin*, so that the character of God can develop in us).

Too often, the gospel message has been deformed because one (or more) of these elements was no longer understood correctly. In the Middle Ages, before the Reformation, Catholic doctrine did not present the concept of faith correctly, which harmed their entire theological system. Today, unfortunately, even in many churches that have put their emphasis on faith once again, in a way that is much closer to Scripture, it is often hope that is not correctly understood. Our “hope” in much modern theology is nothing more than dreaming of a better world to come and being freed from the suffering of this life, rather than a genuine commitment to pursue holiness because we really want to be “delivered from sin.”



Hope is the hardest point for sinful man to understand

This is in fact a very old problem, one which is by no means unique and limited to the modern world. True Christian hope, as we have seen, is the perspective and the desire of attaining spiritual perfection. Understanding hope implies living the Christian life according to that hope, even though we know we will never reach that goal perfectly in this life. As soon as man's gospel infects the Christian message, hope is the first element to be lost. Instead of being motivated by holiness and seeking it fervently, it is much easier to seek after some more immediate and material form of well-being.

Knowing that, let's take a look again at Ephesians 1:15-18, one of the passages quoted in the introduction to this section in order to show how Paul groups together these three aspects of the gospel. He wrote: “Therefore, since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I never cease giving thanks for you, mentioning you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and reveal to you a full knowledge of himself, that he may enlighten the eyes of your heart, so that you can understand the hope to which he has called you, the rich and glorious inheritance he has for the saints.”

This is all one long, complicated, run-on sentence in the original text (which is typical of the way Paul writes). But if we simplify it to bring out just what he says about the three basic points it says: “since I heard about your faith ... and your love ... I pray that ... you can understand the hope to which he has called you...” That shows us something very interesting: Paul is aware of their faith and their love, and he prays that they will also understand hope. That kind of prayer shows that hope is not always clear in the minds of all believers, and Paul realizes that. It is relatively easy to talk about “faith in Jesus” and “love for others” but tying that all together with the steadfast hope for holiness, as the single primary goal of salvation, is not always as easy. But if hope is not really clear, then faith and love can't be, either.

We need to imitate Paul, then. We must not build our theology on one or two points, but on all three. Together, they form a complete and sufficient message of salvation. We need to understand, proclaim and live not only faith as the means of salvation, but the hope of holiness as the overriding goal and true love for others as the primary manifestation of salvation in our lives.

Faith, hope and love in the epistle to the Romans.

These three principles are developed in detail, and in order, in Romans. Since they are so important, and since problems in understanding what they really mean have caused so many deviations from the true gospel message, before we go any further it would be useful to look at all of that more closely. Romans is the letter where Paul provides the most complete and the most systematic exposition of his theology. Thus, if we really want to understand what he says about faith, hope and love, Romans is the best place to do it.

After the personal introduction that deals specifically with his relationship to the believers in Rome (Romans 1:1-17), Paul gets into a first “teaching” section (1:18 - 3:20) that describes man's problem: sin, and the condemnation that results from it, as well as man's incapacity to overcome that problem by his own efforts, even if he tries to do it by keeping God's law. In this section, the words “faith,” “hope” and “love” are never used. He is describing man in his natural, sinful state, meaning as people who have no faith in the Christian sense of the word, no spiritual hope, and whose love is nothing more than a sentimental appreciation of those who are good to us.

Once he gets into explaining systematically what the gospel really is, he will simply do it by going into the concepts of faith, hope and love. He will only get away from these three points in chapters 9 to 11, which is a sort of “parenthesis” in his exposition where he explores the situation of Israel with regards to the gospel by looking at the relationship between hope and faith.

Romans 3:21 to 5:21: the nature and the importance of faith

The second section of the teaching in Romans, 3:21 to 5:21 (the end of chapter 5), is naturally about faith. It explains what faith is, as well as the grace that God demonstrates in saving man by faith, without the works of the law.

Paul begins the section by explaining the basic principle of faith: “But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, to which the law and the prophets bear witness: The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no difference, since everyone has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Justification is a free gift of his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God presented as a propitiation through his blood, received by faith. God thus shows his righteousness, even though in his forbearance he passed over sins previously committed. This now demonstrates how God can be righteous and yet justify those who have faith in Jesus. What place is there, then, for boasting? None; it is excluded. By what law? A law based on works? No because of a law based on faith. For we conclude that man is justified by faith without the works of the law (Romans 3:21-28).

He goes on to show that justification by faith, which is necessarily a gift of grace, is not by any means something new, since Abraham himself was justified by faith. As proof, Paul quotes Genesis 15:6: “Abram believed the Lord, who counted it as righteousness for him.” Note that this is not just “Abram believed in God.” It is easy enough to believe God exists, but Abraham's faith is believing what God said, trusting him. The entire chapter of Romans 4 explores what Abraham's faith is all about, and what that teaches us about Christian faith.

The section on faith ends with chapter 5, which already introduces the concept of hope but which, more than anything else, shows very clearly that the grace of God, which saves by faith those who don't deserve it because they are incapable of keeping the law, is infinitely greater than sin and condemnation: “For if, by the transgression of one man, death reigned through that one, those who receive abundant grace and the gift of righteousness will reign even more so in life through the one man, Jesus Christ! So just as one transgression resulted in condemnation for all men, even so one act of righteousness extends justification and life to all men. For as through the disobedience of one man, many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of one, many will be made righteous. The law came in so that the transgression might be amplified, but where sin was amplified, grace was amplified even more” (Romans 5:17-20).

Romans chapters 6 to 8 : the nature and importance of hope

Chapters 6 to 8 analyze the principle of hope. Chapter 6 and the beginning of chapter 7 begin the presentation by looking at a rather troubling implication of salvation: If the whole goal of salvation is to deliver us from sin, then logically, if we are saved, we should no longer live in sin. Christ died in order to deliver us from sin, and rose again victorious over sin and death. Thus, if we accept his salvation, there is no reason that sin should continue to dominate us: “Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it?” (Romans 6:2). “In the same way, consider yourselves as totally dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its desires and do not let sin use the members of your body as instruments for unrighteousness. Instead, present yourselves to God as those who are alive from the dead and present the members of your body to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not control you, since you are not under the law, but under grace (Romans 6:11-14).

This is perfectly reasonable, and glorious, but at the same time it is quite troubling because even as Christians we realize that sin is still very much a part of us. Our actions are not always perfect. Our heart is never perfectly pure. Our thoughts do not always glorify the Lord. Paul recognizes that very explicitly, using himself as an example, in the latter part of chapter 7: “For I delight in the law of God in my innermost being, but I see a different law operating in the members of my body, warring against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work in me. Wretched man that I am! Who will free me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord... So then, on the one hand I am a slave to God’s law in my mind, but on the other hand my flesh is a slave to the law of sin” (Romans 7:22-25).

Paul says he “delights in the law of God in his innermost being.” He even says that in his mind he is “a slave to God’s law.” He does not write in the past tense, about something he experienced previously when he was a zealous, proud Pharisee, congratulating himself on his righteousness because he dwelt only on those parts of the law that suited him while at the same time firmly resisting God’s will in other areas of his life. He speaks of what he is experiencing even as he writes, with his mind renewed by the Holy Spirit so that he is truly a “slave to the law of God.” Even in that condition, he recognizes that sin is still present in him.

This is a serious problem. If the goal of salvation is to deliver us from sin, how do we explain that even those who are saved are still sinners? Is salvation only an illusion?

Chapter 8 resolves this difficulty – and thus concludes the section – by developing the principle of hope: The work of salvation in us is not yet finished but, when it is finally finished, we will indeed be delivered from sin. At various points, chapter 8 describes this hope in different ways.

Verse 4 confirms that the goal of salvation is indeed “in order that the righteousness required by the law may be fulfilled in us.” The righteousness “required by the law” is the righteousness that God requires, since it is his law. As we see in the law, that requirement is *perfect* righteousness. This verse thus shows that the goal of salvation is not simply to forgive us for our sins, but to transform our entire character, so that the perfect righteousness required by the law becomes a reality in our hearts and minds. But the verse continues in saying that that happens in those who “walk, not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.” Those who do not want this transformation to happen, those who prefer to “walk according to the flesh,” wanting God’s blessings in their lives but not wanting God really to *be* God in their lives, are not part of it.

Verse 29, speaking of those who accept salvation, says that God “predestined [them] to be conformed to the image of his Son.” The term “predestined” intimidates quite a few people but there is no need to be alarmed by it. It means “determine ahead of time” and, in this context which is speaking of the final goal of salvation (rather than the obtaining of salvation, which is the context to which many attach the concept of predestination), the translation “predestined” is perfectly appropriate. “Pre-destine” means “determine the destination ahead of time.” As with an airplane for which the destination is known before passengers accept to board it or not, the “destination” of believers, meaning their final goal, is also known: They will be like Christ, who is perfect in holiness, in obedience, and in his relationship with the Father.

It is worth mentioning, even though they are not found in the epistle to the Romans, that the only two other

passages in the New Testament that use this verb to refer to believers (the other usages of the word all speak of Jesus being “pre-destined” to the cross) also deal with the final end of salvation. They are found in Ephesians 1:5 and 1:11. Ephesians 1:5 says God predestined us to be “adopted” and Romans 8:24 reminds us that “adoption,” which is the moment when we fully enter into the Father-son relationship with God, is still to come. Ephesians 1:11-12 says that we have been predestined to “celebrate his glory” and Romans 8:18 (Paul's use of the term “predestined” always ties back to Romans 8, his most complete exposition of the principle of hope in the Christian life) also says that the moment when this glory will be fully revealed in us is also in the future.

God has thus determined ahead of time what will be the result of salvation in the life of the redeemed: They will become like Christ. Romans 8 concludes by reminding us that God will fully accomplish what he has begun in our lives (verses 31 to 34) and that nothing can separate us from the love of God (verses 35 to 39). Our hope is assured because it is God's work and not our own. *He* is the one who saves perfectly from sin.

Romans chapters 9 to 11: the link between faith and hope

The section in chapters 9 to 11 has led to a huge amount of discussions, which are certainly useful, but which do not apply all that much to our present subject. One of the biggest problems in understanding this section is to keep in mind that Paul is giving the answer to a question that no one really wonders about any more, which is how God can accept Gentiles into “the chosen people.” As a former Pharisee, Paul would have defended very strongly the ideal that the only way for a Gentile to become a part of God's people is to become a Jew. He knows very well that that very position is defended by many Jews and even by some Christians, who thus want Gentile converts to Christ to be circumcised as a sign of their membership in the Jewish people, of whom Jesus is the Messiah.

He thus argues here that God did not choose all the physical descendants of Abraham for salvation (9:6-18), that he is free to choose whom he wants (9:20-23), and that that includes people who come from other nations (9:24-28). Nevertheless, since he had explained about hope in the previous chapter, and the fact that God's promise is sure, and yet admits that many Jews do not have this hope, he explains the reason for this seeming contradiction by showing the relationship between the two aspects of salvation which he has developed so far, faith and hope. At the end of chapter 9 he writes that if many Jews do not have the certainty of this hope, it is because they seek salvation by works rather than by faith (verses 30-32).

Chapter 10 shows that faith comes only from hearing the gospel message, and that Israel has indeed heard that message. The last verse of the chapter says that the problem is in Israel's reaction to God's message. Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah and says that the Jewish people are “disobedient and contentious” (Romans 10:21, quoting Isaiah 65:2). Chapter 11 finishes the section by showing that God has nevertheless not rejected the Jewish people (Paul himself, after all, is Jewish, as he reminds his readers in verse 1), but that God eliminates from Israel those who refuse this salvation that frees them from sin, while at the same time “grafting” those Gentiles who accept it into the spiritual work he is doing through the nation of Israel (11:17-24).

The teaching of this section is thus useful for us even today, even though we are completely used to the idea that salvation is for all peoples and not only for the Jews. These chapters remind us that the hope of being totally delivered from sin comes only through faith in Christ. Thus, this section does not really deviate from the “faith – hope – love” outline of the book, but serves only to show that faith and hope cannot be separated from each other.

Romans 12:1 to 15:7 : the nature of Christian love in various situations

The last section of the teaching of the epistle, from the beginning of chapter 12 to the middle of chapter 15, describes how this salvation, that is given to us by faith and that will lead us to the hope of perfect holiness, manifests itself concretely in our lives: as love. Some of the subjects Paul describes in this section are very clearly about love while others, at first glance, do not appear to be dealing with the subject of love. But when we take into account the practical nature of love, as Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 13, we see very quickly

that this entire last section of Romans is indeed about various applications of Christian love:

- Chapter 12 describes in incredible detail a love that goes farther and farther, all the way to the point of actively doing good to the very ones who hurt us.
- Chapter 13 explains how obedience to laws, put in place by governments for the good of society, is also a demonstration of Christian love.
- Chapter 14, dealing with the sensitive question of meat offered in sacrifice to idols, shows that love is the best way to handle the situation: Love seeks what is edifying to others instead of simply insisting on its own rights.
- The beginning of chapter 15 gives us the general principle that sums up the whole section: “We who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those who are not, and not just please ourselves. Let each one of us please his neighbor and build him up by doing what is good. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me” (Romans 15:1-3)

The most interesting thing about this section is that Paul introduces it with the famous exhortation: “Do not be conformed to this present world, but instead be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). We thus see that this “renewing of the mind” is simply Christian love. Too often we see love as something that is primarily sentimental, but Paul exhorts us to let God transform our minds, by learning to love in the most profound way.

The epistle to the Romans has long been considered as the most thorough explanation in the whole Bible of what salvation really is. Since Romans presents this message by explaining the nature and importance of faith, hope and love, we see that the gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be summed up by just one of these aspects.

If we try to reduce the whole gospel message to just a question of faith (as many churches do, far too often), or to reduce it all to a simple exhortation to love one another (as many *other* churches often do), or to sum it all up in the hope of a better world (which is the theology found in Negro Spirituals), we end up getting the whole thing wrong. If we don't understand *all three* elements that Paul uses to explain the gospel (which are, after all, the same three aspects found in the very first announcement of the gospel in the New Testament, when the angel announced to Joseph why Jesus was going to come), even the one of the three that we try to use to explain it all will be seriously deformed.

An extremely ancient conflict.

Of the two fundamentally different spiritual messages proclaimed in this world (man's gospel, which tries to obtain God's help in dealing with our problems, and the gospel of Jesus Christ, which tells us how Jesus can save us from sin), only one is acceptable to the unrepentant sinner. Sinful man wants an easy life, and generally doesn't mind the idea of a God who can help him get what he wants, as long as God isn't the one in charge. But the other message wants to totally transform that whole sinful mindset, teaching us to seek God's priorities and become holy as he is holy. Since the latter message is unacceptable to sinful man, man naturally distorts it constantly, to turn it back into the former message.

We have looked at this primarily from a Christian point of view, in order to show that preaching faith in Jesus does not necessarily mean that the result is the gospel announced to Joseph by an angel and put in place by Christ. But the conflict between these two messages is in fact much, much older than the actual Christian message. From the very beginning, God's message to mankind has always been the need to turn from sin and come back to him, in holiness. But right from the start, immediately after the fall, man's gospel has been what the human heart wants to hear. The clash between these two ways of looking at spiritual values has thus marked the whole history of religion, from the very moment that sin appeared in this world.

Cain and Abel: the conflict between these two messages is already there

Genesis chapter 3 describes the origin of sin in the human race. Genesis 4 describes the conflict between Cain and Abel and, later on, the conflicts of the descendants of Cain. This chapter, which gives us the oldest information we have on the history of mankind after the fall, shows clearly that the confrontation between these two ways of understanding spiritual values is already there.

The problem in Genesis 4 is not, as some have thought, the type of sacrifice that each brother offered. Some have said that Cain was wrong in bringing the fruit of the soil as an offering, because blood has to be shed in order for a sacrifice to be acceptable to God. But that is wrong. For one thing, Cain is not responsible for obeying what the law of Moses will say thousands of years later. Even more than that, though, it is totally wrong to think that God cannot accept such an offering. Grain offerings are not only acceptable to God, they are sometimes specifically required. All of Leviticus chapter 2, for example, deals with this type of offering. God did not reject Cain simply because of some misplaced symbolism that he couldn't have understood anyway until a lot more of God's revelation had been given, which wouldn't happen for thousands of years.

It seems quite clear here that Abel has a genuine desire to draw near to God in holiness (in Matthew 23:35 Jesus himself called Abel "righteous" and Hebrews 11:4 says that he acted by faith), while Cain is simply jealous because God's blessings come to his brother instead of to him. Even after murdering his brother, in fact, and showing very clearly that he has no desire whatsoever to be delivered from sin (he shows no sign of repentance, instead contenting himself with giving excuses), he is more concerned about punishment and protection than he is about holiness (verses 13-14).

A few generations later, one of his descendants will show this same attitude even more blatantly. Despite two murders ("I killed a man for wounding me, and a boy for injuring me", verse 23 – killing someone simply because they hurt us is a totally excessive reaction and thus constitutes murder), he is still claiming God's protection (verse 24). The intimate relationship with God degenerated very quickly when man fell into sin, and became instead a simple religion that cares nothing for holiness but that still believes that it has a right to God's help and protection. Man's gospel has thus been present in this world for as long as sin has.

Jesus: the Son of David or the Son of God?

At the time of Jesus, the clash between these two ways of looking at spirituality took a very peculiar form. People have often wondered how it happened that a people who were desperately hoping for the Messiah could reject him when he came. The reason most of them did so, however, is fairly simple: Jesus was indeed the Messiah sent from God, but that doesn't mean he was the Messiah the people wanted.

The Jews at that time wanted a Messiah who would put in place a reign of peace, prosperity, and general well-being. Obviously, freeing Israel from the Romans would be part of it, probably one of the first steps in building an empire which would see Israel ruling over the whole world. They referred to the Messiah that they saw in this way as "the Son of David," since various prophets had shown that the Messiah would indeed be a descendant of David. But "the Son of David" meant much more than simply a descendant of David, in their minds. King David had conquered the enemies of Israel (the Philistines, at the time) and set up an empire that stretched "from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates" It was the greatest power in the world at the time. Israel ruled over everyone else, and no one else ruled over Israel. After centuries of slavery in Egypt, then more centuries of invasion and domination by one foreign power after another in the time of the judges, that was a very welcome change. There was such prosperity in the country that the riches of Solomon have become legendary to this very day. "The Son of David" would thus do the same thing. If David could do it, the Messiah could do it just as well, if not better.

In reality, David's reign was much more limited than was commonly thought

People's ideas about David were quite exaggerated, however. He built his kingdom during the period that historians call "the Dark Ages" of the Middle East, a strange period which, for reasons not yet fully understood, all the major powers of the region (the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Hittites, and the Mycenaean Greek civilization) all fell apart at more or less the same time, in the space of a little over a century. That left a major power vacuum throughout the entire area. The peoples that King David conquered were not very powerful militarily, meaning that David was not the mighty conqueror that the "Son of David" mentality led people to believe.

As for how far his kingdom extended, it really is something of an exaggeration to say that David and Solomon reigned "from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates." South of Israel, between Israel and the Nile

delta, the land is mostly desert. It is pretty much agreed that “the river of Egypt” is not the Nile (despite the troubles in Egypt during this period, Israel never controlled the Nile delta) but a small river, often dry, that marks the theoretical limit of the land of Egypt itself. There were no powerful nations between Israel and this piece of desert. The Edomites were the closest thing to a “powerful” nation in that part of the desert, and they were significantly less numerous than the Israelites. Reigning “from the river of Egypt” was no great military feat.

To the north, David conquered a small kingdom named Tsoba in the Bekaa Valley, in what is now Lebanon, as well as their allies around the city of Damascus. But Damascus at the time was nothing like the powerful city it would become later, and even at the height of its power, Damascus never dominated the whole region. Following the defeat of Tsoba and Damascus, a country named Hamath that was situated even farther north, and which had had troubles with Tsoba, paid tribute to David. Hamath didn't actually become a vassal-state to King David, but it was at least a protectorate of Israel at the time. Hamath, in turn, controlled a stretch of desert that allowed them access to the Euphrates without going through the more powerful nations to the north of them. Thus, since Hamath paid tribute to David and also controlled this stretch of desert all the way to the Euphrates, David (and Solomon after him) could claim his kingdom extended “to the Euphrates.” But in fact he didn't really control anything at all that far to the north.

It is also worth noting that, as soon as the great Mesopotamian powers arose again after these “Dark Ages” (the Assyrians were the first to do so), Israel lost the control of everything that was north of its own territory and, later on, even its own independence. David never conquered a great power that would have been the equivalent, at his time, of the Romans at the time of Christ. He wouldn't have been able to do so. Furthermore, the books of Second Samuel and First Kings show us very clearly that, in terms of religion, politics and morality, the reign of David was hardly a “golden age.” Idolatry was widespread, immorality and injustice were rampant in daily living, and David had to deal with one revolt after another, including from his own son.

The people at the time of Jesus wanted the “Son of David”

But all these details were forgotten, or overlooked, at the time of Jesus. After centuries of domination by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Syrians and the Romans, the Jews idealized the time of David and thought only of his power, of the peace and prosperity of the time. The Messiah would be a mighty leader who would do the same thing.

The Gospels often mention the “Son of David.” But the term is never used by Jesus for himself, or by his disciples. When Jesus wanted to put the accent on his humanity, he referred to himself as “the Son of man.” But he also called himself the Son of God, which caused quite a few problems with the Jews. He also put a lot of effort, over a period of about three years, into helping his closest disciples to understand that he was the Son of God, and what that meant.

“The Son of David,” in the thinking of the Jews, was going to come and do something very similar to what David had done. “The Son of God,” however, speaks of someone who comes from God to do *God's* work. And God's first priority, as we have seen, is to deliver his people from sin. The difference between “the Son of David” and “the Son of God” is thus not a question of the humanity or divinity of the Messiah. (That difference is in the terms “Son of man” and “Son of God,” two terms which Jesus did indeed use regularly.) It is basically a matter of priority: Is the first and most important role of the Messiah to make life easy for the people, by delivering them from their problems, or to make them holy, by delivering them from their sins?

That does not mean that Jesus didn't do anything to deliver people from difficulties. On the contrary, he performed many, many miracles that helped people with their problems, whether they were really serious problems like resurrecting the only son – and, most likely, only financial support – of a widow (Luke 7:11-15) or frankly minor situations like not having enough wine for a wedding banquet (John 2:1-10). In particular, he performed a huge amount of healings.

Nevertheless, his primary goal was never to work miracles. He did them essentially for two reasons. First of

all, the Old Testament prophets had announced that the Messiah would put in place a kingdom where there would be no more death, no more illness, no more suffering, no more poverty, and so on. Jesus knew very well that he was not going to set up that eternal kingdom at that time, but he did enough miracles to show that he *could* do it, when the appropriate time came and the major problem, sin, had been dealt with. He showed that he has power over illness, demons, storms, poverty, and even death. More than that, though, Jesus often did miracles simply out of human compassion. When he was faced with the sick and suffering, he felt compassion for them and healed them, even though that was not his goal. Thus, his miracles show his power and his compassion, but not the goal of his mission. His priority, at that time and still today, was (and is) to deliver from sin all those who are willing to accept salvation.

Peter and the Messiah, the “Son of God”

The Apostle Peter finally came to understand the difference between these two conceptions of the Messiah. When Jesus asked his disciples who he was for them, it was Peter who answered for them all: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). That doesn't mean that it was only then, after following Jesus for about three years, that the disciples finally understood that he was the Messiah (that is, the Christ). They had all been disciples of John the Baptist, as we see in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, and in the criteria used for replacing Judas in Acts 1:21-22. They had heard John say that Jesus was the Messiah (John 1:29-34) and they believed him (John 1:40-45). The only reason they became disciples of Jesus in the first place was because they believed he was the Messiah.

John the Baptist, however, had understood the nature of the Messiah, and the Messiah's mission, already back then. In John 1:29 he said, “Behold the Lamb of God, who *takes away the sin of the world.*” In verse 34 of that passage he says very specifically that Jesus is the Son of God. But the disciples who followed Jesus took much longer to really understand that and, especially, to understand just what it meant. They saw Jesus work miracles and deliver people from troubles, but they also heard him teach. In his teaching, he never once put any particular accent on miracles. In fact, he often seems downright reluctant to work miracles and, fairly often, he didn't want the people to talk about it when he did heal them. (He knew that would only contribute to the notion, too widespread already, that he was “the Son of David.”) His teaching was always primarily about a transformed heart, a holy life, a spiritual outlook that has eternal values as its priority, instead of material well-being here and now. Month after month, this teaching penetrated into his disciples' thinking until finally they could really understand that Jesus was not just a mighty prophet who did lots of miracles, but the Son of God, the Messiah who comes first and foremost to “take away the sin of the world.”

It is in this sense that Peter writes, in 2 Peter 1:3-4: “His divine power has given us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through our full knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and virtue. For by these he has given to us the most precious and the greatest promises, so that by them you may become participants in the divine nature, escaping from the corruption in this world because of its vile desires.”

Peter speaks of divine power, but not in order to claim that God will heal every illness, calm every storm, and comfort all those who are suffering. He describes the “most precious and greatest promises” by pointing out their spiritual implications. By them we “become participants in the divine nature” and “escape from the corruption in this world.”

Being “participants in the divine nature” obviously does not mean that we will become omnipotent, or create whole new worlds as God did. The most important aspect of God's nature is his character: He is holy, he is good, he is righteous, he is love. It is in terms of our character that we will “participate in the divine nature,” it is in these areas that we will become “conformed to the image of Christ.” When sin has been eliminated in us, we will be holy as God is holy, good as he is good, righteous as he is righteous. We will live in perfect love for others, as God does, a love that always seeks what is best for all involved.

“The corruption in this world” is sin, of course. For Peter, the greatest and most precious promise of God is to be delivered from sin and to become holy as God is holy. That is what Jesus wants to do for all those who believe in him, and what he can do, because of his victory over sin. John the Baptist told his disciples that

Jesus would “take away the sin of the world” and the disciples, after enough time with Jesus, ended up by understanding that that was by far the most important thing he could ever do.

But those who were waiting for “the Son of David” had other priorities. Those who use the term in the Gospels are always those who come to Jesus looking for deliverance from one problem or another, or who are looking for some kind of political revolution. The only exception is Matthew who, in the first chapter of his Gospel, uses the term in a context where he makes it clear that it only means “descendant of David” (he uses it for Joseph as well). Jesus is the “son of Abraham” just as much as he is the “son of David.” He is obviously trying to show the Jews that Jesus is indeed a descendant of David (he has to be, in order to be the Messiah), but that he still isn't the “Son of David” in the way people thought the Messiah would be.

Bartimaeus and the Son of David

The priorities of those who see Jesus as “the Son of David” are very well illustrated by the story of Bartimaeus, in Mark 10:46-52. This story is found in all three of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), but it is clearly the same story in all three. Jesus asked Bartimaeus and his friend (Matthew tells us that there were in fact two blind men there together, even though Mark only speaks of one of them) a very interesting question. As far as we know, it is the only time he asked anyone this question, in this way in any case. When Bartimaeus finally stood before Jesus, Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” Nowhere else in the Gospels do we ever see Jesus asking this question this way. (Earlier in Mark 10, in verse 36, Jesus asked James and John, two of his apostles, something very similar, but only in response to their request that he would give them whatever they wanted; there, the question was more a way of putting them off than an invitation.) When Jesus asked Bartimaeus what he wanted, it is an important question because the answer will show very clearly what he wanted the most.

Bartimaeus had called out to Jesus using the title “Son of David.” His answer to Jesus' question is very clear: “I want my sight restored.” He wants a miracle, a very impressive miracle. Jesus performs the miracle, in order to show him what he can do and to encourage him to follow him, but we see that Bartimaeus' priorities are not the same as those of Jesus. Peter tells us that the most important thing Jesus can do for us is to deliver us from sin, but Bartimaeus didn't say, “Change my heart, Lord, make me truly holy.” Bartimaeus didn't yet know Jesus at this point; he had never heard Jesus teach. He certainly thought, at the time, that he was asking Jesus for the most important thing he could ever receive, but he didn't know what was really important. Being delivered from sin was not much on his mind. He clearly saw the Messiah as “the Son of David” rather than “the Son of God.”

A few days later, Jesus confronted the Pharisees with the question of the Messiah's identity, asking them: “What do you think about the Christ: Whose son is he?” (Matthew 22:41-42). They answered very easily that the Christ (that is, the Messiah) is the Son of David. Jesus pointed out to them that the Messiah cannot be David's son, since David (in Psalm 110) calls him “Lord.” But they couldn't accept that. One of the things Jesus was accused of at his trial is the very fact that he called himself “the Messiah, the Son of God” (Matthew 26:63. Mark 14:61, Luke 22:70). When he says that that is indeed who he is, they all say that that is blasphemy. The Jews at that time were used to having various “Messiahs” come along regularly. But having one of them say that he is the Son of God, that he can forgive sin, that their religion is wrong because they put all the accent on exterior, legalistic behavior instead of on a transformed and purified heart, was not acceptable. That was not the kind of Messiah they were looking for.

The troubling part, though, is not that Bartimaeus is more interested in immediate, physical deliverance than in spiritual deliverance from sin, which can change everything for all eternity. He didn't yet know Jesus, after all. It is to be expected that someone who just met Jesus for the first time would have a fairly insufficient understanding of who he was and what he came to do. Bartimaeus couldn't read the Gospels, which show us the end of the story of what Jesus came to do. He couldn't read the epistles, which explain the meaning of what Christ did. None of that had been written yet. Jesus hadn't even died yet.

But believers today *can* read all that. And although the Gospels and the epistles explain so clearly what Jesus' work is all about, there are still many churches today proclaiming man's gospel, proclaiming a

message that basically reduces Jesus to “the Son of David.” That is what is really troubling. The conflict between these two messages is very ancient, but at the same time it is very modern, because it is still very widespread today. We will take a look at various forms of the gospel message as preached today, even in “Christian” churches. And we will see that, despite all the information that we have in the New Testament that people like Bartimaeus didn't have, we really haven't gone much beyond the multitudes at the time of Jesus who simply wanted “the Son of David” to deliver them from their problems. We talk about faith in Christ, about his death and his resurrection, but even so, man's gospel has replaced the true gospel of Jesus Christ all too often, and sometimes the only truly “Christian” part of the message is an exterior form.

Various forms of man's gospel among us today.

The most blatant form of man's gospel today is called the prosperity gospel. In the name of Jesus, preachers promise riches, healing, success, happiness, and all kinds of other blessings to those who “have faith.” Very often, material blessing is promised to those who give money to the Lord's work (which of course means, in practical terms, giving it to those who *represent* God, which in turn means giving it to the very preachers who are telling people to give money in order to become prosperous!) and, if the person continues to have problems, then obviously they didn't do all of what they should have done. The obvious solution is to give more money!

This kind of prosperity gospel is very easy to condemn. Not only is it blatantly contrary to what the Bible teaches but it leads so easily to all kinds of swindles that it simply isn't acceptable. It is the message of a cult, not the message of Jesus Christ. He never spent his time trying to convince people to give him money. Nevertheless, the message of prosperity is much more common than one might think, even among those who claim to be against it. As long as it isn't quite so blatant, it often goes more or less unnoticed. In Europe and America, it quite often simply takes the form of promising *other* forms of prosperity: physical, with the accent on healing or, much more often, psychological, with a promise of happiness, wholeness and internal well-being. But this difference is simply a reflection of Western society: Since psychological well-being is what people are looking for, that's what man's gospel promises in that context.

Man's gospel and triumphant faith

One of the areas in which we see this psychological prosperity the most is in the concept of “triumphant faith,” a gospel that basically says that those who have faith in Jesus will have victorious lives and be able to overcome any obstacles that come their way: “I can do everything through him who strengthens me!” Sure, that is indeed a Biblical quote (Philippians 4:13), but in its context it means exactly the opposite of what this “gospel of victory” would have us believe: Paul explains that he can accept prosperity or poverty (verse 12), because Christ gives him the strength to do so (verse 13). But the message of psychological prosperity doesn't talk about the power to face difficult situations; the power becomes the power to transform any difficulty into victory, by faith.

Hebrews 11:32-38 is extremely interesting, in light of this triumphalist message: “And what more shall I say? I wouldn't have enough time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets who, by faith, conquered kingdoms, acted righteously, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, became strong again after weakness, were powerful in war, and overcame foreign armies. Women had their dead restored to them by resurrection. Others were tortured to death, not accepting to be released, so that they might obtain something even better, in resurrection. Others faced mocking and floggings, or even worse, bonds and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were tried, they were sawed in two, they were killed by the sword, they roamed around dressed in sheepskins and goatskins, they were destitute, afflicted, mistreated – men of whom the world was not worthy! – wandering about in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.”

The first part of this passage (up to the middle of verse 35) speaks of the victories of men and women of faith in the Old Testament. But the rest of the passage speaks of the trials and sufferings of those who *weren't* delivered, while showing us that they lived *by the same faith* as those who experienced miraculous

deliverance.

Yet it is so easy to claim that “by faith” or “by the power of praise” or “by the power of prayer” we can claim victory and “God will give it to us, in the Name of Jesus!” There are a number of churches and movements that are more and more characterized by this kind of triumphalism. The kinds of things we see in the second half of this passage in Hebrews 11 are not considered as indicative of true faith. Anyone who doesn't have the kinds of victories mentioned in the first half of the passage must not have prayed the right way, must not have praised God enough, must not have claimed victory...

Over and over again, we hear testimonies in churches along the lines of “I was in a really difficult situation, I prayed to God about it, and I was delivered from the problem. God is so good!” Now, it is absolutely true that such miraculous solutions happen, and it is equally true that God is good. But we almost never hear someone say, “I was in a really difficult situation, I prayed to God about it, I wasn't delivered from the trial, but God is still good, because his grace is sufficient for me and I know that no trial can ever prevent him from delivering me totally from sin so that I can spend eternity with him!” That is just as true, and there are many cases (more than we realize) of true Christians who are *not* delivered from their troubles. But they hardly dare to say so, for fear of being accused of lacking faith or not really walking with God.

When man's gospel influences the true gospel of Jesus Christ, it becomes very easy to tell someone who is going through problems: “Turn to God, believe in him, and he will deliver you from this.” But if we are speaking about what is going on right here and now, in terms of our physical situation, that is not at all a certainty. Where are the spiritual counselors who have the courage to tell believers the whole, honest truth? That truth is, and can only be: “Turn to God, believe in him, and he will do his work in your life. You might never be delivered from this problem you are facing, at least not in this life, but what is really important can never be lost.” Even in churches that denounce the prosperity gospel, this “gospel of victory” is widespread, in the form of promises of psychological well-being or physical healing. And yet, it is only a slightly modified form of the prosperity gospel.

The nature of faith, in the Bible and in man's gospel

One characteristic of man's gospel that allows this proclamation of “victory in everything” is its conception of faith. In the Bible, faith is simply trusting in what God has promised: “[Abraham] was fully convinced that what God has promised, he is able to do” (Romans 4:21). Abraham's faith did not consist of just believing in any particular blessing that he happened to want, or of thinking God would give him what he wanted because he “claimed” it with enough conviction. Abraham's faith – the faith that the New Testament sets forth as a model for all believers – was simply a firm confidence in *what God had promised*.

It is very common to hear Christians say things like: “The weather forecast announces rain for the church picnic Saturday, but we're going to believe the weather will be good, by faith.” What does faith have to do with that? Since Biblical faith is confidence in what God has promised, where is the promise that the weather will be nice on Saturday? If God promised it then yes, we can know, by faith, that it will happen. But if he didn't promise it, then such a statement is not faith, but merely presumption. We can always *ask* God for nice weather on Saturday, but we have no right to the assurance “by faith” that it will actually happen unless he gives us a distinct promise.

This has tremendous implications for Christian living. The “faith” that proclaims that something will happen just because we believe it reduces God to a simple worker, doing what he has to do because *we* decided on it. The goal, in that case, is no longer to let him change our hearts so that “his will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” but to believe that *our* will is going to be accomplished, simply because we think we have “faith.” That is not Biblical faith. That is not the faith Paul teaches in his “faith, hope, love” outline for explaining the gospel.

This is actually “faith in faith” rather than faith in God. In this outlook, *we* are the ones who decide what we want, and it is *faith itself* that is the power to accomplish it. The Biblical outlook on faith, however (“fully convinced that what God has promised, he is able to do”), is totally different. It is God who takes the

initiative, in giving his promise, and it is God who concludes the process by doing what he promised. Our faith comes in between God's promise and his action, in a process that begins and ends with God. This is the principle of Hebrews 12:2, which says that Jesus is the “initiator” of our faith (the Greek word refers to the one who acts first) and its “finisher,” the one who completes the process.

But man's gospel does not want a faith where God does just about everything. How can we influence God with such faith? If he is the one who decides, and he is the one who does it, a person who lives by faith has to align himself on what God wants. But if “faith” is a genuine power in itself, a power that *we* can use, according to *our* desires and what seems important to *us*, then we have much more reason to believe that we will receive what *we* want. That kind of faith has nothing to do with what the Bible teaches, but it fits in very well with man's gospel. And the fact that this outlook on faith is so widespread in “Christian” churches shows how deeply man's gospel has affected our thinking.

Prayer and fasting are not ways of manipulating God

In a way that is very similar to the principle of “faith” we have just seen, man's gospel also shows up in Christian churches in a very widespread understanding of prayer and fasting. In the Bible, prayer is communion with God, and a way of seeking his will. The ultimate prayer for a believer is “Not my will, but yours,” or, as Jesus put it in the famous prayer he taught to his disciples, “May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” But in man's gospel, prayer also becomes a force that *we* can use to influence God so that he will give us what we want.

Some Christians are very shocked when they hear that there is no power in prayer, but that is a perfectly true statement. The power is in God, not in prayer itself. Prayers asks, it does not order. If we think that very “spiritual” formulations, the constant repetition of “Lord” in our prayers, a loud voice, the “conviction” we put into our praying, the number of times we pray, or any other characteristic of prayer is going to help us to “convince God more effectively,” then we are thinking in terms of man's gospel rather than in terms of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Jesus' parable in Luke 18:10-14, it was the Pharisee who made the “best” prayer. But it was the tax collector who prayed in a way that God can accept.

As for fasting, it is interesting to note that the law of Moses never mentions it. Fasting was a later addition to the Jewish religion, which allowed them to pretty much attach whatever they wanted to the concept. The New Testament speaks very little of fasting, and never outside of the context of the Jewish culture. It is thus very risky to try to say just what place fasting can and should have in Christian practice. One thing we see very often, though, is that fasting is seen as a way of “strengthening the power of prayer.” But the kind of fasting God honors is when one simply renounces temporarily the things of this world, even totally legitimate things like eating, in order to truly seek his face. Whether we're talking about fasting or about prayer, anything that is seen as a way of influencing God so that he will give us what we want is clearly rooted in an attitude that says “Not your will, but mine,” which is the exact opposite of what the Bible encourages us to do.

We are allowed to ask for God's help in our difficulties

It is important to note very carefully that the simple fact of asking for God's help is *not*, in itself, an indication of the influence of man's Gospel. A number of times in the New Testament, God himself invites us to come to him with our requests (see for example 1 Peter 5:7). “Give us today our daily bread” is as much a part of legitimate praying as “May your name be sanctified” and “may your kingdom come.” Every true believer benefits regularly from God's protection and intervention to deliver us from many of our problems. That is part of a normal relationship with God, and we are all blessed by it. God is very able to help us, and willing to do so, when that is what he wants for us.

The problem is not in asking, but when that becomes our *priority*. It is especially a problem when it is such a priority that seeking for holiness is no longer even really a part of the “Christian” life. In the parable of the prodigal son, that young man did not want to submit to his father's will. He thought he could run his own life better if he was away from home, so he took off to live in sin. He finally admitted he was wrong when he

was forced to face up to his own inability to provide even for his most basic needs, while knowing full well that the way his father ran his house meant that there was “enough bread and more” for everyone in the household, even for the lowest servant. But it is important to note that Jesus does not have him saying, when he finally realized that, “I will go get some of my father's bread.” He had already tried that, when he left home with his father's riches but unwilling to submit to his direction. That ended in total failure. Instead of just going to get more bread, Jesus has him saying “I will go to my *father*.” The goal is not the Father's riches, but the Father himself.

It is not a sin to enjoy “the Father's bread,” or even to ask for it. The problem is when “the Father's bread” becomes more important than the Father himself. God can never take second place to anyone or anything. And yet, in the way too many people think of the Christian life, seeking God's blessings is much more important than seeking God.

A message like this is focused on man much more than on God. The primary accent is on the blessings we can obtain when we come to God, rather than on the holiness he produces in our lives and the relationship with himself that results from that holiness. Jesus did not say he was the only way to forgiveness, or to an abundant life, or to heaven. It is true that it is only through him that we can receive those things, but they are not the goal, even so. Jesus said he was the only way to come *to the Father*. A God-centered gospel seeks God, and seeks to totally eliminate the sin in our hearts that separates us from him. A man-centered gospel, on the other hand, is primarily seeking God's blessings.

That might mean seeking after strictly materialistic blessings, such as is the case in the most blatant forms of the prosperity gospel, but it can also mean putting the priority on more “spiritual” blessings such as healing, success, or happiness. In our rich Western countries, as we saw with the “gospel of victory,” people aren't necessarily asking God to provide them with material riches, since they can get those fairly easily in other ways. But they want God to make them happy, to protect them from failings and negative feelings of fear or sadness. Either way, the goal is still God's blessings, rather than God himself.

The judicial gospel, where forgiveness is the highest blessing

The most widespread form that man's gospel takes in the modern, Western world can be called the “judicial gospel.” This way of looking at the gospel message puts all the accent on condemnation, with all the suffering and sorrow it entails, and contrasts that with forgiveness and the eternal happiness it makes possible. As we already saw, looking into what it means to say that Jesus saves us from sin rather than just forgiving us, condemnation is one more aspect of the difficult circumstances in which we find ourselves, which come from outside of us and cause us pain. Since it is not a part of us, but something that happens to us, the true gospel shows us that God's priority is not simply to deliver us from the pain of condemnation but to deliver us from the sin in our hearts that leads to this condemnation. If sin is eliminated, then condemnation for sin is necessarily eliminated also. Nevertheless, it is very clear that for many Christians, the entire gospel message can be summed up as: “Believe in Jesus, so that you can be forgiven and have eternal life.”

Fortunately, that does not mean that Christians are never interested in being delivered from sin. But since the gospel message is too often reduced to little more than that, seeking after holiness is usually seen as something of an “option,” that should be of interest for those who are “the most spiritual,” rather than the very nature of the gospel. It is relatively easy to convince someone to “accept Jesus,” if he believes that hell exists, in order to



escape being punished for sin. It is much harder to lead people to understand the need to be delivered from sin itself, rather than being delivered merely from the *punishment* for sin.

It is not wrong to announce forgiveness in Jesus. Forgiveness is a reality, one of God's greatest blessings, and forgiveness for sin can be had only because of Christ. But even forgiveness is not the goal, and forgiveness is by no means the very nature of salvation. The nature of salvation is the transformation that ultimately leads to sin being totally eliminated from our makeup, and the goal is perfect and eternal fellowship with God himself. Man's gospel puts more accent on the good things that God can do for us than on seeking holiness and seeking that relationship; we should not distort the true gospel by trying to present it the same way.

Conclusion : What is our gospel?

There are two fundamentally different religious messages. One of them comes in a huge number of varieties, which often disguises the fact that there are only two. It is often presented in terms that are very similar to those used to explain the other one, which often disguises the fact that there is a huge difference between the two of them. But, if we want to fully take advantage of all that Christ has made available to us, it is absolutely essential to distinguish between the two of them. Seeking to be delivered from problems that cause us pain, even from condemnation for sin (which is part of what causes pain, even though the worst of that pain will not happen in this life), is not at all the same thing as wanting to be delivered from sin itself. Sinful man wants God to fix the difficult circumstances in which we live; God wants to change our hearts.

This difference needs to be made very clear and very explicit in two different areas: It needs to be clear in our own understanding of the gospel and in how we live as a result of that gospel, and it needs to be clear in the message we announce to those around us. It is important to grasp as clearly as possible the issues involved in each of these areas.

We need to be clear in our own lives first of all

Let's start with ourselves. Before we can explain something clearly to others, we have to be sure we have understood just what it means in our own lives first of all.

What motivates us the most: God's blessings, or the spiritual work he wants to do? On the one hand we have forgiveness to avoid hell, as well as physical healing, solutions for our daily problems, personal well-being, riches, success, and a host of other personal advantages. On the other hand we have holiness and a personal relationship with God. And it is important to note that holiness and a relationship with God are not and must not be seen as means to an end, in order to obtain blessings. If someone is willing to "live a holy life" simply so that God will answer his prayers, or so that he can obtain "spiritual power," then a desire for holiness, a hunger for God himself, is not his true goal.

It should also be noted that you cannot really separate holiness and a personal relationship with God. Since the fundamental nature of sin is the refusal to let God have the place he ought to have in our lives, if we are delivered from sin then we are delivered from that refusal. Holiness, therefore, is not simply a necessary condition in order to live in fellowship with God: holiness *is* fellowship with God, among other things. At the same time, if we want to live in true fellowship with God that means glorifying him *as God* (Romans 1:21), which clearly requires us to let ourselves be directed by his law of perfect love for others. And that means holiness.

Thus, it is quite understandable that the Bible sometimes presents salvation as a relationship with God ("This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God," John 17:3; "My goal is to know him," Philippians 3:10, as well as quite a few other passages) and sometimes as perfect holiness, the total elimination of sin ("...that we may present everyone perfect in Christ," Colossians 1:28; "we shall be like him," 1 John 3:2; "...so that by them you may become participants in the divine nature, escaping from the corruption in this world because of its vile desires," 2 Peter 1:4, among other passages). But whether we look at it as holiness,

which clearly implies a personal relationship with God, or as a personal relationship with God, which clearly implies holiness, **that is the goal**. Fellowship with God in true holiness is not and cannot be a simple means to an end, in order to obtain some blessing or other.

If we understand that perfect holiness is the goal of salvation, that is going to have a major effect on how we live, in a couple of different ways:

First of all, we will never look at what we have obtained so far as “good enough.” Since none of us can ever attain to perfect holiness in this life, since none of us can ever have a perfect relationship with God while we are in this world, that means that the goal is still ahead of us. We have not yet “arrived.” Because of that, we will live the same way Paul did, according to what he wrote in Philippians 3:12-14: “Not that I have already obtained it, or have already been made perfect, but I press on in order to take hold of that for which I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brothers, I do not consider myself to have yet laid hold of it, but I do one thing: Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward instead to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal of obtaining the prize – the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” He hadn't yet reached perfection, so he continued to strive toward the goal. He didn't see salvation as a “ticket to Paradise” that was already certified, but as a course that was not yet completed. In verses 15 and 16 he exhorts all believers to have this same outlook, so that we will all be moving ahead at the same time, no matter how far we have gotten along the path.

Another area in which this understanding of salvation will make a difference is in the importance we place on holy living. If our goal is perfect holiness, we will naturally strive toward perfect holiness. Sure, we won't get there on our own, and our efforts won't even contribute to our salvation (it is **Jesus** who saves us from sin), but we will do everything we can to live a holy life simply because **that is our driving goal**. Seeking after holiness is a very normal way of life to those who truly **want** holiness. That flows inescapably from the very fact of accepting salvation: Salvation in Christ has as its goal to deliver us from sin; if we accept that salvation, we need to be consistent with our choice. The need to pursue holiness will never have to be forced on those who understand that that is the whole reason they accepted salvation in the first place.

We can thus see a person's true priorities in their choices in life. Ultimately, everyone is consistent with his most fundamental goal. Jesus said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). If my “treasure” is a perfectly holy relationship with a perfectly holy God, my heart will pursue that very naturally and my life will show it. This is where we can see if we have really understood, for ourselves, the true nature of salvation. What is our primary preoccupation: holiness, or overcoming difficulties? If all believers were truly aware that the primary goal of salvation is to be delivered from sin, the theme of holiness would be much more widespread in our books, our testimonies, our preaching, and our Christian songs.

We need to be clear also in the gospel we proclaim to others

Having made sure in our own lives first of all that we have understood the true gospel of Jesus Christ and are really living it, we will be able to proclaim this message to others much more clearly.

It is important to present all the primary aspects of the Gospel: “Jesus saves us from sin.”

- Jesus saves us from sin: It is entirely his work. Salvation is not the result of our efforts or our worthiness, not even in part. This is the whole principle of salvation by faith alone.
- Jesus saves us from sin: The salvation he offers us is not just a question of being forgiven so that he can bestow various blessings on us. If the perspective of perfect holiness is not what interests us, then the “salvation” we accepted is not salvation in Christ. Perfect holiness is the true hope of the believer.
- Jesus saves us from sin: His priority is not to get rid of our problems, but to get rid of our mean, selfish character. His work changes our heart more than it changes the troubling circumstances we face. That produces in each believer true Christian love.

The gospel message is thus faith, hope and love, each element in its place and presented in the way the Bible

presents them:

- The **means** of salvation (faith in the work of Christ).
- The **nature** of salvation (the hope of perfect holiness).
- The **demonstration** of salvation (God's love developing in us).

It is not enough to announce just one of these points. (Faith and love are the two that are used the most, separated from the others, to try to reduce the whole gospel to one single point.) We need to present the whole plan of God, honestly and simply, so that people can know if they want to be a part of it or not.

Man's gospel, as we have seen, has existed as long as human sin has existed, simply because it flows from the desire of the sinful human heart. As sinners, we don't want God to really be **God** in our lives, but we certainly want him to deliver us from our problems. That is how most people are going to tend to understand the gospel message. Knowing that, we need to be as clear as possible. Catch phrases (“*Believe in Jesus and you will have eternal life!*” “*Give your heart to Jesus and you will know the joy of the Lord!*” “*Accept the Lord and you will have peace with God!*” ...) can never be anything more than a way of getting people's attention, a kind of “pre-evangelisation.” They must never be considered, all alone, as a sufficient or complete explanation of the gospel.

When the jailer in Philippi asked Paul and Silas what he had to do in order to be saved, they responded, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31). But they didn't stop there. They then spent a long time (a good part of the night, apparently) **announcing the gospel** to him (verse 32). Without that, the nice little “spiritual” phrase would certainly have been understood in a way that would make it part of man's gospel. Even the phrase that served as the basis of our whole examination of the gospel, “Jesus saves us from sin,” can never be enough, all alone, without explanation. A sinful heart will always manage to understand it in a way that fits it in with man's gospel.

There are people who explicitly defend the concept of announcing an “abbreviated” version of the gospel, so that it will be accepted. The argument used to defend this practice is that people will more easily accept a message of forgiveness and blessing. Then, later on, once they're in the church, there will be time to explain to them the importance of repentance, commitment, and a change of heart. But not only is this approach dishonest (it comes down to adding important conditions after people have already “signed the contract”), it also results in churches filled with people who have a wrong understanding of the gospel.

Actually, there is no certainty at all that someone who “accepts the gospel” will go along with this radical change of the message, if the original message they accepted was all about blessings they could receive by turning to Christ. A sinner does not have to have a profound change in his heart attitude about holiness and letting God really be **God** in his life, in order to accept man's gospel. Presenting it in “Christian” terms doesn't make any difference. A sinner can accept that message and still remain a convinced sinner. Thus, it really is not surprising that so many people who became “Christians” through a man-centered message resist so strongly, throughout their whole life, at the idea of making it their priority to seek after holiness.

Sure, it's much easier to “make converts” with man's gospel; it corresponds to what people want to hear, after all. That makes for much more impressive statistics, bigger churches, and more money in the offering plate. But it does nothing to help those who “come to the Lord” through that kind of message to really understand the gospel of Jesus Christ. If we want to be disciples of **Jesus**, we must announce **Jesus'** message. And his message was that it is much more important to deal with sin in the heart than with the troubles in our lives.

The gospel of Jesus Christ: a totally sufficient message!

The gospel of Jesus Christ really is an extraordinary and powerful message. Extraordinary, because it is so different from everything that religion proclaims in this world, including the various “Christian” religions that are so widespread today. Powerful, because it can transform twisted hearts, deliver us from sin, and allow us to enter fully into God's kingdom. Man's gospel is a very ordinary and feeble message in comparison. It is ordinary because it doesn't really offer anything that a multitude of other religions don't already offer, and it is feeble because it has no power to truly transform the sinful human heart.

With such a powerful and extraordinary message available to us, it is really a shame not to profit from it fully. It is a shame not to live it in all its life-changing beauty, and it is a shame not to proclaim it faithfully to a world that so desperately needs it.

Jesus saves us from sin. That is why he came to us and, if we understood his message, that is why we came to him. He wants to produce perfect holiness in us, holiness that will not only change our behavior but also, and even primarily, bring us into intimate and perfect fellowship with God, in all his glory, for all eternity. That's what Christ wants to do that for us, and it is what he *can* and *will* do for us, if we are willing to let him. The deepest longing of every true believer should always be for this liberating and transforming work of his Spirit in our hearts: "Yes, Lord Jesus, save me from sin, and make me holy, as you are holy!"