

To My Friends

Strait Talk About Eternity

Randy Wages

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Ointment and perfume rejoice
the heart: so doth the sweetness of a
man's friend by hearty counsel.

Proverbs 27:9

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for
wide is the gate, and broad is the way,
that leadeth to destruction, and many
there be which go in thereat: Because
strait is the gate, and narrow is the
way, which leadeth unto life, and few
there be that find it.

Matthew 7:13-14

Acknowledgments

Since “To My Friends” deals with matters of eternal consequence, there is absolutely nothing original in terms of the basic Gospel concepts and principles set forth herein. I’ve simply tried to relate in everyday language God’s way of salvation as revealed in the book He authored, the Bible. Even at that, God Himself tells us that He is pleased to reveal His vital truth to us by the “foolishness of preaching” – communicating to us through human instruments. Since 1985, I have been the beneficiary of precisely that – some outstanding Bible teaching.

I wish to acknowledge and express my sincere appreciation to those from whose preaching, teaching, and writings I have borrowed liberally. Much of what I have written has been collected from numerous sermons, Bible studies, and the writings of others over the years. This revised edition takes advantage of some of the excellent teaching which I’ve continued to benefit from in more recent years. Hopefully the changes will enhance the reader’s understanding of the same basic Gospel message as set forth in the original.

My appreciation extends to all the Bible teachers, preachers, and writers used by God over the years to teach me and whose impact is reflected in these pages. In particular, this book was most significantly influenced by the excellent teachings and writings of my former pastor, William W. (Bill) Parker. His scholarship, encouragement and assistance in this endeavor have proven invaluable.

Finally, I thank all who assisted in the editing and proofreading of this book. I am truly grateful for their valuable time and input. And last, but not least, I thank my dear wife Susan for her patient support during the many hours I spent in study and preparation of this book.

Randy Wages

Foreword

It is a rare thing in these days of so much religious talk and activity, as well as so much useless writing, to find a book totally concerned with the Gospel message of God's grace in the salvation of sinners through the Lord Jesus Christ. It is even a greater rarity to find one written in simple and plain language so that the Gospel is unmistakably defined and clearly communicated. This is what Randy Wages has accomplished in this effort to witness the Gospel to his friends. He skillfully and logically weaves together a presentation of the truth of salvation by grace so that anyone who is interested and who desires truly and sincerely to seek the Lord can do so. Randy exemplifies in this book one of the greatest evidences of love and concern any true friend can show – He tells the truth even at the risk of wounding and losing friends. The wise man wrote, ***“Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful”*** (Proverbs 27:6). The Apostle Paul asked the Galatian believers, ***“Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?”*** (Galatians 4:16). The honesty of a true friend, especially in matters of eternal life and eternal death, is to be treasured above all things. It is intended for good, and this comes through in this book.

Randy has written this book in a very readable style as if he were simply sitting down and having a conversation with a friend. He has brought forth the simple doctrines of the Gospel of Christ and His righteousness to show the vital, life-and-death, issues of eternal life. Those of you whom he had in mind upon writing this work should feel very honored that you have such a friend and that he is so concerned for your eternal well-being to take the time and effort involved in writing this book to you. Note as well, that any person, whether you know Randy personally or not, who acquires and reads this book should consider him a friend. Your best friend could not give you better news and information than is found in these pages. If you read what is written here, know that you have heard and been confronted with the Gospel message and the issues of eternal life.

Pastor William W. Parker

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PART

I

INTRODUCTION

1

True Friends

Following a loud clap of thunder, the smoke began to drift from the eaves of my neighbor's house. It was late in the evening, and our neighbors were notorious for retiring early and rising with the chickens. Should I call and warn them? I'd hate to wake them up if it turned out to be nothing. Then I saw it – flames leaping skyward from the corner of the roof! With no further hesitation, I phoned my neighbors, called the fire department, and ran across the street to offer assistance. Later, I received my reward as the grateful neighbors thanked me for awakening them in time to insure their safety. The simple comment, "you're a true friend," said it all.

Although this event has been embellished to illustrate a point, the fact is that most everyone I know would do the same for even the most casual of friends – warn them of imminent danger, but particularly if (1) they were sure of the danger and (2) they were concerned for their welfare, that is, it was someone they cared about – a friend.

Unfortunately, such warnings of danger aren't always welcomed, even from friends. To put it simply, danger or trouble is bad news. Often, the tendency is "to shoot the messenger." I've seen this firsthand when physicians, faced with the unpleasant task of informing patients and their family members of tragic news such as the diagnosis of a terminal illness, experience negative reactions that seem directed toward them personally. Such a reaction springs from the fact that none of us like to hear bad news as it relates to our own welfare or those for whom we care. However, we're ultimately thankful, particularly if the warning helps to prevent, correct, or altogether avoid the danger in question. Obviously, we would value and be grateful for the physician who, while delivering news of a serious diagnosis, also informs us of a sure and certain cure – a remedy to the previously unknown danger.

Such observations regarding friendship in the context of dangers, warnings, and remedies are relevant to my motivation in writing this book. This doesn't necessarily imply that I have a lot of "sick" friends, as the term is sometimes used in the vernacular. Rather, this book is written as an open letter to those I care about the most – family, friends, and acquaintances. From here on, I will take the liberty to refer to all of these (family, friends, and acquaintances) as my friends. I have attempted to express my concerns (about the disease) and share my discovery (of the cure) in just the same style and approach that I would use to personally discuss the book's subject with my closest friends, given a welcomed opportunity to do so.

We are normally drawn towards those who have things in common with us. I know that I have much in common with my friends, especially my closest friends. With regard to my past spiritual experience and relationship before God, this was the case as well. Most of my friends and I sincerely claim to believe in God. Yet it is in this area, regarding my spiritual welfare, that I discovered that I had been deceived for years. Spiritually, I was seriously ill but totally unaware of the danger. So it is with many of my friends, and although there are many differences among them, I consider most of them to be in the same boat – in serious peril yet totally unaware of the danger. Therefore, this book is my effort to be a true friend – to warn those I care for most dearly of a serious disease. So, in one sense, I guess you could say this is for my "sick" friends. Fortunately, to fully understand this disease is also to recognize the sure and certain cure – quite a silver lining behind the cloud!

At some point in life's journey, I believe that most of us take stock of our lives and consider, even if only briefly, such monumental questions as: "What about my life after death?" "Can I really be sure of spending eternity in heaven?" Ministers and religious leaders the world over stand ready to give their version of answers to such life and death issues.

I am an engineer, a businessman, and a layman, not a seminary trained member of the clergy. Although I respect, have benefited from, and recognize the value of formal education in any field, including religion, I have found that the most trustworthy information doesn't always come from the credentialed experts, but rather is often gathered from those who genuinely have our best interests at heart. If a friend sought my counsel upon considering such weighty life and death issues, I would, without hesitation, convey with conviction the truths set forth in this book. To the extent I've proven to be a trustworthy friend, then such assertions should carry some weight, particularly since a true friend would never knowingly provide erroneous or uncertain responses to questions of such eternal consequence and magnitude.

A Friendly Challenge

“To My Friends” was written from just this perspective, with my friends in mind, and I ask you to read it as such. It speaks plainly, in layman’s terms, one friend to another, of matters of eternal consequence. Since 1985 I have been privileged to sit under outstanding biblical teaching, yet I do not pretend to have all of the answers. What I do possess, however, is the basic, necessary, and vital understanding of that which God reveals to those He saves and of these answers I am sure – so sure that I ask my dearest loved ones to stake their eternal destiny on the same ground! Unfortunately, such sincere interest in the welfare of others, or dogma regarding its accuracy, does not guarantee the soundness of the advice. As fallible creatures, we can be, (and many are), not only sincere, but sincerely wrong.

My appeal to you, the reader, is simply this – Read this as if your closest, dearest, most trusted friend in the whole world gave it to you with your welfare in mind. As stated, it is just such friends that I kept in mind as I wrote this treatise. As conceded, heeding this appeal does not insure the accuracy or validity of the information, but it does insure its worthiness of consideration. We all owe it to our friends to at least consider their well-intentioned thoughts on such important issues.

Several assumptions have been made with regards to you, the reader. I am assuming that, like most of my friends, you believe:

- (1) In the existence of God
- (2) In life after death (an eternity to spend)
- (3) In the Bible as the revelation of God and standard for truth.

If all of these assumptions aren’t true of you, then I refer you to the volume of other books written on these subjects since what I have to say in this book presupposes these things.

Many of you who read this book will begin with the premise that your eternal future is secure, that you already have the answers you need and consider yourself assured of an eternity in heaven. I too was confident of my state before God, long before I had even heard the essential truths I now know are always revealed to those God saves. I'm thankful that God providentially turned my world upside down with the message of His Gospel, a message I found to be diametrically opposed to everything upon which I had previously based my hope.¹

A Winning Proposition

As a friend preparing to discuss a potentially opposing view, I ask that you objectively set aside your preconceived notions and willingly reexamine your own eternal security in light of the pages to follow. After all, we are talking about **eternity!** When it comes to where we spend eternity, if in no other area of life, we should always be willing to test and reexamine the validity of the foundation of our hope and assurance.² I'm certainly glad that someone challenged me in this way. How can you lose in agreeing to such a proposition?

There are only two possible outcomes, both favorable, if you agree to this objective self-evaluation.

- (1) You will discover that your hope is a good, sound one, consistent with the realities of God's absolute, unchanging truth and you'll emerge with even greater assurance for having considered these things;

OR

- (2) Like me, you will discover how seriously mistaken you've been before it's too late, discovering the unmistakable certainties of salvation consistent with God's standard of judgment.

Either way, you win!

¹ Prov 14:12; 16:25

² 2 Cor 13:5; 1 Pet 3:15; 2 Pet 1:10-11

In the interest of speaking to you as a layman and friend, I have tried to write plainly in common, every day language; however, I have provided some appropriate scriptural references as footnotes for those inclined to test that which is asserted against the only immutable, absolute standard of judgment – God’s Word. Some key scriptures are referenced multiple times because of their relevance to the subject at hand. I recommend that you give careful consideration to each scriptural reference for it is critical that you assess the validity of what I have to say in light of the Word of God. Assuming you’ve consented to read this as requested – as if written to you by a dear friend, then consider the following:

- (1) You should only agree with your friend on such a vital issue if you find it to be in accordance with the standard of truth – God’s Word.
- (2) You owe it to your friend to make that determination.

When we hear assertions contrary to our own long-held beliefs, our tendency is to quickly dismiss or discount them. If our established beliefs are indeed valid, they certainly should stand up to such scrutiny. So, I encourage you to examine the scriptural basis and judge whether that which is asserted in the pages that follow is true or false in accordance with God’s holy Word – the Bible.

A Little History

By now you have probably picked up on my “not so subtle” efforts urging your serious consideration of the book’s contents. I hope I have adequately conveyed the sincere concern and conviction that has served as the principal motivation for my appeal. On a more personal note, there are also other reasons that have led me to write this book. At this point, some of my friends are probably scratching their heads wondering if “our good buddy” has gone off the deep end – understandably so, since some have little knowledge of my religious convictions.

Perhaps some history is in order. Prior to 1985, I had lived a life typical of many of my friends raised in the South. I was brought up as a Protestant in a Southern Baptist Church by wonderful, caring, loving parents. Following a delightful childhood, fun-filled teenage years, college and marriage, I became more and more firmly established and zealous in the religious upbringing of my youth. I had assumed leadership positions in the church, becoming a deacon and a Sunday school teacher as my life increasingly revolved around the church and my religion. As sincere parents, serious about their religion, my wife and I had every intention of bringing up our three wonderful daughters consistent with our own long-held beliefs.

In the latter part of 1985, this all changed when, providentially, I came to hear and believe God's Gospel. This good news exposed the counterfeit "gospel" upon which most of my friends and I had erroneously staked our destinies. During the prior eight-year period, 1977 – 1985, my post-college friendships had almost exclusively been limited to those with whom I enjoyed religious fellowship. Suddenly, armed with the greatest news I had ever heard, I zealously, (and I might add, very unskillfully), attempted to alert my religious friends of our common error and explain the wonderful news I had discovered – and boy did I botch it! To stay with the medical analogy, I had discovered the disease along with the certain cure, but I was woefully unskilled and deficient when it came to using the appropriate bedside manner to communicate it.

I was naïve about man's natural predisposition to reject God's truth, barring intervention from God Himself, not always mindful of the miraculous work of grace that it took for me to come to know Christ by God-given faith so as to repent from my former religion. Given man's natural aversion to God's "way," not to mention my own ineptness in relating this newfound discovery, I encountered a type of rejection like I had never experienced before from some of my closest friends. I was brutally frank with several of my religious friends and in reflecting on this time, I can identify with the old quotation, "It's important to our friends to believe that we are unreservedly frank with them, and

important to friendship that we are not.” (McLaughlin). Although I retain some of those relationships today, things certainly aren’t the same inasmuch as the bonds of the past centered on our former religious fellowship.

So Why This Book?

Since that time, I’ve established new like-minded friends with whom I enjoy a bond of Christian fellowship; that is – friends who concur with the message of this book and place tremendous value on the truth of the Gospel. Also, I have met and established friendships with many others, outside of a religious context, with whom my wife and I have other things in common. All of these groups serve as part of the motivation behind this effort, influencing the decision to share my heartfelt convictions in this book.

With age and growth in grace and knowledge has come some wisdom. I have learned that God works on His own timing and that patience is indeed a virtue worth cultivating.¹ As Henry Ward Beecher said, “You never know till you try to reach them how accessible men are: but you must approach each man by the right door.” In today’s society, serious discussions about vital spiritual things, outside of organized religion, are often considered taboo. I have come to understand that someone, even a good friend, must be prepared and interested in any subject if it is to be given serious consideration.

Whether you agree with my beliefs or not, you can certainly imagine the frustration of caring for someone, knowing vital information needed for their safety, yet finding that they simply don’t want to hear what you have to say. Clearly, if we love and care for someone, our desire to warn them should prevail over our fear of rejection.² The Bible teaches that we cannot avoid this offense that accompanies the Gospel message.³

¹ Rom 5:3-4; James 1:3-4

² Prov 27:5-6; Gal 4:16

³ Jn 15:18-21

On the other hand, when it comes to God's work, I've come to realize that the Gospel and the sharing of it are simply means that God uses. God will not fail to achieve His purpose and save His people! My zeal and desire to see others come to true salvation knowledge will not change God's timing. Using wisdom and patience does not imply that we should compromise our faith by failing to tell others the Gospel when given the opportunity. Rather, love to our neighbor, as commanded by God,¹ demands otherwise. My desire is to be ready and eager to take advantage of opportunities when presented. But I've also learned to wait and seek to determine if my friends are prepared to hear what I have to say – that is, whether or not they are interested and willing to give it serious, objective consideration.

It is this internal conflict that served in part as a stimulus for writing this book. It truly bothers me, as it does other like-minded Christians, to know that we hold such vital knowledge that others need to hear, yet are hampered and thwarted by their disinterest or discomfort in discussing such matters. For my own peace of mind, I wish to do all I can to make this information readily available. My hope is this book will be a ready resource for friends and family so that they might:

(1) Clearly grasp what their caring friend believes

and

(2) Give serious consideration to the implications as it pertains to their own spiritual state and eternal welfare.

Though I continue to grow in grace and knowledge, I am far better equipped today to share this wonderful news than I was in my spiritual infancy. My hope is that the presentation of what I wish to say in written form will afford you, the reader, a clear presentation of the Gospel, void of the emotionally charged atmosphere that often accompanies a one-on-one discussion. As I've said, bad news and warnings of danger aren't always welcomed. I find this is particularly true when the warnings pertain

¹ Matt 22:39; Mk 12:31

to religion. Differences in religion have started feuds, wars, and continue to cause strife and division. Just look at the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East. Hopefully this written “conversation” will be conducive to a more rational and objective consideration of the subject matter. My prayer is that this book will be given sincere and unbiased consideration by all my friends – past, present, and future.

By now, I hope you have agreed to consider the rest of this book with objectivity, setting aside preconceived notions, with willingness to reevaluate your own faith and state before God, and a determination to test what is written against God’s standard of truth – the Bible. Keeping this in mind, please consider that many of the New Testament epistles address the deadly errors of religious people.

Religious Friends Read On

To many, their “faith” is nothing more than a product of their upbringing. What if you had been born into a Hindu family in India, or an Iranian Islamic family, or a Japanese Buddhist family? Would you stake your eternal destiny on the religious teachings of your youth? Is our faith based on an objective search and determination of God’s absolute truth or a mere product of our culture? The Bible does not say that salvation is for those who are born into religious families but for those who seek the Lord.¹ Do we adhere to certain beliefs simply because our parents, our church, or our religious denomination taught us those things, or because we’ve objectively resolved these things to be true according to God’s Word? The Bible teaches us that there are many kinds of “faith” that fall short of true God-given faith.² Are you willing to put yours to the test?

Involvement in religion can be, and often is, the very worst place to be found. The Bible also teaches that all religion, other than true Christianity, only establishes its participants in a false

¹ Deut 4:29; Matt 7:7-8; Lk 11:9-10

² Matt 7:21-23; 13:18-23; Jn 12:42; Rom 10:1-2

refuge.¹ Sadly, today's more popular version of so-called "Christianity" is no different. A person is in the greatest danger when he falsely assumes that he has found safe refuge when, in reality, he is only lulled into a false sense of security that serves to halt his search for true and enduring safety. Here we see why Satan loves religion!²

A Plea to Confront Reality

Finally, in business and marketing circles, we've all heard the cliché that "perception is reality." This conveys the principle that since people act and respond based on their perceptions, we should consider them real. When it comes to your eternal destiny, I beg you: Do not make this assumption. In this realm, recognize that **perception is not necessarily reality!**³ I ask that you confront reality as determined by God's truth, void of the distractions of organized religion. True religion, founded on the grace of God alone, is certainly supportive and invaluable; however, as we learn from the tenor of the New Testament epistles, most religion is false and dangerously misleading. In my observations, many stubbornly refuse to face reality, even if it means "going down with the ship." They tend to value tradition more than truth. Your future, your eternal destiny is at stake. Let's leave no stones unturned as we objectively seek the reality of God's truth! Now, come, let us reason together.⁴

¹ Isa 28:15-18

² Jn 8:41,44; 2 Cor 4:3-4

³ 1 Sam 16:7; Prov 14:12; 16:25; Lk 16:15; Jn 7:24; 2 Cor 10:7

⁴ Isa 1:18

PART

II

GOSPEL BASICS

3

God's Standard

My father was a machinist in the days prior to the widespread use of numeric or computer controlled machinery. His skill as a master craftsman was honed and displayed by virtue of the customized job shop services that made up his niche market. A modest volume of production work supplemented this niche business. As a teenager, I worked part time in my dad's shop and was often given some of these simpler, more mundane production assignments of machining parts in quantity.

Utilizing metal working lathes or milling machines, I would duplicate the original item that my father would have carefully and precisely machined in advance. Even at that, dad would frequently check behind me with precise measuring instruments to insure each finished piece was within the prescribed thousandths of an inch tolerance. To insure consistency and improve efficiency, he would sometimes design and build jigs that would assist in the process. Other times, he would simply provide an original model or standard by which each successive piece could be measured.

One day as I was duplicating machined pieces, my dad discovered that as I finished each item, I was then, in turn, using it as the standard by which to measure the next one, having set aside his precisely machined original once the production was underway. He explained and demonstrated to me how this could lead to unusable, "out of tolerance" results since even minute deviations from the original could be compounded, the error potentially multiplied with each successive part. I learned a great deal from my father, but for some reason, I've always treasured this very basic, fundamental principle he taught me in his shop – to make sure that I always measured by the one true and correct standard.

When I reflect on this, I'm reminded of the comical Norman Rockwell painting which depicts a series of ladies relating a

story by telephone, each lady passing the story on to the one positioned next to them. Pictured at the end of the lengthy gossip chain on the receiving end of the phone is the same lady who is pictured at the front of the chain, the source of the original story. In the final image, her facial expression reflects surprise at hearing something totally new, indicating that the story no longer bore any resemblance to the one she had originally authored.

So it is with today's religion, including the majority of those calling themselves "Christians." On the surface it may appear that I have much in common with all of my so-called "Christian" friends. After all, we adhere to the same Bible, we often use the same terms, and we do agree on many of the principles, virtues, and historical accounts set forth in the Scriptures. These common aspects and similarities only serve to camouflage the reality – that when it comes to what really matters, what makes the difference between an eternity in heaven or hell, the basis of hope for the vast majority bears no resemblance with the true Gospel set forth in God's Word. The deviation from God's standard as recorded in Scripture, from Adam's fall in the garden to the problems of the early church, remains entrenched in the popular religion of our day. Like Rockwell's painting, I'm sure the error has compounded over time.

The point is this – whatever judgments we make, we must insure that they are according to the right standard. If we are to confront reality, we must understand and apply the proper standard to our judgments. As we've already discussed, the only absolute, immutable, infallible standard for truth is God's Word – the Bible.¹ With this as our guide, it now becomes critical that we ascertain just what this book says. What is the standard set forth in the Bible, God's standard, by which we all shall be judged? In other words, what will make the real difference in determining whether you will spend an eternity in heaven or hell? If I'm to evaluate my own state before God honestly, I must understand and submit to the standard by which He will

¹ Isa 8:20; Rom 2:2

judge whether I'm saved or lost. To judge by the wrong standard in this realm is a fatal error of eternal consequence.

A Judgment to Face

I will identify the standard in a moment, but first, let's make sure we face the reality of what awaits us all. You've heard it said that nothing is certain except death and taxes. The Bible teaches us that just as we all shall die a physical death, we also shall all face a certain judgment, a declaration of our standing before God and our consequent eternal destiny.¹ The state we're in upon leaving this physical life on earth – whether saved and heaven bound, or lost and heading for hell – will not be changed by death. The judgment will not determine our destiny; rather it will declare it. It is a pronouncement of our standing before God, of our guilt or innocence before His bar of justice. It will include His just sentence either to (1) an everlasting separation from God and the torment of hell or (2) an eternity of everlasting joy in the very presence of Christ in heaven.

If you are confident that you're heaven bound, then consider this question – Upon what basis or ground do you derive this confidence? Here are a few of the more common answers I would expect to hear from many of my friends to this question:

- Because I believe in God
- Because I've accepted Jesus as my personal Savior
- Because I've received (or invited) Jesus into my heart
- Because God promises to save me since I believe that Christ died for my sins and I have allowed Him to enter my heart
- Because, knowing I am a sinner and in need of Christ as my Savior, I've repented from my sins and received Christ as my Savior
- Because of the blood of Christ, His dying for my sins

¹ Jn 5:28-29; Rom 14:10; Heb 9:27

- Because, although I'm not perfect, I try to live my life as a good, kind, decent person consistent with the Bible's teachings
- Because most folks consider Brother Jones <or fill in the blank> saved and I know I stack up pretty well when compared to him
- Because I believe in a Sovereign God who chose or elected those of us He intends to save
- Because I've prayed the sinner's prayer, invited Christ into my life, and confessed that before men
- Because I've trusted Christ as my personal Savior and confessed Him in baptism
- Because God promises to save all who believe the Gospel and I do

The list could go on. I've found that most of my friends base their hope on such things or on something that proceeds from them – something they feel God has enabled them to do. Usually this confidence stems from the fact that they sincerely, perhaps even fervently, believe in something – God, Jesus Christ, the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, a kind and gracious Holy Father, the universal brotherhood of man, and so on. After all, the Scripture does indicate that whosoever believes shall be saved.¹

There is certainly an element of truth in some of the responses listed above but the validity of these answers depends upon just what one means when making such assertions. For example, to believe in Christ is to be saved, but the Scripture warns us of counterfeit christs.² So it is incumbent upon us to determine whether the Christ we're trusting is the true Jesus or an imposter. Many sincerely agree that it's Christ's blood, His death, that saves them just as I did; yet, I've since discovered I was actually ignorant of a **Spirit revealed** understanding of Christ's Person and work – of what His obedience unto death actually accomplished. So in order to determine if we're trusting

¹ Jn 3:15-16; Acts 10:43; 16:31; Rom 9:33; 10:11

² 2 Cor 11:4

in the true Christ we must examine both (1) His Person – who He is and (2) His work – what He actually accomplished. The Bible clearly states that anyone who believes on Christ as revealed in the Gospel is saved, but the Scriptures warn us of other, false gospels – often disguised to resemble the truth.¹ So let's dig beyond these simple replies so as to determine just what we mean, so that we might clearly understand the actual ground of our salvation and test whether it is consistent with God's standard or not.

Like most, I believe that faith (along with the inseparable grace of repentance) is a necessary evidence and component of salvation.² The issue that determines the validity of our hope isn't whether or not we must believe but rather what or more precisely, on Whom we must believe. If we're to assess our own standing before God honestly, we must begin by determining what He has revealed as His standard of judgment. Those who are saved not only hear and understand God's standard, but they submit to it, adopting it as their own. Any who persist to the end in judging salvation on the wrong standard will "go down with the ship" and perish eternally.³ Let's begin to examine the truth we must believe.

The Standard Identified

God has graciously revealed to us the standard by which He will judge. For a student taking an exam, it's like an open book quiz – the answer set forth clearly for our viewing. God's Word tells us that if we are to enter into His presence in heaven, **we must possess a righteousness that is equal to the righteousness of Christ Himself**. He explicitly states in the book of Acts, and supports it elsewhere, that this is the standard of judgment.⁴ Christ, in reference to the most devout, dedicated, sincere religious groups of His day, the scribes and the Pharisees, said that if our righteousness did not exceed theirs, we could not enter into

¹ Matt 7:15; 2 Cor 11:3-4,13-15; Gal 1:6-9

² Mk 16:15-16; Lk 13:3,5; Acts 2:38; Eph 2:8-9; Heb 11:6

³ Matt 7:2, 21-23

⁴ Acts 17:31

heaven.¹ In the book of Isaiah, the Bible equates this rigid, unchanging standard of judgment to a plumb line from which no deviation shall be tolerated.²

The standard is clear – **we must possess a perfect righteousness, equal to that of the sinless humanity of Christ if we are to gain entrance into the presence of a holy God in heaven.** Upon hearing of this for the first time, the natural response is likely – “How can this be? Why, that’s impossible with man. If that’s true then none can be saved. No one can be perfect like Christ, the God-Man.” If these are your sentiments, perhaps, for the first time, you too are confronting the standard by which a holy and just God shall judge – righteousness. Such questions are reasonable, but God has graciously provided reasonable explanations as well. I will address this further in the pages to follow, but first, let’s make sure we fully understand just what this inflexible standard of righteousness really denotes.

¹ Matt 5:20

² Isa 28:16-17

Righteousness - God's Requirement for Heaven

The word, “righteousness” is used in various contexts throughout the Bible; however, for our purposes, we will deal with the term as used in the context of that which God sets forth as the standard for salvation. Righteousness is the fulfillment of God’s requirements necessary for entrance into His holy presence. It is what merits all of salvation, including final glorification in heaven. So we see in this context, that it is an answer or fulfillment to that which God requires.

What Does God Require?

We’ve already seen that God requires righteousness for entrance into heaven. What does this mean? The Bible teaches that God requires perfect satisfaction to His law and justice! The fulfillment of this requirement is righteousness.¹ When used in the context considered here, “righteousness” means **perfect satisfaction to God’s law and justice**. Let’s examine this further.

Perfect Obedience -

God’s law in this context refers to His entire will as revealed in His Word. With respect to God’s requirement of righteousness, God’s law is simply summarized in the New Testament as (1) loving God supremely and (2) loving your neighbor as yourself.² So for me to personally satisfy the law’s precepts would require that I love God perfectly, that I continually worship and regard Him first and foremost in all things at all times. Furthermore, it would require that I continually have the same regard for the welfare and concern of my neighbor as I do for myself. The

¹ Rom 3:21-31; 10:4

² Matt 22:37-40; Mk 12:30-31

Bible teaches that my “neighbor” includes my worst enemies.¹ So, the least ill will toward my worst enemy for even one moment would bar me from meeting God’s standard of perfect obedience.

The Scriptures teach that failing to love my neighbor perfectly makes me just as guilty before an infinitely holy God as if I was a mass murderer. This does not mean there are not differences and degrees in matters of sin. Certainly the mass murderer is much worse than the law-abiding citizen who fails to perfectly fulfill the law of love. However, neither the mass murderer nor the law-abiding citizen (who fails to perfectly fulfill the law of love) deserves salvation from a holy and just God based on their works and efforts to keep the law. Both are guilty of sin and cannot enter heaven based on their own righteousness. So to recognize that the law-abiding citizen is better than the mass murderer in our own eyes does not equate to anything meritorious in the kingdom of God according to God’s standard of salvation.² Christ commanded that we be perfect.³ The Bible says that we are cursed if we fail to comply with God’s law in even one area.⁴ Therefore, to satisfy God’s law perfectly would require perfect, continual obedience from the cradle to the grave.

Payment of the Penalty -

As stated, righteousness means perfect satisfaction to God’s law and justice. Including the term “satisfaction to God’s justice” in defining righteousness simply denotes that righteousness is not only the fulfillment of the law’s precepts through obedience, but also the extraction of the prescribed penalty for breaking the law. In other words, the penalty for sin (which the Bible defines as any transgression of the law)⁵ must be paid! The

¹ Matt 5:43-48

² Rom 3:23; 6:23

³ Matt 5:48

⁴ Gal 3:10; James 2:10

⁵ 1 Jn 3:4

Bible is clear – sin demands and results in death.¹ The debt to law and justice must be paid.

So, God's requirement for you to be reconciled to Him, to enter into fellowship with Him, and ultimately to gain eternal life in heaven itself is that you must possess this righteousness. That is, when He regards and judges you, He must find that His law and justice are satisfied, both in precept (perfect, sinless obedience) and in penalty (sufficient payment of the debt for sin must be extracted) if He is to declare you fit for His presence in heaven. That's **RIGHTEOUSNESS!**

¹ Ezek 18:20a; Rom 6:23a; Heb 9:22

Up the Creek without a Paddle

Wow! If God truly requires a perfect righteousness, then it would seem that we are surely “up the creek without a paddle.” That is, the Bible asserts that we must possess something, righteousness, that we have no possibility of producing.¹ The fundamental reason we can’t produce righteousness is simple – we are sinners! That is what we are, our very nature.² We all sin, or transgress the law, and find that it is impossible to produce the righteousness required by a holy God so as to attain and maintain eternal life.

Convinced of Sin?

The Bible teaches that in true spiritual conversion, God the Holy Spirit convinces all to whom He gives spiritual life of the following: of sin, righteousness, and judgment.³ Most of my friends will readily admit that they are imperfect sinners, falling well short of the standard set by Christ in His sinless walk on this earth. In fact, almost everyone involved in organized religion will concede as much; nevertheless, the Scriptures give us numerous examples of many like-minded religious characters who were yet unconverted⁴ – that is, not convinced by the Holy Spirit of sin, righteousness, and judgment. So what does it mean to be truly convinced of sin?

First, it’s important that we recognize the impossibility of adequately comprehending our sinful condition apart from a proper understanding of God’s standard of judgment. We may acknowledge the fact of our sinfulness without fully understanding how truly depraved and deserving of God’s wrath we are unless we measure ourselves against the “plumb line” of

¹ Matt 19:25-26

² Rom 3:10-18, 23; Eph 2:1-3

³ Jn 16:8

⁴ Matt 7:21-23; Lk 18:18-23

God's standard – perfect righteousness. So, for any who think they could somehow measure up – think again. Unlike horseshoes or hand grenades, close doesn't count! In fact, to comprehend this standard is to realize how none come close at all. Any who come to a God-taught knowledge of Christ must confront this error that is common to all – the mistaken assessment of their own condition – of their state before God.¹

This error is often exposed by where or how we find relief and recovery from the sin problem as we see it. To return to the medical analogy, an incompetent physician, a quack, is usually exposed by his prescription of an inadequate remedy. It's only then that we discover that the disease itself was tragically misdiagnosed. The same is true here. Whatever one asserts as his or her ground of deliverance from their sinful state, will reveal whether or not he truly understood the nature and magnitude of the problem.

To cut to the chase, if your remedy doesn't answer the demands of God's holy law and justice by virtue of your having obtained a perfect righteousness, then you haven't been truly convinced of sin. To be convinced of sin is to understand that nothing that proceeds from you will meet God's requirement of righteousness – not even your repentance, and/or perseverance in the truth. One convinced of sin, righteousness, and judgment sees:

(1) That only righteousness, perfect satisfaction to God's law and justice, will merit his or her salvation²

and

(2) The impossibility of being saved based on anything else, of anything that proceeds from the sinner, a transgressor of God's law.³

¹ Rom 7:8-13

² Rom 3:21-26

³ Rom 3:20, 28; Gal 2:16; Phil 3:3-9; Titus 3:5

So What's Different?

How is this different from the prevailing view of sin? I know that for many years, while totally oblivious to God's requirement of righteousness, I considered myself to be a sinner, in need of salvation by God's grace. Unfortunately, at the time, what I thought was grace fell tragically short of meeting God's requirement. Still, I considered it sufficient to address my sinful condition. Though I knew I was deficient in many areas, I failed to recognize the depth of my totally depraved condition. I considered myself saved by God's grace but my conception of His grace amounted to God enabling me to meet the conditions necessary for my salvation. I was banking on something that proceeded from me, a sinner, to procure my own salvation. I believed that Christ, by His death, had made this all possible and, like most, I thought that God had enabled me to respond in belief. Yet there was no mistaking the fact that something proceeding from me, not righteousness, was the basis of my presumed hope.

Saved from Sin by Sin?

It is important that we recognize that anything that proceeds from a sinner is tainted with sin, including the sinner's best efforts, even his or her prayers and attempts at worship. In light of this, to expect deliverance from God on the basis of anything that proceeds from me the sinner is equivalent to expecting God to save me and deliver me from sin, not based upon righteousness, but based upon that which is tainted by the very condition from which I seek deliverance – sin itself.¹ This is tantamount to expecting an immutable God to change – to lower His perfect, holy standard of justice under the natural but false assumption that He must do so in order to show mercy.

In light of the standard of perfect righteousness required by God, I now see that I did not understand the predicament in which my sin condition left me, void of righteousness and with

¹ Lk 16:15; Rom 7:5

no hope of producing one myself.¹ My remedy – my confidence that I was saved by virtue of my having received Christ, based upon my faith – reveals that I was not savingly convinced of sin at that time. I was convinced of many flaws and imperfections in my character and conduct. I recognized selfishness, envy, greed, malice, and any and all acts of immorality as sin, yet I had not experienced true, Holy Spirit conviction of sin. The demands of God’s law must be met – not simply recognized as some unattainable ideal.

Think about this – almost all religions the world over, including most which do not call themselves “Christian,” believe that acts of immorality and flaws in character and conduct are displeasing and deserving of their “god’s” wrath. Now many of my friends who consider themselves “Christian” would agree that those from such non-Christian religions, though convinced of the evil of such flaws in character and conduct, have not been convinced of sin by God the Holy Spirit. So this shows that in salvation, being convinced of sin entails more than just a mere recognition of character flaws and less than perfect conduct.

The Sin that Deceives Us

So, again, what’s different? As stated, to be convinced of sin is to be convinced of the impossibility of salvation based on anything that proceeds from me, the sinner. Many who do not even claim belief in Christ are convinced of the evil of immorality, but **in salvation, we become convinced of something that we would not otherwise conclude naturally.** To be convinced of sin by the Spirit of God is to become persuaded of something beyond that which our natural conscience would reveal to us. It is to discover a sin that we were previously unaware of – a sin that in fact deceives us into thinking that we are true believers when such is not the case.² It’s to think that we have been convinced of sin and delivered from it while still ignorant of (or not

¹ Rom 3:10, 20; 6:20

² Isa 28:15-18; 2 Thess 2:7-12

submitted to) God's standard and requirement for this deliverance – righteousness.¹

If we are to understand our predicament accurately, it is imperative that this deception be exposed. Consider how most answer these questions about committing sin: Is lying sin? Is stealing sin? Is murder sin? Most of my friends would correctly answer, “Absolutely,” without hesitation. But what about this question: Is doing our best to avoid lying, to avoid stealing, and to avoid committing murder sin? Naturally, most of my friends would answer with a resounding, “Of course not,” considering such efforts to obey as admirable and commendable. If we're going to unravel this “mystery of iniquity”² that is promoted by the religion of today's apostate (God-forsaking) church, then we must think again in light of God's testimony. Without argument, the Bible commands us to strive to avoid sin; however, the Bible also teaches that if one is ignorant of (or not submitted to) Christ's righteousness as their only hope for salvation, then his or her best efforts to avoid such heinous sins is the height of evil – even more awful in God's eyes than the sins of immorality we seek to avoid. We all naturally recognize such things as lying, stealing, and murder as immoral, unethical, and evil; but, prior to true spiritual conversion, we do not recognize how and why our attempts to avoid these things are actually immoral, unethical, and evil from God's perspective.³

By nature, we highly esteem and value such efforts at obedience as either (1) forming some part of our ground of acceptance before God or (2) as evidence of our state, of being saved. Here is where we see that things men call “good,” God really does call “evil.”⁴ I will explain this in more detail in later chapters; however for now, I simply want you to see that this deception (referred to in the Scriptures as the “deceivableness of

¹ Rom 10:1-3

² 2 Thess 2:7-12

³ Lk 16:15; Jn 3:18-20

⁴ Isa 5:20

unrighteousness”)¹ preys naturally upon us all at some point in our lives.

The Bible makes it clear that Satan is a deceiver.² As such, he must operate in the realm of religion. He is akin to an undercover agent, fooling most religionists into thinking that they are fighting Satan when actually they are in unison with him. The Bible says this is true of all of us prior to true spiritual conversion.³ Satan, working through religion itself, deceives us into erroneously thinking that things God considers unrighteous, actually commend us unto God. For Satan, religion is like Brer Rabbit’s briar patch – his ideal stomping ground. If we remain deceived, we’ll simply continue our religious walk, doing what is sinfully natural – that which seems right (moral and ethical) in our own eyes,⁴ all the while blinded and not submitted to God’s standard.

To be clear, this sin that deceives all by nature is **the sin of self-righteousness. It is the sin of thinking that anything other than or in addition to the perfect righteousness rendered by Christ will merit any part of my salvation.** To be delivered from this deception is to be convinced of sin, righteousness, and judgment.⁵ This sin is deceptive in that it lulls us into thinking we’re okay – that our eternal future is secure while, in fact, we are banking on something which falls disastrously short of meeting God’s requirement. The discovery of this certainly turned my world upside down. The very things that I naturally concluded would please God, gain His favor, and remove His wrath – I now know to be the height of evil and an assault on the honor of God. The medicine I erroneously thought constituted a cure for my condition actually was symptomatic evidence of the disease itself.⁶ As the Scriptures set forth, that which seems good, which the majority of the religious world

¹ 2 Thess 2:10

² 2 Cor 4:3-4

³ Jn 8:44; Eph 2:1-3

⁴ Judges 17:6; Prov 14:12; 16:25

⁵ Jn 16:8

⁶ Phil 3:4-7

highly esteems, is actually evil, an abomination before God when held up to the light of His standard of righteousness.¹

Until this sin was exposed, it was evidence that the Spirit of God had not yet done a work of grace in my heart. Consider that I was oblivious to how I might be saved based solely upon the righteousness of Christ. By default, if one does not plead and possess a righteousness that they had no part in producing, then they are depending upon something that proceeds from them personally, at least to some degree. Under these circumstances, they are deceived into thinking that they are qualified and entitled for salvation based upon something that falls woefully short of God's standard of perfect righteousness. Although I failed to recognize it as such for many years, I now see that I was blind (like most of my friends) to this deceptive sin – **the sin of trying to establish a righteousness of my own – self-righteousness!**² Before you exclude yourself from this number, hear the good news: God saves self-righteous, otherwise hell deserving sinners, such as you and me. We'll discover just how this can be in the pages to follow.

Having read this far, my hope is that you are beginning to see that when measured against God's strict standard of righteousness, we are truly "up the creek without a paddle" if salvation is conditioned on us sinners in any way or to any degree!

¹ Lk 16:15

² Rom 10:3-4

How Did We Get in this Shape?

Having established that a holy God requires something that a sinner cannot produce, let's discuss how mankind got in such shape in the first place. In brief, this all came about by the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden as recorded in Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

The Nature of Adam's Sin

Most are familiar with the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, eating the forbidden fruit. Since many of my male buddies have used this story over the years jokingly to "blame it on the woman God gave them," I'm confident that I don't need to review the details of the story for most of you. For the unfamiliar, I'll simply refer you to the account as recorded in Genesis.¹

As familiar as the story was to me growing up, I never grasped its relevance until I examined it in light of the Gospel wherein Christ's righteousness is revealed. Among the many New Testament warnings to beware of false teachings, one such warning is accompanied by an admonition to beware of the subtlety used by Satan in deceiving Eve.² This warning is particularly significant given that, unlike Adam's posterity, Adam and Eve themselves were not predisposed to sin before committing their original sin. The Bible teaches that as descendants of Adam and Eve, we all enter into this world as spiritually dead sinners, allied with Satan, and at enmity with God;³ however, this was not true of the first couple. They were not natural allies with Satan prior to the fall. Yet, Eve was deceived by Satan's subtlety.

¹ Gen 3:1-6

² 2 Cor 11:3-4, 13-15

³ Rom 5:12; 8:7; Eph 2:1-3

How much more vulnerable are we then to being similarly fooled? Satan's deception was subtle in that it did not appear to be an outright denial of the truth conveyed by God, but rather it left them with the suggestion of committing the most heinous of sins, camouflaged and presented as seemingly harmless and consistent with an appropriate relationship before God.

Consider the following two aspects of Satan's deception in the garden. First, though Adam and Eve were informed by God that they would die if they disobeyed Him by eating of the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil,"¹ Satan told them that it wasn't necessary to abide by God's standard. In fact, he told them that they could be as gods, in essence, set their own standard for good and evil.² Secondly, Satan informed them that, contrary to God's assertion of the certain consequence of death for failing to meet this standard that in fact, they really would not die.³

Religion's Promotion of Satan's Lie

That is exactly what the vast majority of mainstream religion tells its hearers today. Cloaked with the language of Scripture taken out of context, organized religion ignorantly tells us:

- (1) That we set the standard for salvation – that it is up to us since it is ultimately conditioned on something that proceeds from us, the sinners;

and

- (2) That, spiritually speaking, we're okay – we shall not die eternally as long as we meet the prescribed condition(s) of our particular religious denomination, contrary to and independent of God's standard of perfect righteousness.

¹ Gen 2:16-17

² Gen 3:5

³ Gen 3:4

Religion tells us to buy into Satan's deceptive lie in the garden when it tells us, "God has done His part – now the rest is up to you." We're taught that we are in control, that the crowning, determining event upon which our final destiny hinges is our response, our acceptance – in other words, that salvation is conditioned on us. Different religions and denominations disagree or vary the emphasis upon just what conditions or requirements the sinner must meet. Oftentimes the self-righteous aspect of such teaching is obscured by the seemingly humble assertions that credit God the Holy Spirit with enabling us to meet the necessary conditions for our own salvation. Many, (including myself in years past), are deceived by this, failing to see that the Holy Spirit would never promote anything that would rival the work of Christ as God's provision to fulfill all of the conditions necessary for salvation.¹ Whether the emphasis is on faith, repentance, some degree of obedience or "holy living," perseverance, or some combination of these, do not be fooled – most of religion promotes Satan's lie by telling us that in the exercise of our "free wills", we meet the conditions for our own salvation and ultimately, we are in control. In falling for this, lost sinners unwittingly declare their autonomy and independence from God, rejecting His way and seeking their own because it seems right to them.² Satan's version in the garden was simply, you "shall be as gods."³

As we've seen, God requires perfect righteousness, but most base their hope on something else – such as their faith, their repentance, their perseverance, or some combination of these. They set their own standard, contrary to God's holy requirement of righteousness. God says that unless you possess this righteousness, you shall be eternally punished for your sins.⁴ Nevertheless, most are told and sincerely deceived into thinking they shall not experience a spiritual death sentence of torment in hell even though they defy God by refusing to seek salvation His way

¹ Jn 16:13-15

² Prov 14:12; 16:25

³ Gen 3:5

⁴ Isa 28:17; Matt 5:20, 48; Acts 17:31

– that is, based upon a righteousness they had no part in producing.

I grew up learning some of the ramifications of Adam’s sin – how it had affected all of future mankind by ushering in physical death and many of the drudgeries of life, including the necessity of laboring for our sustenance. However, until I heard about the necessity of possessing a perfect righteousness, I couldn’t truly appreciate the predicament of man precipitated by Adam’s fall. Consider that Adam uniquely had the best opportunity to continue without sin. Unlike the rest of us, he had no belly button. He was created holy, untainted by a natural sinful nature. We could have selected no better representative, yet he succumbed to the subtle deceptions of Satan. Is it any wonder that those of us born with a natural predisposition to sin will so easily enter into the same lie promoted by Satan in the garden? Truly, we must be given spiritual life if we are to come to know God savingly.¹

Representation and Imputation

So, if I enter into this world as a sinner, in need of salvation, and oblivious to the righteousness He requires – what does Adam’s sin have to do with it? The answer lies in the scriptural concepts of representation and imputation. Now, before you decide that I’m delving into some advanced theological discussion of non-vital significance, think again. In the pages to follow, I will show how by these very same principles of representation and imputation, saved sinners actually personally possess the perfect righteousness that they are unable to produce! Like me, some of my more religious friends may have heard the saying, “Wrong on the fall, wrong on it all.” The fact that these same principles are vitally involved in a sinner’s justification before a holy God certainly lends some credibility to the cliché.

¹ Jn 1:12-13; 3:3-8; Eph 2:1

Guilty as Charged

God appointed Adam to be the federal head and representative of the entire human race. When he sinned, we sinned. How can this be? We weren't there. We didn't actually commit his sin. The Bible teaches us that, although we didn't actually sin personally, we did sin in our representative Adam. That is, by Adam's sin we are subject to sin and death, and we are deserving of God's wrath because of sin.¹ Adam's eating of the forbidden fruit is not personally an act of mine – he did it. Nonetheless, it became mine by imputation, but only as I am considered in Adam under the covenant of works, the terms of which are salvation by the works of men. Adam broke this covenant and so the promise of life by it ceased. So to seek salvation under the terms of this covenant is deadly.

Imputation is the act of legally crediting or charging the merit or demerit of the action of one party to the account of another. Adam's sin was actually imputed to all of mankind, all that He represented.² This means that the demerit of Adam's sin, its legal guilt and defilement, was actually charged (imputed) individually to each and every one of his descendants, again, as it pertains to the covenant of works.³ As a result, we all enter into the world as spiritually dead and defiled sinners (alienated from God) before we ever personally commit the first sin. The Bible points out how the physical death of all is evidence of the reality of this universal oneness with Adam.⁴

This shows us that the state of spiritual death which all are initially born into is based upon our representation in Adam, having his sin imputed (legally charged to the sinner) before that sinner consciously commits his or her first sin.⁵ We all fell in our representative, Adam, but graciously for some, they have another representative and are under the terms of another

¹ Rom 5:12, 18a

² Rom 5:19a

³ Rom 5:12

⁴ Rom 5:13-14

⁵ Rom 5:18a, 19a

covenant, the covenant of grace in Christ as set forth in the Gospel of grace. As we'll observe in the next chapter, for these, the demerit of Adam's sin as well as the sins they personally commit in their respective life times were charged or imputed to another, an eternal Surety who in time would bear the just penalty due unto them.

Sin – It Comes Naturally

Furthermore, as a descendant of Adam, we inherited his sinful nature. His fallen nature is actually imparted to all of his posterity so that we find within us the sinful, rebellious will to naturally side with Satan against God. This nature includes the powerful principles of self-love, self-righteousness, and religious ignorance and pride. The characteristics of Satan's deception in the garden itself point toward the fact that man's alliance with Satan is most prominently manifested in our natural, sinful, religious efforts at appeasing God's wrath and gaining His favor in ways contrary to His gracious provision. Herein lies much of the subtlety.

Though I find very little in common with the famous 19th century atheist and father of communism, Karl Marx, I do concur with his characterization of religion as "an opiate of the people." That certainly seems to be descriptive of most of today's religion, including the vast majority of that which goes under the name of "Christianity." My hope is that your senses will not be dulled with the masses by the subtle deception of sincere, well-meaning religious leaders who unwittingly promote Satan's deadly lie.

If I Can't Produce It, How Does It Become Mine?

So, here we are, seemingly “up the creek without a paddle,” yet the Bible teaches that God is pleased to save multitudes out of Adam’s fallen race. We’ve learned that God’s law and justice must be perfectly satisfied for any to join His presence in heaven; therefore, a sinner, by definition, is disqualified. So if a sinner cannot produce the righteousness required by God, how does God mercifully save sinners?

Righteousness Imputed

To understand this is to comprehend the only valid ground or basis upon which a holy God can and does save sinners. **The ground of salvation is the imputed righteousness of Christ!** The righteousness of Christ is the merit of His entire work of redemption, His perfect satisfaction to God’s law and justice. The Bible teaches us that Christ became Incarnate – that is, He took into union with His Deity, a sinless humanity. Born of the Virgin Mary,¹ Christ, the “seed” of woman,² the God-man, was like us in His humanity (body and soul) except He was void of the sinful nature imparted to us from our father Adam.³

God requires perfect satisfaction to His holy law. Christ, in His humanity, was put under God’s law so that He might fulfill it.⁴ Christ alone perfectly obeyed God so as to fulfill God’s requirement of sinless perfection.⁵ Furthermore, God’s justice requires that a suitable penalty must be extracted to answer for each and every sin of any that will be permitted into His holy presence in heaven. Before an infinitely holy God only a sinless

¹ Matt 1:23-25; Lk 1:34-35

² Gen 3:15

³ Heb 4:14-15

⁴ Matt 5:17-18; Gal 4:4

⁵ Heb 1:3; 10:14

sacrifice of infinite value is sufficient to pay this debt for sin. Christ, the God-man, obediently offered Himself as a substitutionary sacrifice at the cross of Calvary in fulfillment of this requirement for all who will enter heaven's glory.

Our Priest, Our Sacrifice, Our Altar

In the Old Testament we read how the Jewish priests were commanded to offer innocent, unblemished sacrificial lambs at God's prescribed altar. The altar set the sacrifice apart and gave it value, distinguishing it as an act of acceptable obedience to God, rather than some random slaughter of animals for other purposes. Obedience to these God-given requirements under the Law of Moses brought temporal deliverance and blessings to that chosen nation. More importantly, the sacrifices and other prescribed commands were to serve as pictures and types to teach them of the promised Messiah – Christ, the Lamb of God, through whose sacrifice sinners would be and were eternally delivered.¹ So we see that Christ, as the great high Priest, provided the sacrifice of His own humanity upon the altar of His Deity. His Deity gave value to the sacrifice of His humanity and set it apart. Only the infinitely valuable blood of the God-man Mediator, Christ Himself, is sufficient to pay the sin debt owed to God's injured justice. Here we see the necessity of both the Person and the work of Christ for righteousness to be established.

The permanent, never-ending aspect of eternal death and banishment from God is itself a testimony of God's inflexible justice and the invaluable payment for sin that is required and demanded to appease the wrath of a holy God. The Bible teaches us that multitudes of sinners will perish in hell as punishment for their sins, yet this will never pay the debt owed to God's injured justice. This is consistent with the view that hell is eternal – sinful man's suffering and permanent banishment from God's presence being dreadfully inadequate payment of the debt owed to an infinitely holy God.

¹ Gal 3:24; Heb 9:8-14, 23-26; 10:1-5

How Does Christ's Righteousness Become Mine?

So – Christ produced the righteousness I need. Now, how does it become mine? The Scriptures teach that just as by Adam's sin, all those he represented were legally accounted to be sinners, by the exact same means, all those represented by Christ are legally accounted to be righteous.¹ In other words, Christ's righteousness is imputed, or charged to the account of all whom He represents. **The justified sinner thereby stands before God possessing a perfect righteousness that he had absolutely no part in producing.** That is, the entire merit of Christ's work of redemption, His satisfaction to both God's law and justice, has been charged to my account. This does not negate the necessity of faith, but God-given faith "believeth unto righteousness."² Genuine God-given faith looks to Christ alone for all of salvation, based solely on the imputation of the righteousness Christ produced at the cross of Calvary. This blood-bought gift of faith³ provides the first valid evidence to someone that Christ's righteousness was imputed to them. So, my plea before God is nothing other than the righteousness of God in Christ that He imputed to me and revealed to me by God-given faith. And God assures us that He has granted salvation and eternal life to all who truly submit to Christ and His righteousness alone as their only hope!⁴

Keep in mind that Christ's righteousness refers to the entire merit of His work of redemption – His satisfaction to both law and justice. So, even though God has imputed to me the merit of Christ's perfect, sinless obedience, you might wonder how God could consider my sin debt to be paid based upon the sacrificial death of Christ as my substitute. After all, I didn't die, Christ did. In fact, if death is the result of sin, how could God justly pronounce a death sentence upon His own Son, who never committed any sins? Well, the Bible explains this wonderful transaction as well.

¹ Rom 5:19

² Rom 10:9-10

³ 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23; Eph 2:8-9

⁴ Matt 6:33; Jn 6:40; Rom 10:1-11

To all whom Christ represented, God imputed or charged their sin in Adam as well as every one of their individual sins, (past, present and future) to Christ so that He became guilty and defiled in the eyes of God's justice based on sins He had absolutely no part in producing – they were imputed, or charged to His account. Similarly, the believing sinner is justified, reconciled unto God, and declared not guilty and pure before the eyes of God's justice based on a righteousness he has absolutely no part in producing – it being imputed, or charged to his account.¹

It's important to distinguish that the sins Christ bore on the cross were not imparted to Christ so as to make Him a sinner in His character and conduct. Rather, they were charged (imputed) to Him. For Christ to die as a suitable sacrifice, He must and did remain without spot or blemish in fulfillment of God's requirement of a perfect righteousness.² Likewise, it's important to see that righteousness is not infused (imparted) into those whom Christ represented. Rather it, righteousness, is charged (imputed) to their account. If it were otherwise, the preeminence of Christ in salvation would have been transferred so that the justified sinner would then have room to boast, contrary to God's testimony.³ No, instead, those who are saved are legally accounted righteous based upon the righteousness that still resides in their substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ. As John Bunyan wrote:

“Indeed this is one of the greatest mysteries in the world – namely, that a righteousness that resides with a Person in heaven should justify me, a sinner, on earth.”

The biblical doctrine of imputation is a wonderful discovery to anyone truly convinced of sin and of their need for righteousness they can't produce!

¹ Rom 4:6-8; 2 Cor 5:21

² Heb 9:14; 1 Pet 1:18-19; 2:21-24; 3:18

³ Rom 3:26-28; Gal 6:14; Eph 2:8-9; Col 1:18-22

The Reality of Imputation

I've explained how Christ, as a representative and substitute for those for whom He died, satisfied God's law and justice on their behalf. Further, I've shown how the merit of His accomplishment was made theirs by imputation. As a fruit and effect of their justification before God by Christ's finished work at the cross, these all shall, in each successive generation, come to Him in God-given faith, pleading His imputed righteousness as their only ground of acceptance before Him.

Now, some may be tempted to think that these principles of representation, substitution, satisfaction, and imputation are merely symbolic and not literal transactions with regards to how God saves sinners. I've heard it taught that God, who knows all, including the continual sinfulness of all, simply treats the believing sinner as if he is righteous. Some have suggested that a saved sinner is not in fact legally accounted to be righteous, but God simply acts as if He is – that the individual sins aren't literally paid for, but that God simply treats the "believer" as if he hadn't sinned in response to the "believer's" act of faith.

Think again. Here is just how real imputation is. God thinks so highly of the honor of His own character, that he killed His only begotten Son, the spotless, perfectly sinless Christ, on the cross **for sins imputed**. If you believe the historical account of the crucifixion of Christ, then this alone should settle for you the real, vicarious nature of Christ's substitutionary death. Only a monster would have subjected Christ to the shame, humiliation, and agonizing death He suffered if actual sins had not been literally imputed to Him. Christ truly paid for the sins of all whom He represented and God's justice demands their salvation since their debt has been fully paid!

For years, like most of my friends, I thought that Christ had died for not only my sins, but for the sins of everyone who had ever lived, including the multitudes that the Bible tells us will perish in hell.¹ Now, having understood that the imputed

¹ Matt 7:13

righteousness of God in Christ is the only hope for a sinner's salvation, I'm ashamed that I ever thought that even one person for whom Christ died could possibly perish. I now recognize that in holding this view, I was casting reproach on God's character and assessing the redeeming work of Christ, His blood, to be worthless as to its saving efficacy. What an unjust fiend God would be to have already extracted the penalty for anyone's sins in the death of Christ and then still send that one for whom Christ died to an eternal punishment in hell! All those for whom Christ died are eternally saved! I'll elaborate on this later but for now, let's continue to examine why the imputation of righteousness is absolutely necessary for a sinner's salvation.

Salvation – A Matter of Law & Justice

Consider the following three scenarios:

(1) Assume you are pulled over for speeding, given a ticket, and you decide to appear in court before a judge to plead your case. Now, it just so happens that the judge is one of your dear friends. In spite of the fact that the evidence of guilt is indisputable, your friend, Judge Buddy, decides to dismiss your case without inflicting the penalty of the fine as prescribed by law. Has justice been served?

(2) What if, under similar circumstances, a different judge happens to hold a personal grudge against you? In this case, your attorney was able to present truthful and indisputable evidence of your innocence. Nevertheless, Judge Grumpy declares you guilty in spite of the facts and requires that you pay the penalty prescribed for the alleged crime you did not commit. All would agree that justice had not been served in this case.

(3) Finally, suppose you are pulled over for speeding, given a ticket, and, conceding your guilt, you simply decide to go to the courthouse and pay the fine. Upon arriving, you discover that a dear friend had already paid the fine on your behalf for the amount prescribed by the law. You were informed of this; however, Judge Greedy intervened and insisted that you also pay the fine personally, in addition to the payment already made. Again, justice has not prevailed.

Most everyone would have no difficulty seeing the injustice in each of the scenarios above; however, most fail to recognize the same accusations of injustice toward God implicit in their doctrine pertaining to salvation. Make no mistake about it, the Bible teaches us clearly that God is just!¹

¹ Gen 18:25; Isa 45:21b; Rom 2:2; 3:26

Drawing parallels with the first case before Judge Buddy, if God were simply to pretend, or treat the sinner, as if he had never sinned, justice would not be served! Nevertheless, multitudes erroneously think that this is the nature of God's mercy. To be guilty is to be deserving of punishment. The Bible teaches us that God will by no means clear the guilty and that sin demands death.¹

Analogous to the second case before Judge Grumpy, righteousness demands the salvation of any sinner if justice is to be served. The Bible teaches that Christ's righteousness was imputed to all whom Christ represented in His life and death and that in time they all shall be brought to Him in faith, by the sovereign call of His Spirit.² God's justice demands that those without guilt must go unpunished. For the saved, the guilt and defilement of sin is removed because justice was satisfied on their behalf by their substitute on the cross.³

Finally, as with the third case before Judge Greedy, any for whom Christ died, for whom the debt has already been paid – must go free⁴. It's clear that God would be unjust if he extracted punishment for sins that Christ had already paid for.

Justification

It is absolutely necessary that we come to understand and submit by faith to Christ as our only hope for salvation, based solely upon the imputation of His righteousness. To grasp just how necessary this is, it is useful for us to see the biblical perspective of salvation as a matter of law and justice. The Bible refers to the saved sinner as one who has been **justified**. This describes all who ultimately enter heaven. Justification is a legal or judicial term. So, whatever it means, it must necessarily have some relation to the law and justice of God. As before, by law in this context, I mean all of God's revealed will. God tells us

¹ Ex 34:7; Ezek 18:4, 20a; Rom 6:23a

² Jn 6:37-40; Rom 8:28-32

³ Rom 3:25-26; 5:21; Heb 10:14

⁴ Heb 10:17-18

through His Word that, as subjects under His law, we are eternally cursed if we fail in even one instance to comply continually with His standard of perfect obedience.¹

So, if God's law requires perfect obedience, then partial compliance is inadequate. This is why there is no neutral territory. Either you've been justified by Christ or you are condemned in Adam, standing in one or the other, because either you have a righteousness that answers the demands of God's holy law and justice, or you don't – there is no in-between. **God's justice can neither condemn any who are innocent, nor accept any who are not righteous.**

Now justification also includes the pardon of sin. Yet the Bible tells us that God shall “by no means clear the guilty”² and that the “soul that sinneth”³ shall surely die. Sin demands death according to God's justice.⁴ We learn from the Scriptures that there is no forgiveness or pardon without the shedding of Christ's blood⁵ – the culminating act of His obedience, even “unto death.”⁶ In other words, there can be no forgiveness or pardon unless God's holy law and strict justice are satisfied. God will not ignore, deny, or pervert His justice.

The Bible also tells us in numerous places of God's purpose to show mercy.⁷ This pardon of sin addresses both the demerit of our sin in Adam as well as the demerit of all the sins we personally commit. And justification includes God's pronouncement and acceptance of the sinner (a transgressor of the law, the ungodly) as righteous.⁸ So we come to see that the concept of justification sets forth the requirement of **righteousness** because, again, that's what righteousness means – perfect satisfaction to

¹ Gal 3:10; James 2:10

² Ex 34:7b

³ Ezek 18:4, 20a

⁴ Rom 6:23a

⁵ Heb 9:22

⁶ Phil 2:8

⁷ Ex 34:6-7a; Heb 8:12

⁸ Rom 3:25-26; Eph 1:3-7

God's law (perfect obedience) and justice (the penalty being paid). Now all this makes up that standard of righteousness that is required and by which we shall be judged. Comprehending the remedy that meets this standard is the great problem that is solved only by the Gospel of God's grace. And in that Gospel, wherein this remedy is found, we behold the redemptive glory of God, how God can be just and still save a sinner.

The Glory of God

Have you ever wondered why we are all here? Why did God create the world and mankind in the first place? Why did an all-powerful, all-knowing, sovereign God allow (even ordain) Adam to fall as a representative of the entire human race so as to leave them in need of a savior and the imputation of His righteousness? What is God's purpose and design in all of these things? Well, on the surface, there appears to be a consensus among so-called "Christian" theologians that **God's main purpose in everything revolves around His glory – that He might be glorified.** This consensus is well founded in that it is derived from clear, indisputable scriptures that set forth God's glory as His ultimate purpose and design in all things.¹ Unfortunately, that consensus falls apart when you begin to examine what many think God's "glory" is all about in this realm.

Most people think as I did in years past, that God's glory consists mostly of the notion that God should get all the credit. It is true that God should receive all credit or glory; however the Bible teaches that God's glory, as it relates to His ultimate purpose, actually refers to **the revelation of who He is – what God is like.** This was evident in the biblical account in Exodus when Moses conversed with God on the mountain.² He asked God to show him His glory. God proceeded to describe what He was like – His character attributes. In this recorded discourse God described Himself, mentioning His sovereignty, His mercy, His graciousness, His longsuffering, His goodness, His truth, and His justice.³

God is spirit. We can't physically see Him. So, how and in what way do we know Him? We know God as we behold His

¹ Psa 104:31; Isa 40:5; Rom 11:36; Eph 1:3-14; 3:20-21; Col 1:16-17;

¹ Tim 1:17; Rev 4:11

² Ex 33:18-19

³ Ex 34:6-7

character attributes. God reveals these attributes to us by the things that He does. For example, we come to understand something about God's infinite power and wisdom when we consider Him as Creator of the universe.¹ We come to understand that God is faithful to keep His promises and execute His threats in the historical account of His dealings with mankind, particularly the nation of Israel as recorded in the Old Testament. The passing of each and every day, the sunrise and sunset, teaches us of the faithfulness of God. So we come to know God by the things that He has done. Now let's examine that which God reveals of Himself in salvation.

The Glory of God in Salvation

The Bible identifies justified sinners to whom Christ has been revealed as those who **know the only true God**.² The Bible is full of examples of individuals who sincerely believed many truths about the character of God, yet they were exposed to be lost because their knowledge of God fell short of that which is revealed to those He saves. So what is it to know God in truth? What does all this have to do with God's requirement for righteousness – that His law and justice be perfectly satisfied?

Just as God's glory is His main purpose in all things, so it must be in His design to save sinners. In fact, the highest manifestation of God's glory is revealed in the heart of a sinner when God gives that sinner spiritual life. The Bible teaches that just as God reveals to us something of His glory in His work of creation, He reveals something particular about His glory, His character, in the hearts of those He saves through the work and Person of Christ.³ Although we may learn much about God and His character through His many marvelous works of creation and providence, there is something special about his character that is only revealed in the Person and work of Christ.

¹ Psalms 19:1; Romans 1:19-20

² Jeremiah 9:24; John 17:3

³ 2 Corinthians 4:6

Only through the Person and work of Christ can one comprehend how God can be **both a just God and a Savior**. To see how God can remain just while still saving sinners is to behold God's highest glory, the redemptive glory of God! To hear, understand, and value how this can be so is to truly know God as He uniquely is revealed to those He saves.¹

Consider again the discourse between God and Moses on the mountain after Moses asked God to show him His glory. God began by asserting His sovereignty, stating He would "show mercy on whom I will." He went on to talk about his long-suffering and mercy, goodness, and truth, and finally, he tells Moses, I'm like this: "I'll have mercy on thousands, forgive iniquity and transgression and sin," but I'm also a God that "will by no means clear the guilty!" God told Moses of His redemptive character – how He was both a just God, not clearing the guilty, **and a Savior**, showing mercy to thousands.²

God reveals here that because of who He is, there will be mercy, but not at the expense of His law and justice. God says he will not clear the guilty. God is infinitely holy and all of His attributes (including His justice and His mercy) must work consistently together in the perfection of His being. Here we come full circle to see that God's glory, His ultimate purpose and therefore salvation itself, is vitally connected to law and justice being satisfied. As that passage in Exodus reveals, Moses understood this. As he worshipped God, he saw that grace, the unmerited favor of God by way of justice being satisfied, would be required – that a "stiff-necked," or self-righteous people (such as all are by nature) couldn't meet the standard – that a righteousness outside of the sinner would be required for sin to be pardoned.³

Throughout the Bible, we are taught that to know God in salvation is to know Him in His redemptive character as a just God and a Savior. We are told that whosoever calls on His name

¹ Isa 45:20-25; Jer 9:23-24; Rom 3:21-28

² Ex 33:18-19; 34:6-7; Isa 45:21

³ Ex 34:9

shall be saved,¹ but we're also told that His name is "the Lord our righteousness."² His name in this sense is what identifies and distinguishes Him from any other god and we're commanded to know and look to Him (to a just God and a Savior) for salvation.³

The implications of this are serious. This is why Christ had to come – He had to fulfill God's requirement of righteousness. Only by doing so could God reveal His redemptive character – how He could remain just and still save otherwise hell-deserving sinners. We can know a lot about God, but to be ignorant of how God can be just **and** justifier is to be ignorant of the very reason that Christ came in the first place.⁴

So What's the Big Deal?

Lest you think this is some minor technicality or trivial issue, I urge you to think again. (You should begin to notice that I'm frequently asking you to "think again.") The Bible says that Christ came to fulfill the law.⁵ If we disconnect God's mercy from His law and justice, we place no value whatsoever on the work of Jesus Christ. Remember, that's why He came – He came to satisfy law and justice for all whom he represented.

Recognition that Dishonors

To drive home this point, imagine the following scenario. Put yourself in the place of a young girl, perhaps your sister, or your own daughter. As such, assume that you were obsessed with achieving your lifelong dream of winning an Olympic gold medal as a gymnast. You were so determined that you had trained for years from a very early age, willing to pay the price required to perform at that level. Now also assume that, as a wholesome, attractive, young lady, you took tremendous pride in

¹ Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21; Rom 10:13

² Jer 23:6

³ Isa 45:21-22

⁴ Rom 3:25-26

⁵ Isa 42:21; Matt 5:17-18; Gal 4:4-5

your appearance – almost an obsession, secondary only to that primary goal of winning an Olympic medal. As the games approached, your coach worked you harder and harder and you lost some of that feminine shapeliness, as your exercise program required you to build stronger and larger leg muscles. Although bothersome, you were even willing to sacrifice your shapely, feminine figure to achieve your primary goal. You visualized the fame that would accompany your success, imagining yourself on the cover of Sports Illustrated with the gold medal draped around your neck.

Well, the games finally arrived and your years of training paid off. You won that gold medal and couldn't wait for the recognition you had dreamed of for so long. Returning home at the close of the games, you anxiously awaited the next issues of all the sports magazines, expecting to see your picture plastered on the cover. Well the magazines came out and you picked up the new issue of Sports Illustrated only to find that your picture wasn't there. In fact, you didn't find it on any of the other sports publications. Dejected, you were about to leave the newsstand when, out of the corner of your eye, you spotted your picture. You excitedly ran to pick up the magazine, but instead of a sports periodical, it was a health and exercise magazine and there on the cover was a picture of you in your gymnastics wear with a gold medal draped around your neck. But, instead of focusing in on your smiling face and the medal you had won, the picture seemed to spotlight your overly developed muscular legs and the caption underneath read, "Too much exercise, can mean thunder thighs."

Though some may chuckle at this, imagine how devastating something like this would be. Think of the insult. You had trained for years and years, dreaming of the day you would be recognized for your achievement. Well, you were recognized but it certainly wasn't the kind of recognition you sought. How humiliating!

Think now what multitudes do who give Christ recognition, apart from an understanding of that which Christ's work of

redemption was designed to reveal, the glory of God. Why millions celebrate His birth at Christmas and His death and resurrection each Easter – yet all the while their thoughts concerning His Person and work dishonor God and fail to recognize Him as both a just God and a Savior. Most of my friends, like me in years past, think that they give Christ recognition, including the credit for saving them. Like me, they recognize many true attributes of God. Yet, as in the case of the disappointed gymnast, Christ receives recognition, but it is not the recognition that He desires. And it certainly is not pleasing to Him.

We're not talking of some mere mortal here. We're talking about Christ, the God-man, who condescended to take into union with His divine nature, a sinless humanity that He might be exalted as Lord¹ – Who came and suffered, and bled, and died, specifically to establish a righteousness, to satisfy God's law and justice on behalf of His people.

Though you may recognize many aspects of God's character, if you fail to see or value that which He came to do, to establish a righteousness that answers the demands of God's law and justice, then think of the insult! I could never concoct a story involving mere mortals that could equate to the "slap in the face," the dishonor, and the insult that such views cast on the very work of Christ. I know that while I was still blind to God's design to reveal Himself in His redemptive glory, I assumed that my thoughts of God and the work of Christ were honoring to Him since I believed that I was giving God the credit. Like me, you may even say that your salvation is "all of Christ." But God's glory consists of the revelation of how He could be just and justifier.² And where God isn't glorified, Christ is not exalted, and there is no salvation. Grace is salvation conditioned on Christ alone. Where there is no grace, there is no glory for God! Where God's purpose in salvation of glorifying Himself as a just God and Savior is not found, true salvation knowledge remains absent!

¹ Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:14-20

² Rom 3:21-28

Fundamentals of the Glory of God

I heard an excellent message from my former Pastor that summarizes some of what I have written (and more) concerning God's glory. The major points listed below were extracted from that message and provide an excellent summary on the subject. These fundamental truths pertaining to God's glory are:

- (1) God's main purpose and design in all things is His glory.
- (2) God's glory is the revelation of His attributes as honored and magnified so as to identify Him and distinguish Him from idols.
- (3) God's highest glory is the revelation of His attributes as honored and magnified in the full, free, eternal salvation of sinners based on the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- (4) This is God's highest glory because it is in this salvation that we see every attribute of His character magnified as working consistently together in salvation by grace through Christ.
- (5) This saving, redemptive glory and revelation of God can be summarized in the phrase ***a just God and a Savior*** as God reveals Himself to be both a righteous judge and a loving Father.
- (6) The main issue, therefore, in salvation is the glory of God, and the main issue in the glory of God is the righteousness of Christ.
- (7) It is God's goal to glorify Himself in the salvation of sinners by revealing this glory in the hearts of His elect, and He sends His Spirit to accomplish this in the new birth.
- (8) The main work of the Holy Spirit in us is to glorify God in our hearts by revealing Christ as the one sent of the Father to establish the only righteousness whereby He could be both a just God and a Savior.

It is critical that we gain a proper understanding of God's design in salvation – to glorify Himself in the sinner's heart, revealing to that sinner how mercy and truth come together¹ – **how He is both a just God and a Savior.**² To be ignorant of this specific revelation of God, His redemptive glory, is not to know God in a way that distinguishes Him from idols. As with most of my friends today, my ignorance of this in years past exposed my own idolatry. My idol was not some graven image made of stone but rather a god of my imagination who seemed in many ways to resemble the true and living God of the Bible. I imagined that God would save me in ways totally inconsistent with His character as both a just God and a Savior.

This highest manifestation of God's glory is revealed in the heart (the mind, affections, and will) of all those who come to Christ by the regenerating work of the Spirit of God.³ The heart is the center of man, not solely the emotional dimension as is commonly used. It includes our mind – that is, we do come to know something specific. We can't believe "with the heart" that which we don't know.⁴ So, in spiritual conversion, we learn with our minds, desire with our wills, and love with our affections this understanding of God and how He saves sinners. This, the revelation of God's glory, is His design and purpose in salvation – the very reason that God the Father sent His Son to establish righteousness.

So now I hope you can see that God's glory, (the revelation of who He is), is integrally involved in the ground of salvation. This means that whatever one thinks makes the difference between heaven and hell serves to identify the god he worships – who he thinks God is. To savingly know the true and living God of the Bible is to know Him as both a just God **and** a Savior!

¹ Psalms 85:9-10

² Isaiah 45:21

³ 2 Corinthians 4:6

⁴ Hosea 4:6; Romans 10:2,10,14

A Brief Summary of Basics

Up to this point, we've reviewed the following basic Gospel concepts:

- We will all be judged according to God's standard
- God's standard of judgment is righteousness
- Righteousness is perfect satisfaction to God's law and justice
- The nature of sin and the sin that naturally deceives us – thinking that anything other than (or in addition to) Christ's righteousness will gain my admission into heaven or merit any part of salvation
- Our oneness with Adam in the fall and the nature of Satan's lie
- The principles of representation and imputation:
 - Adam's sin imputed to all he represented
 - The sins of all whom Christ represented being imputed to Him
 - The righteousness of Christ being imputed to all whom Christ represented
- Acquiring a righteousness I can't produce – the imputed righteousness of God in Christ
- The reality of imputation
- Salvation is a matter of law and justice
- The Glory of God in the salvation of sinners

Having laid out these basic Gospel concepts, let's begin to examine the evidences of salvation. Are you savingly convinced of sin? Do you know God in truth as He is revealed to the saved? How can you know if you are among those represented by Christ – to whom His righteousness is imputed? What are the evidences of salvation? My hope is that the following chapter will assist you in meeting the challenge issued earlier in the book – to assess your own state before God according to truth as revealed in His Word. How can we know if we are saved?

Evidences of Salvation How Can I Know?

Although we have much scripture pertaining to the evidences of salvation, there are two main evidences that I will address and by which we can determine if we are heaven bound. These are: (1) God-given faith and (2) Initial repentance. While neither of these is experienced apart from the other, I find it useful to consider these two distinct aspects of the one miracle of grace – the gift of spiritual life called the new birth. Most who call themselves “Christian” easily gain a false sense of security if, like most of religion, they misunderstand what is meant by these terms. Like me in years past, most of my friends believe that they are saved because they have made a profession of faith and believe that they have repented. However, we know from scriptures that not all faith is “God-given” and that there is repentance “to be repented of.”¹ So, let’s examine just what constitutes genuine, God-given faith and initial repentance so as to discern whether these evidences of true spiritual life are to be found in us.

God-given Faith

As I’ve mentioned earlier, there are many kinds of “faith” that fall short of true God-given faith. Numerous examples of this are found in the Bible. We find many who were very religious and even believed that Christ was the Messiah. Yet, by scriptural testimony we know that they were lost. The Bible teaches us that even the faith of some preachers (who sincerely thought that they “preached in His name”) was not of God. Certainly we could not know these to be saved by the evidence of their faith.²

Faith in this context is synonymous with believing. Some of

¹ Rom 10:1-2; 2 Cor 7:10

² Matt 7:21-23; Lk 18:18-23; Jn 3:1-3,7; 12:42; Rom 10:1-2

my friends think that because they “believe in God” that they have faith and therefore are heaven bound. The Bible teaches us that even the devils have this sort of faith, for they believe in the existence of God. In speaking of Christ, the demons even acknowledged that He was “the Holy One,” sent “of God.”¹ So how can we know whether or not our faith is the fruit of God’s saving grace and gives evidence that we possess the righteousness required to enter heaven?

It is indisputable. All who are saved must and will have faith – we must believe.² The real issue isn’t whether or not we must believe. The issue is **what**, or more accurately, **in whom** we must believe! God-given faith is distinguished from vain or dead faith in that it submits to the imputed righteousness of God in Christ as the only basis or ground of our justification and acceptance before God. By God-given faith, we comprehend and adopt God’s standard of judgment – righteousness. True faith in Christ sees that salvation is conditioned on the merit of His work alone, thereby excluding itself as the condition for acquiring eternal life. The Bible clearly teaches that although faith, as ordained by God, is a necessary and sure result of Christ’s finished work of justification, faith is not a condition or requirement to be met for salvation. Rather, it is an evidence of salvation. It’s important that we make this distinction. You don’t give yourself physical life by deciding to breathe. Breathing is evidence that you are alive. So it is with faith as it pertains to spiritual life. To believe that my faith, my act of belief, is the determining factor or plays a causal role in salvation is to have faith in faith, not faith in Christ. True faith in Christ rests in that which He alone accomplished in satisfying God’s law and justice – righteousness. To seek righteousness by faith, as all are commanded to do, is not to seek it in faith, as if faith itself is somehow equivalent to righteousness or an act to be exercised in order to procure Christ’s righteousness. The righteousness we need is found outside ourselves. It is revealed in the Gospel, the Gospel that must be and is believed by those God saves.³

¹ Lk 4:33-34

² Heb 11:6

³ Rom 1:16-17; 3:22,28; Eph 2:8-9

*So – What is **THE** Gospel?*

Most of my friends will agree with the Scriptures that whosoever believes the Gospel shall be saved. In the passage referred to as the Great Commission as given in the Book of Mark, Christ Himself commands His disciples to “preach the Gospel to every creature” and states that “He that believeth... shall be saved...[and]... he that believeth not shall be damned.”¹ So that leaves us with the obvious issue – what is **the** Gospel that all are commanded to believe?

Though it can be stated in a variety of ways, simply put the Gospel is the good news of **God’s eternal salvation of guilty sinners based solely upon the merits of Christ’s obedience and death, His very righteousness, freely imputed and revealed by God-given faith.**

If you concur that God’s glory is His main design and purpose in all things, including (and especially) salvation, then what we believe (our doctrine) must be consistent with the achievement of this design. The Bible states clearly that God reveals Himself to sinners by the means of the Gospel, preached, heard, understood, believed, and acted upon. The Scriptures tell us that the Gospel is “the power of God unto salvation unto every one that believeth.... For therein is the righteousness of God revealed...” This means that **the true Gospel (that must be believed) must reveal the righteousness of God.**²

Elsewhere in this same epistle, the Apostle Paul prayed for the salvation of his fellow Israelites, considering them to be lost, specifically because of their ignorance of this righteousness – God’s righteousness revealed in the Gospel. In concluding this, he even said of them that they had “a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.” He goes on to explain that in their ignorance of the vital knowledge of God’s righteousness, they were, by default, “going about to establish their own righteousness” – “not having submitted themselves unto the righteousness

¹ Mk 16:15-16

² Rom 1:16-17; Eph 1:13; 2 Thess 2:13-14; James 1:18; 1 Pet 1:22-25

of God.” Paul concludes this passage by stating that Christ was the fulfillment or “end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.”¹ In other words, Christ’s righteousness, His satisfaction to law and justice, is what a true believer bases his hope upon. His hope is sure and certain because it is based upon that which meets God’s requirements for salvation – righteousness!

To summarize, the Scriptures clearly teach that:

- (1) Whosoever believes the Gospel shall be saved. Whosoever does not shall be damned.²
- (2) The Gospel that one must believe reveals the righteousness of God.³
- (3) So, to be ignorant then of this righteousness revealed in the Gospel is to be lost and still in need of genuine, God-given faith.⁴

Like me in years past, most of my friends have never heard of the righteousness of God as revealed in the Gospel. I had not even heard the term “imputed righteousness.” As a Sunday school teacher, I was teaching and influencing others on matters of eternal consequence while ignorant of this necessary and vital knowledge. I now see that although I knew and believed many true things about God and Christ, I had never even heard the true Gospel – for in it, the Gospel, is His righteousness revealed. How could I believe in that which I had never even heard? As the Scriptures point out, to be ignorant of this – His righteousness – is to be lost. This exposed that I, along with all of my like-minded friends, was devoid of God-given faith at that time. Although I certainly didn’t recognize it as such, I was, by default, naturally going about to establish my own righteousness.

¹ Rom 10:1-4

² Mk 16:16

³ Rom 1:16-17

⁴ Rom 10:1-4

So, you can see that for us to recognize the sin that naturally deceives us all, we must also discover the necessity of this righteousness revealed in God's Gospel. By God's own clear testimony we see that ignorance of this one point of doctrine, of Christ's righteousness, equates to ignorance of the Gospel itself – the Gospel we're commanded to believe for salvation. So this deceptive sin of thinking anything else will suffice, this "mystery of iniquity,"¹ is unraveled for us by its great counterpart, the "mystery of Godliness."² The Bible mentions those who have a "form of Godliness" but deny the "power" of it,³ the identifying trademark of one who is deceived. They may appear to be "Christians," they think of themselves as "Christians," and all who know them may judge them to be a "Christian." But this appearance, confidence, and judgment are derived from some condition or requirement they think they have met – not from their interest in Christ's righteousness. This is indeed an indictment of my past as well as most of today's so called "Christianity." As I've just shown, the true Gospel is the "power of God" for salvation because it reveals the righteousness of God in Christ, the very righteousness that so many know little to nothing about.⁴

Is the Person & Work of Christ Really Necessary?

Do the details of who Christ is (His Person) and what He actually accomplished (His work) really matter? If your system of belief, your faith, does not involve staking your eternal destiny solely upon the merits of Christ's Person and work, His righteousness, then think about this – Why was it even necessary for Christ, as God-man, to have walked upon this earth in obedience and die a horrible death on the cross at Calvary? I know that in years past I had some notion that because Christ came to die for my sins, that I could be saved. However, having never heard of God's requirement and provision of righteousness, the only significance I could reasonably assign to Christ's life and

¹ 2 Thess 2:7

² 1 Tim 3:16

³ 2 Tim 3:5

⁴ Rom 1:16-17

death was derived from my belief in the accuracy of the historical events pertaining to Christ and from recognizing that this was how God had arbitrarily set things up. I knew nothing about God's character or God's design to reveal and glorify Himself in salvation that would actually necessitate the establishment of righteousness – satisfaction to His law and justice.

Given what I knew and believed at that time concerning God's character, Christ could just as easily have performed some other miraculous, supernatural act in heaven. Assume for a moment that I had been taught that a specific miracle was performed in order that I might have salvation and that I would get into heaven if I would only believe and trust in this particular miracle. Do you see that while ignorant of God's standard of righteousness, the god in whom I once believed could have just as easily substituted any arbitrary act, whether miraculous or not, in place of the obedience and death of Christ. Similarly, there was no reason why such an arbitrary act had to be performed by one who was uniquely both God and man, the incarnate Christ. In hindsight, I know this to be true because it would not have altered in any way what I thought of the Creator! Had I been convinced that God would save me based upon my trust that Christ had performed a double back flip in heaven, I could still attribute unto him the same character attributes that identified the god I worshipped, including my flawed concept of his love and mercy.

Do you see how that, being ignorant of God's requirement of righteousness, it was my former "faith" that made all the difference? It mattered little what or in whom I believed – only that I did believe. I would have argued to the contrary that it really did matter, that it could not have been some arbitrary act or miracle. But even that argument would have been solely based upon my belief in the historical accuracy of the Bible – not because of what I knew of God as revealed in the Person and work of Christ. It was not because I recognized that nothing but the establishment of righteousness by the redeeming work of Christ would suffice.

I knew what Christ had done – but I was totally ignorant of what He had accomplished. I had some vague notion of how Christ had died for sins, and I knew that He was buried and rose again the third day. However, I did not know just what this work accomplished “according to the scriptures.”¹ I did not know that Christ’s death made salvation sure and certain for all whose sins He bore. I thought His death only provided part of the equation, merely making salvation possible. I thought that a condition I met, my exercise of faith in accepting Him as my personal Savior, is what sealed the deal. This type of “faith” places no value whatsoever on the Person and necessary work of Christ. This “faith” is not consistent with the Bible and is not an evidence of salvation, but sadly an indication of just the opposite.

So again to summarize, how can I know if my faith is truly an evidence of being saved? The Bible teaches us that true, God-given faith is unique in that it submits to the righteousness of God in Christ as the only ground or basis upon which God could and does justify sinners. The faith of God’s elect² believes God’s Gospel, the Gospel that is distinguished from counterfeits in that it reveals this very righteousness. My hope is that you are beginning to grasp the reasonableness as well as the wonder of God’s Gospel of grace in which His righteousness is revealed!

The Bible also teaches us of another evidence of salvation. Inseparable and concurrent with genuine, God-given faith is the evidence of initial repentance that confirms that our faith is truly of God.

Initial Repentance

Few will dispute that the Bible teaches the necessity of repentance.³ Scripture also portrays the teaching of repentance toward God along with faith toward Christ as the goal and objective of a true Gospel ministry.⁴ I had always been taught

¹ 1 Cor 15:3-4

² Titus 1:1

³ Lk 13:3; Acts 17:30; 2 Pet 3:9

⁴ Acts 20:20-21

that repentance was a “turning.” That is, whereas I was heading in a certain direction, in repentance, I now turn to head in the opposite direction. I was also taught that repentance was a radical change of mind. To this day, I believe these descriptions to be apt; however, I’ve discovered that I was seriously mistaken about just what I was to turn from and what I was to turn to in faith and repentance.

Most people associate repentance with a reformation of sorts. To some, repentance means a change from a life of immorality to one of morality. To others, it involves a change from an indifferent attitude toward religion or spiritual things to a life characterized by greater religious dedication or zeal. Certainly such reformations in character and conduct are beneficial to society and should be encouraged; however, this is not the true nature of initial godly repentance that would give evidence of salvation. Although such reformations may, in fact, accompany godly repentance, they do not insure that initial repentance unto salvation has occurred.

If repentance involves a “turning,” or radical change of mind, then by definition this turning must be from something or some way that was erroneous to something true. Here again we can see how God-given faith and initial repentance, though distinct evidences, are inseparable and always accompany one another in true spiritual conversion. Just as faith believes the true gospel wherein Christ’s righteousness is revealed, true repentance is a turning away from any other way of salvation to God’s prescribed way. One may come to understand and agree that God’s way of salvation is by virtue of Christ’s righteousness imputed, yet fail to repent or turn from and reject every other way. In this case, failure to repent is evidence that the faith is not genuine and not an evidence of spiritual life. This reveals that we aren’t truly convinced that God’s way of salvation is the only way, continuing to consider it possible that somehow we, or others, might have been saved while ignorant of (or not submitted to) the imputed righteousness of Christ as the only valid ground for salvation.

The repentance that is evidence of salvation is a change of mind concerning the character of God and how He can justly save sinners. It is a change of mind concerning Christ and the value of His righteousness as the only basis of admission into heaven. It is also a change of mind concerning ourselves as we become aware of the sin that naturally deceives us, of thinking that anything other than (or in addition to) the righteousness of Christ imputed could remove our guilt and defilement before a holy God.

Only the true Gospel can expose this sin that causes us to seek to establish a righteousness of our own before God. As I explained earlier, the Bible clearly states that to be ignorant of the righteousness revealed in the Gospel means that, by default, we automatically are trying to establish a righteousness of our own. Such attempts are the by-product of the view that salvation is conditioned (at least to some degree) on something that proceeds from the sinner. This is self-righteousness whether we recognize it or not. In salvation, the light of the Gospel exposes this sin to us so that we do recognize it and repent from it – **from ever thinking that we could be eternally blessed by God based upon anything other than (or in addition to) Christ’s righteousness imputed.**

The Bible also teaches of an ongoing sorrow over sin that causes true believers to repent constantly over the presence and influence of remaining sin. However, in the context of this chapter, considering repentance as an evidence of one’s state, it is critical that we make a distinction between this continual repentance and the initial repentance that accompanies true spiritual conversion. The absence of this initial repentance gives evidence that one’s faith is false and, in turn, exposes that any accompanying sorrow over sins is nothing more than legal, natural-conscience conviction.

Repent from What?

Like faith, there is little argument as to the necessity of repentance. Just what is it that we must repent or turn from?

The Bible tells us that **we must repent from dead works and former idolatry.**¹ This is the initial repentance that is the evidence of true faith. Repentance from former idolatry requires a recognition and rejection of erroneous thoughts about God. I'll elaborate on this in the pages ahead, but first let's consider in what sense we are called to repent from dead works.

Dead works refers to any attempts to attain or maintain salvation's benefits, including our very admission to heaven itself, based on anything other than the imputed righteousness of God in Christ. They are "dead" works because those who are spiritually "dead" perform them" and because their ultimate end is eternal death.² So godly repentance can only take place when one hears of this righteousness and rests in it alone as their hope for salvation. Apart from this understanding, even the most sincere religious efforts on our part are characterized by God as "dead works" to be repented of. That is, we must turn from those things that we thought were commendable or meritorious – things that we thought would entitle us to heaven. In repentance, we forsake that which we formerly valued and thought made the real difference in our standing before God.

Perhaps the clearest scriptural example of repentance from dead works and former idolatry is provided by the Apostle Paul's description of his own spiritual conversion. Paul is described in the Scriptures as an appropriate pattern to any who would come to genuine repentance.³ In the 3rd chapter of Philippians, Paul describes his conversion and repentance, explaining that what he thought was "gain," he now counted loss.⁴ No doubt, Paul would have never considered acts of immorality or indifference toward God as things that would be "gain" for him – that would recommend him in some way to God. So we know that whatever he was repenting of, it wasn't things of this nature.

No instead, that which is "gain" refers to all of the religious

¹ 1 Thess 1:9; Heb 6:1; 9:14

² Rom 7:5; Eph 2:1

³ 1 Tim 1:16

⁴ Phil 3:3-10

efforts that we naturally highly esteem and erroneously think to be profitable in establishing or maintaining our relationship with God. In true godly repentance, we become ashamed of what we once thought to be spiritually profitable and now count it as evil, dead works. I now see that before believing that the sole basis of my salvation was the imputed righteousness of Christ, my thoughts of God were all wrong and the god I worshipped and served then was an idol. As mentioned earlier, it wasn't an idol carved out of stone, but rather an idol of my imagination. Therefore, in repentance, I turned from that idol to serve the true and living God.¹

The Bible teaches that before the Spirit's regenerating grace in our hearts we are all idolaters and need to repent of such. Knowing this, I used to foolishly view money or the pleasures of this world as idols from which men were called to repent. After all, it is true that often our priorities become terribly misplaced and inconsistent with the Bible's teachings. We certainly should encourage others to turn from their indifference and from the cares of this world to a more sincere consideration of spiritual things. Admittedly, such cares and concerns for the things of this world often are hindrances to thoughtful consideration of spiritual things. And I know that some erroneously view prosperity as a sign of God's blessing upon "believers." Yet, I've never known anyone who truly thought that their money or their indifference would get them into heaven. I know of no one who considers money or other such things as that which was "gain" to them – or as something that would entitle them to heaven. The idolatry from which all must repent goes far beyond a "turning" from mere indifference, or misplaced priorities.

The Reality of Our Idolatry

For true godly repentance to take place, one must be confronted with the reality of their idolatry. No one knowingly worships an idol. If you've never comprehended your own idolatry, then it would be impossible for you to have repented or turned from it. Idolatry consists of wrong thoughts about God –

¹ 1 Thess 1:9

who He is and what He is like.

To illustrate how an inadequate, partial revelation of God can equate to idolatry, consider the following old fable about six men, blind from birth that lived in India. One day they decided to visit a nearby palace. When they arrived, there was an elephant standing in the courtyard. The first blind man touched the side of the elephant and said, “An elephant is like a wall.” The second blind man touched the trunk and said, “An elephant is like a snake.” The third blind man touched the tusk and said, “An elephant is like a spear.” The fourth blind man touched the leg and said, “An elephant is like a tree.” The fifth blind man touched the ear and said, “An elephant is like a fan.” The sixth blind man touched the tail and said, “An elephant is like a rope.” Because each one only touched part of the elephant, they could not agree on what an elephant is really like.

Bringing this analogy into the spiritual realm, this is why many people have misconceptions about what God is really like. Believing wrong things about God is a serious matter because it is idolatry. According to the Bible, idolatry is thinking anything about God that isn’t true. Idolatry is born out of ignorance of God.¹ With this in mind, can God be known? The answer is “yes.” Although we cannot know Him completely, we are responsible for and commanded in scripture to know that which He has revealed of Himself.² As mentioned in an earlier chapter, “The Glory of God,” we can know many things about God without possessing the knowledge that is revealed to those He saves. The light of nature may reveal something of His wisdom, power, goodness, and majesty. Our conscience may even reveal something of God’s standard of truth and justice. But only His divine self-revelation of Himself in the Scriptures reveals the God of redemption. Only there can we discover how God can be both a just God and a Savior and see how every attribute of God’s character is engaged, honored and magnified in God’s way of salvation.

¹ Isa 45:20; Hos 4:6; Acts 17:23

² Isa 45:21-22; Rom 10:13-17; Heb 11:6

To understand this, it is helpful to see that in God there is a unity or oneness of attribute and essence. We can distinguish each attribute for the purposes of studying God, but we cannot divide them from God. God cannot be divided. To return to the analogy, an elephant is not a wall, snake, spear, tree, fan, nor rope – although we can see how limited knowledge of its individual attributes may lead to such conclusions. With respect to God, the error of our thoughts of what God is like is more difficult for us to discern. To guide us, keep in mind these two vital truths:

1. That God cannot act contrary to any one of His attributes
2. That to deny one attribute of God's character is to deny every other attribute of God's character and, in essence to deny God.

God cannot act in a way contrary to Himself. For example, God cannot change because He is immutable. If He changed He would have to either improve or get worse. By definition, an impeccable, perfect God can do neither. He cannot lie because God is truth. He cannot fail because He is faithful. He is wise enough and omniscient to foresee every obstacle that would hinder the fulfillment of His promises. He is powerful enough to remove those obstacles and provide all the means necessary to accomplish His promises and fulfill His intentions. If God could be anything less than any one of these attributes, He would cease to be God.

An Example of a Former Idolater – Yours Truly

To illustrate the significance of this, consider my own former thoughts of God – inconsistencies that I had to confront and which exposed my own former idolatry. While knowing much about God and what Christ did, I knew nothing of Christ's actual accomplishment in establishing righteousness. I considered Christ's death on the cross as the ultimate expression and supreme example of God's love, yet I mistakenly believed that multitudes perished from among those for whom He died. Even

though I thought that Christ died “for their sins,” I also believed that many, even most, of these objects of His love perished.

I hope you see the fallacy of believing as I did. Unknowingly, my view of how God saves sinners denied God’s justice. My view of God required that He forego His holiness and justice in order to express His love. If I had thought sins were truly punished in Christ on the cross, then I should have seen that only an unjust and ruthless tyrant would send any folks to hell whose sin debt had already been paid by Christ. Alternatively, if the perfectly sinless Christ did not actually have sins imputed to Him, then His death itself would have been a travesty of God’s justice – God the Father who sent Him to die for sins! If sins weren’t literally charged (imputed) to the sinless Christ, then for whose sins did He die? My belief that Christ died for all without exception exposed my erroneous concept of who God is – a concept that equates to considering God as unjust despite the fact that I failed to recognize this slanderous assault on His character.

I hope my own experience helps you to see that my denial of even this one attribute of God, His justice, equated to idolatry. Perhaps had I openly acknowledged to others and myself that God was not only all-powerful, all knowing, infinitely wise, immutable, but also unjust, you would more readily discern that this god wasn’t the true God but an idol of my imagination evidenced by this single accusation of injustice. Why, how dare one call God unjust! I certainly would not have knowingly made such an assault on the character of God, yet in the blindness of my lost condition, that’s exactly what my erroneous concepts of God and His way of salvation amounted to. Though I didn’t perceive it, that was the reality. I hope that you, my friend, can see that if your own view of God is such that He must act contrary to even one of His attributes as revealed in the Bible, then your concept of God is fatally flawed – actually not the true and living God at all since God cannot act contrary to Himself.

To see how erroneous thoughts of God can equate to idolatry, we must be confronted with the implications of our thoughts. We must see how a denial of one attribute of God’s character is

equivalent to denying every attribute and, in essence, a denial of God Himself – idolatry. Again, using myself as an example, let's look further at the implications of my thoughts. Consider my former views. I believed, (as do many of my friends), that God loves everyone, that He tries to save everyone, and that He sent Christ to die for everyone without exception. I've already shown how this denies His holiness and justice, but what does it say about His other attributes? For example, what does this say about God's love, grace, faithfulness, wisdom, and power? My beliefs were equivalent to saying that even though God loved these sinners, He lacked either the desire or the power or the wisdom to insure their salvation. This would mean that God's love and Christ's sacrificial death did not make the real difference between salvation and condemnation. It said that something that proceeded from the sinner such as his faith, repentance, or perseverance made the real difference – not Christ to whom the preeminence should belong.

What Kind of Love is This?

As mere mortals, we willingly engage all that we are, every attribute and faculty of our being to insure the well being of those we truly love. Consider for a moment a young mother and her toddler enjoying a sunny afternoon lounging around a swimming pool. Suddenly the toddler stumbles into the water and is on the verge of drowning. The mom, a former lifeguard, immediately makes a wise judgment to dive in and rescue the child she so dearly loves. Can you possibly imagine this young mother, wise and capable enough to save her child, opting not to do so? That's exactly what today's popular misconception of how God saves sinners implies about God. It says that He fails to save many of the objects of His love. As I've already suggested, this accuses God of one or more of the following:

- 1) He loves those that perish, but isn't wise enough to foresee the obstacles to their salvation
- 2) He loves those that perish, but isn't powerful enough to overcome the obstacles and difficulties in order to save them.

- 3) His love is certainly not infinite. Actually, it is worthless – for although He is infinitely wise and powerful, He opts not to intervene and engage Himself to insure the well being of the objects of His love, allowing many of them to perish.

I hope this helps you see how such deadly misconceptions of God's way of salvation actually deny God Himself and equate to idolatry. If we recognized that our thoughts of God were erroneous, we would have already seen that this god was in fact an idol of our own imagination – and we would have already turned from this error to serve the living God. The problem is that apart from hearing and believing the true Gospel wherein His righteousness is revealed, we have no idea that we might be in such tragic error. In spiritual conversion, through the revelation of God's Gospel, we come to see that what we once thought was good and "gain," was in fact worthless and evil, revealing to us our erroneous, dishonoring views of God. This isn't simply a matter of some higher knowledge. Our entire concept of who God is changes. Literally, we change gods! Repentance is a radical change of mind concerning the ground or basis of salvation, concerning what we think removes God's wrath and gains His favor. As such, this radical change of mind relates directly to the glory of God. As we've already discussed, **God identifies and distinguishes Himself from idols** in the hearts of all those He saves by the revelation of His redemptive glory **as a just God and a Savior**.¹ Only then can we see how all of God's attributes work consistently together to reveal the true and living God.

So how can I know if I'm saved by an examination of the evidence of repentance? To return to the medical analogy, our repentance can be evaluated in light of our remedy – or where we find relief for our fallen sinful condition. A person may be acutely aware of his guilt and defilement but true godly repentance can only be determined by this: Where does one find relief from this guilt and defilement? God spells relief, **I-R-O-C**, (**Imputed Righteousness Of Christ**). If relief is found anywhere but in the righteousness of God in Christ, then this one has not

¹ Isa 45:20-22; Rom 3:26

truly experienced the godly sorrow that leads to the repentance that is pleasing and acceptable unto God. In fact, the Bible indicates that this is a type of repentance of which one needs to repent.¹

In my own case, I was actively involved in religion long before I heard and believed the Gospel that identified the true and living God and distinguished Him from idols. Once I became convinced of the impossibility of being saved apart from the merits of Christ's obedience and death being credited to me (His righteousness imputed), the difference was startling. It was suddenly clear to me that what I once thought was gain, or made the ultimate difference (my sincere faith), was now in the loss column in light of this newly discovered truth. I could see the horrendous evil in having presumed that anything that could proceed from me, a sinner, could rival the very work of Christ Himself. Having been so convinced, I could readily see that the god I worshipped was in fact an idol of my imagination. As I've mentioned, this discovery turned my world upside down as I saw the contrast between God's truth and the false teachings that I had previously adhered to.

Is Everyone an Idolater By Nature?

Unfortunately, I know very few religious people who actually believe that they were saved out of idolatry; however, I hope that I've shown how repentance from former idolatry is a necessary evidence of salvation found in every true believer. For those who are not actively involved in religion, or who have given very little consideration to their spiritual state, the concept of repenting from an idol may seem harder to grasp. I first faced this distinction in trying to teach a group of youngsters about initial repentance. Unlike me, this particular group had not been steeped in false religious teachings contrary to the true Gospel, yet I knew that the Bible calls all to repent from their dead works and idolatry. I came to see the common ground between both the religious and the irreligious that helped me to understand the

¹ 2 Cor 7:9-10

reasonableness of God's call for all to repent.¹ The Bible teaches that the sin of self-righteousness is natural and common to all, regardless of how involved or serious one is about religion.² Our life experiences further confirm this truth.

As I examined this from the perspective of these children, I saw that repentance was necessary independent of one's former religious background. Even prior to receiving any religious instruction, whenever someone first gives consideration to their own eternal destiny, the first question that pops into their mind is – what must I do to go to heaven? As I've set forth earlier in the book, it is useful for us to ask similar questions to determine just what God requires for admission into His holy presence. However, the significance of this natural question that comes to mind is that our very first thoughts on the subject reveal something about our sinful predisposition. Specifically, our first serious consideration of matters of eternal consequence causes one to ask himself, not simply how might I enter heaven, but rather, what must I do in order to gain entrance into heaven.

We naturally conclude that there must be something that we can individually do to make the difference so as to procure God's blessing. It doesn't naturally enter into our thinking that we might in fact be powerless to save ourselves and that God's holiness demands something beyond that which we can produce. We naturally set out to meet some requirement which is nothing less than establishing a righteousness of our own. This first stab at answering the question of how I might enter heaven always results in an assumed solution of salvation being ultimately determinate upon something done by or through the sinner. To remain content with this answer is to remain in idolatry. This reasoning is common to all and indicative of our state of idolatry prior to hearing and receiving God's Gospel. Only then do we see that salvation is impossible if conditioned on the sinner in any way, to any degree.

I hope you're beginning to see that apart from God's

¹ Acts 17:30

² Rom 3:9-12

revelation of how His law and justice are perfectly satisfied through an imputed righteousness, man is left with no other alternative but to try and meet the requirement on his own. These very thoughts reveal the need of repentance and sorrow for even entertaining the idea that a holy God would accept me based upon some difference that I may make – something other than the imputed righteousness of Christ alone.

So How Can You Know?

So how can you know if you are saved?

- (1) Do you truly believe God's Gospel, resting in Christ alone, trusting in His imputed righteousness as the sole basis of your acceptance before God?
- (2) Have you truly repented from dead works and former idolatry – sorrowing over and turning from having ever thought that God would save you from eternal misery and bless you with eternal life based on something other than (or in addition to) the imputed righteousness of God in Christ?

True faith and godly repentance can only be produced in the sinner who has been given spiritual life. True faith and repentance are gifts from God, purchased by Christ Himself, and they give evidence of a sinner's justification before God.¹

In light of the two questions above, I beg you to continue to examine whether or not these basic Gospel concepts are true in accordance with the revelation of God as set forth in the Bible. My desire is that these evidences of salvation might be found in you, my friend.

¹ Eph 1:11-14; 2:8-9; 2 Pet 1:1-3

PART

III

LET'S GET PERSONAL

What About You?

About My Friends

Over the years I've both personally entertained and encountered many of the objections that naturally arise when one is first confronted with the truths of God's Gospel and His strict standard of righteousness. In this section of the book, I will address some of the opposing doctrinal positions that typically must be sorted out if we are to proceed in a legitimate self-analysis of our state before God. To do so, I will describe some of the more prevalent thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs of different categories of my friends, specifically as it relates to their consideration of God's Gospel described herein. In this section, I will only address the majority of my friends – those who, prior to this book, either had not heard about, or have not yet submitted to, Christ's righteousness as God's standard of judgment and their hope for eternal life.

Certainly not every mindset or description that follows was applicable to me personally and neither will this be true of your own position and view of things. It would be impossible to address every question and concern that even one individual typically deals with in considering and ultimately submitting to the righteousness of Christ as the sole basis for their acceptance before God. True spiritual conversion involves a radical change of mind, a discovery and an admission that our previous hope for eternal life in heaven was unwarranted, seeing that what we thought was "good" was actually "evil" in God's sight.¹ This is no small matter and I've yet to observe anyone with a religious background give this evidence of saving grace until they have been shown and personally become convinced that the tenets of their former religion are in error. And so it should be. My desire is that you will be able personally to identify with at least some of the various descriptions and categories of my friends. In concert with this, I hope you find sufficient reasons, derived from the Scriptures, to encourage your continuance in the quest

¹ Prov 14:12; 16:25; Isa 5:20-21; Lk 16:15

for truth. Again, I beg you to leave no stone unturned. Remember, we are dealing with matters that pertain to our eternal destiny.

Having addressed this book to family, friends, and acquaintances, you might imagine the difficulty of dealing with such a great diversity of religious backgrounds and thoughts. There is certainly a smorgasbord of views among my friends and I don't pretend to paint everyone with the same broad brush. Nevertheless, if you read on you will discover in the subsequent chapter why I find that my friends have far more in common when it comes to religion than would be readily apparent to most. Although there are many different religious denominations and a variety of individual views held even within those groups, I will show in the next chapter how all religion actually falls into one of two categories.

In spite of this commonality, I still think it is useful to identify a few distinctions among my friends. In this chapter these are differentiated, not according to their religious denominations or doctrinal beliefs, but based upon their degree of religious interest. At the onset, let me clarify that this differentiation is not directly useful in determining your state, not to be confused with the standard of righteousness by which God judges. In a subsequent chapter I will address some of the implications derived from important doctrinal differences that have a direct bearing on this standard of judgment. But in this chapter, I will discuss my friends as they are grouped by their varying degrees of religious zeal or indifference. Keep in mind that within these groupings, I am still directing this toward the majority of my friends – those who currently base their hope on something other than (or in addition to) the finished work of Christ – His righteousness.

I believe it is appropriate in dealing with anyone's concerns and objections, to begin from their vantage point based upon their individual perspective on things. This grouping by level of interest is an attempt to do just that, to hopefully address you, the reader, where you are based upon your current religious

perspective. In seeking to encourage serious consideration of these vital issues, I have found a correlation between the types of concerns, obstacles, and prejudices that must be dealt with and the extent to which religion plays a part in the individual's life. As I begin to talk about my friends, I concede that there are many degrees and variations of the characterizations that I will make. I simply ask that you identify those descriptions that are true of you and consider that which is personally applicable. Now, about my friends –

(1) Good Guys – But Not So Religious

This group, like all of the friends to whom this book is written, believes in the existence of God, in an after-life, and generally considers the Bible to be true. For whatever reason, these things just aren't that important to them right now, at least not important enough to have yet warranted the kind of self-evaluation of their spiritual state that I'm encouraging in this book. Their indifference may stem from various reasons. Some simply choose to not think about it – to cast it out of their minds. This is easily accomplished in our fast paced world in which we are pulled constantly by competing priorities. We can just be too busy to take the time to wade through all the religious clutter to try to get at the truth.

I know that a common reaction from many upon hearing the Gospel for the first time is, "You make it too complicated." This sincere assessment would seem to be a barrier to all but the most industrious and curious minds. "Maybe someday when I have more time" is the excuse of some – but for many, someday never arrives.

I believe that some of my "not so religious" friends actually possess greater insight than many, if not most, of their religious counterparts. Once I came to see how so diametrically opposed my former religious beliefs were to the truth of God's Gospel, my understanding of these friends changed dramatically. I developed a new kind of respect for their discernment in recognizing the folly of today's popular brand of organized religion.

Although their indifference has not led them to seek and discover the answers vital for salvation, they do recognize that what they've heard so far does not add up.

Unlike them, I blindly and zealously held onto many contradictions prior to hearing God's Gospel. In spite of what much of religion claims, I suspect that many of these "not so religious" types actually see through the hypocrisy of religion and have some sense of the fact that, if salvation is conditioned on the sinner, then the standard is relative and all pretense to the contrary is mere lip service to explain away scriptures that don't add up. Consequently, some may think, "If that (religious) guy is okay, then so am I," recognizing that based upon the prevalent standard of judgment held by most, they too should expect salvation, measuring themselves by their less astute or hypocritical counterparts in organized religion.

I must say that I certainly enjoy the company of this group of friends far more than that of the religious zealots who unwittingly adhere to and actively promote a deadly system of doctrine in opposition to God's Gospel. However, even in their seeming indifference, this group has also typically "made their peace with God." Although they may be less likely than their more religious counterparts to be so cocksure of their spiritual state, they must conclude that the odds are with them – enough to become complacent in their search for further assurance. They have a standard, but having never heard of God's strict standard of righteousness, they, like their more religious counterparts, must measure themselves by others.¹ In some way, they think they will be okay, that it will all work out for them. They may discern the error, hypocrisy, or folly that others in religion are blind to, but they do not yet have the answers that would make it all add up. So – they simply check out or decide to not think about it anymore.

I know that the complete set of characterizations above are unlikely to be true of even one individual; however, if any of these descriptions fit your view of things, then I ask that you

¹ 2 Cor 10:12

consider further what I have to say. If you count yourself among this group, then I am highly encouraged. Assuming you've read the rest of the book up to this point, this fact alone suggests to me that you may have seen reason to break from your indifferent posture.

Competing Priorities

I will remind you again that we are talking about eternity. It is worth getting to the bottom of – to find answers you can bank upon. Our lifetime on this earth is truly miniscule in comparison to eternity – a never-ending existence somewhere. I urge you (again) to make time to consider and evaluate your own state before God and find the answers that up to now have eluded you. Eternity is an awful (or wonderfully) long time to spend somewhere. How can anything in this life take priority over that which pertains to our future eternal state of bliss or misery? It may take a crisis in your life to awaken you from an apathetic posture towards religion. Perhaps age and the increasing sense of your own mortality will stir you to resume a more diligent search for truth. As your friend, I beg you to seek God's truth.

Too Complicated?

To those to whom this all seems “too complicated,” I encourage you to discover, as I did, how simple God's Gospel really is. I know upon my first exposure to the Gospel, it all seemed rather complicated to me as well. This changed when God granted me spiritual life, enabling me to see how His plan made such wonderful sense. I then realized that it only seemed complicated because it was so foreign to my natural self-righteousness and sinful predispositions, to my determination to hang onto my long held notion that salvation was ultimately conditioned on me. The baggage of my former false teachings and preconceived notions simply served to camouflage the simplicity of God's way of salvation conditioned on Christ alone. I will deal with this in more detail in a later chapter that addresses specific objections such as this one.

“Not your Father’s Oldsmobile”

A once popular television ad encouraged younger adults to consider purchasing an Oldsmobile automobile by attempting to reposition the product as more contemporary in contrast to its more conservative historical image. The ad concluded with the punch line, “It’s not your father’s Oldsmobile.” To those of you who have seen the inconsistency, contradictions, or folly of organized religion, it is only reasonable that you would throw up your hands or “check out,” so to speak. It is understandable that you might become complacent or cool to organized religion, seeing no reason to involve yourselves with a religious establishment or system in which you’ve accurately identified some of its teachings or positions as invalid. My friend, to you, I bring wonderful news.

By now you should already recognize that the way of salvation, the Gospel set forth in this book, is “not your father’s Oldsmobile.” No matter how religious you are, if you are like most of my friends, you most likely have never heard of God’s way of salvation wherein His righteousness is revealed. As stated in earlier chapters, most have never even heard of the only basis upon which they can be found not guilty before God’s bar of justice, the imputed righteousness of Christ. Sadly, I can reasonably predict that most of you have not previously heard of these vital truths that constitute the God-given knowledge of salvation in Christ alone. This is indicative of just how rare it is to find the true Gospel among the religious clutter of our day.

If this is your first reading, you may have not yet drawn any firm conclusions as to the validity of what I’ve written, needing time to digest it and test it against the standard of truth – God’s Word. So it should be. However, even now, you may have perceived that this is vastly different from that which is promoted by mainstream religion. To many, this factor would be a discouragement, but to those who have for good reason become skeptical of religion, I ask you to see that God’s Gospel of grace has been so perverted that it is unrecognizable and not promoted in most religious circles. I challenge you to test the validity of

what I've written and discover whether or not it is consistent with God's revelation and void of the folly, hypocrisy, or inconsistencies you have wisely discounted. It is not your father's Oldsmobile – but unlike the Madison Avenue hype designed to affect your perceptions, God's Gospel truly distinguishes itself from all others, for therein is the righteousness of God revealed. God's Gospel is reasonable and fully consistent with the character of God, His design and purpose. It all adds up!! You now have more than ample reason to shuck off your indifference and, instead of checking out, check it out.

God Doesn't Grade on the Curve

Finally, if you are inclined to remain indifferent or apathetic, I wish to remind you of God's strict standard of judgment. Perhaps you don't think about your spiritual state very often, resting in some sense that you'll be okay as you compare yourself to others. As I explained in the earlier chapters of this book, God will not judge you on a sliding scale. He does not grade on the curve. His standard is strict and absolute. God requires a perfect righteousness by which He shall judge all men.¹ It is truly incumbent upon you to discover and submit to His perfect righteousness as your own standard of judgment and hope for eternal salvation. You may actually have more in common with the very religious establishment that you oppose or remain indifferent towards than you choose to admit.² Before submitting to Christ's righteousness as the only ground of salvation, all fall prey to Satan's trap – believing his lie that they shall not surely die (eternally speaking).³ We remain in Satan's trap, his family, as long as we refuse to adopt God's standard and receive His gracious provision.

As for my friends, I do hope you retain some of those friendly, "good guy" personality traits. I also hope you become more religious – but only if your religious interest is grounded upon the seemingly obscure but invaluable precepts of true

¹ Isa 28:17; Acts 17:31

² Rom 2:1,3

³ Gen 3:4

religion. Thereby we discover that apart from Christ, there really is nothing “good” about us that would commend us unto God. We need a “goodness,” a righteousness outside of ourselves – the imputed righteousness of God in Christ!

(2) Balanced Buddies

Some of my favorite friends fall into this group. These are the folks who go to church regularly, yet they have a “balance” about their life. They certainly aren’t what some would refer to as “holy rollers.” Moderation is often their byword in all things – including their religion. They may have many other interests outside of religion, but they allow time to varying degrees for their religion and worship. They are inclined to give some evidence of their spirituality while not wearing it on their sleeves. They have typically reached a point of comfort and contentment with respect to their spiritual life.

Many of the friends that I have in mind here place most of their religious emphasis on the moral teachings and virtues set forth in the Scripture. Love is often their motto. In their churches they are more likely to hear sermons where the outward evidences and works of believers are stressed far more than the doctrines pertaining to how sinners are saved. Their moderation and tolerance for others translates into less interest in doctrine, perhaps viewing what I consider to be vital knowledge as mere details not worth quibbling over. In their quest to be kind and loving, many of these friends are exceptionally tolerant of other views and inclined to consider most anyone with a remotely similar religious interest as bound for heaven.

Upon the death of mutual acquaintances, I have, on more than one occasion, heard some of these friends comment on the presumed blessed state and destiny of the deceased. Typically they might acknowledge that the person was far less than perfect, but given the kindnesses and positive virtues of the deceased (often substantiated by a favorable personal experience they had encountered), and given the fact that their friend “believed in God,” they conclude that if “he’s not saved and in heaven – then

who could be.” Many of these friends will readily agree that their concept of grace includes a belief that salvation is conditioned on themselves to some degree, typically as enabled by God. For many of these more moderate (or balanced) buddies, it seems that sincerity about their religion may actually count for more than the substance of what and in whom they believe.

Most in this group are quick to make no pretense about their own piety. They are more apt to acknowledge their own shortcomings and do so in a way that is pleasant and gives the impression of true humility. Some of these friends I find to be extremely likeable and a pleasure to be around.

Wake Up!

To these dear friends I truly wish to deliver a wakeup call. Some of the same encouragements to continue the quest for truth and further self-examination that I mentioned in reference to the “not so religious” group apply here as well. What many may consider to be mere details and deep doctrinal issues reserved for theologians are in reality essential basics of the Gospel believed by all whom God saves. As I’ve said, they only seem complicated because they are so foreign to our natural sinful natures. I suspect that some from this group may privately scorn the religious zealots, recognizing that so many of them dogmatically assert things that they know so little about. I fear that this might contribute to the tendency of my moderate friends to ignore or gloss over doctrine so vital to their eternal state. It does matter what you believe. The Buddhist, the Hindu, the Islamic fundamentalist may be just as sincere as you, if not more so. I beg you to adopt God’s standard of righteousness and measure yourself by it. Until you comprehend this truth, you will have no need to break free of your contentment and confidence in a false refuge.

Again, The Wrong Measuring Stick

The obvious standard of judgment for most of my friends in this group is their fellow man. The emphasis on virtues and good deeds to the exclusion of sound doctrine, the anecdotal

examples of how they judge the spiritual state of others (and themselves), all point once again to the tragic error of measuring by the wrong standard. Like most, they unwisely measure themselves by others, contrary to the strict standard of righteousness set forth by God.¹ As shown in the biblical account of the rich young ruler, they likewise err in concluding that if this one isn't in heaven – Who then can be saved?²

Sinful Pride Disguised as Humility

Having been raised to be considerate of others, I had always considered myself to possess a better than average dose of humility. I've often joked that I was so humble that I was rather proud of it. My religious past was no exception. I certainly considered myself to be humbled before God, recognizing my "sinfulness" and in need of salvation. However, when my spiritual world was turned upside down with the truth of God's Gospel, I came to see that reality was far different from my perceptions. What I had considered to be evidences of humility, I now realized were in fact manifestations of selfish pride that God hates. Like my friends in this group, I believed that my salvation and the procurement of God's eternal blessing were ultimately conditioned on something that proceeded from me, though I was quick to add, "...as God enabled me." In my case, it was my faith.

If you've read the previous section on "Gospel Basics" then you should recognize the evil presumption of placing anything in a position of rivalry with God's provision of Christ's finished work at the cross, His righteousness. What a prideful affront to a holy God – to even entertain the idea that we could merit any favor from Him based upon something other than (or in addition to) the righteousness of Christ. All the while I thought I was humbly admitting of my own insufficiencies, I was banking upon a promise that God had never made – to save me in spite of my many shortcomings, as long as I met the condition of faith to procure my own salvation. Though I was completely unaware of

¹ 2 Cor 10:12

² Lk 18:26

it at the time, my presumed humility was actually the exact opposite – a pride that struck at the very honor and glory of God Himself.¹ My “humble” admission of inadequacy still left me with room to boast.² Though I viewed myself as a “repentant” sinner, I dared to substitute that which proceeded from me, my faith, in the place of the infinitely valuable blood and righteousness of Christ. So, what I considered to be a humble submission before my god was in reality the height of pride – a denial of Christ’s accomplishment in establishing righteousness and, consequently, a denial of God’s redemptive glory uniquely revealed therein (a just God and a Savior). I beg you likewise to examine whether or not that which has seemed God-honoring to you is really consistent with God’s Gospel and His way of salvation.

To you my “balanced buddies,” I must concede that there is virtue in moderation and in maintaining a balance in our lives. I certainly hope that you retain a levelheaded perspective on life. However, as you assess your own spiritual state, I hope that you are stirred up to reconsider the ground upon which you base your confidence and insure it’s consistent with God’s truth – no matter how disconcerting and disruptive it may be to your comfortable and balanced life. Borrowing from the phrasing of a former U.S. Senator’s famous quote, I would remind you that extremism in making sure that you are heaven bound is no vice. And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of God’s truth pertinent to this subject is no virtue. Your eternal destiny makes it worth the trouble.

(3) Fervent Friends

Many of my closest post college friendships, prior to 1985, were with like-minded friends who were zealous about their religion. This group of friends consists of many for whom religion plays an important role in their everyday lives. They hold strong beliefs, just as I did, and I do not question their sincerity. Like me, both before and after my conversion, they are serious about their spiritual life.

¹ Lk 16:15

² Rom 3:26-28; Eph 2:8-9

Many of these friends will forego other pleasures and conveniences in their dedication and zeal to act consistently with their beliefs. They are willing to sacrifice their time, money, and energies in pursuit of that which is most important to them, sincerely desiring to obey their god and serve him as ambassadors for their faith. They are far more likely to attempt to influence others to their way of thinking and look for opportunities to be “witnesses” of that which they believe.

Many of my more fervent friends are serious students of the Bible and familiar with the Scriptures. They are more apt to show discipline by allocating time regularly for Bible study and prayer. Typically this group of friends will gravitate toward one another and most of their social life will center on church related activities with those who share their beliefs and, in some cases, their intense passion and zeal.

Misplaced Passion

In one sense, I have a high regard for those who are zealous and passionate about most anything. It seems that all great, noteworthy achievements throughout history have come from those who possessed a passion that motivated them and drove them to new heights. Typically, we all act upon and are more greatly influenced by those things for which we are passionate. Unfortunately, such fervor can be difficult to stomach for those with differing opinions, depending upon the extent to which their zeal and passion affect their tone and approach. Although I count myself among this group prior to hearing the truth of God’s Gospel, I will tell you that I truly regret the fervor and zeal with which I promoted something I now know to be so opposed to the honor of God and destructive towards men.¹

Although passion and zeal are virtues that can serve us well, they can also be detriments in the quest for truth if they are misguided or misplaced. The zeal and fervency that is to be applauded and is most valuable is one that is built upon truth,

¹ Rom 6:21

derived from one's overriding passion for truth itself.¹ In the spiritual realm, God promises that those who seek will find.² This seeking involves a sincere desire to know and understand the realities of God's truth, even if it goes against our own preconceived notions or religious upbringing.

Great inventions are typically preceded by multiple failures. Only by confronting reality, accepting the fact that a premise or theory is flawed, can the passionate inventor move forward. Similarly, if one is to determine accurately the basic spiritual truths that constitute the Gospel, then he must be willing to confront the fact that his premise, his doctrine may indeed be flawed. We know that this is an essential process since the Scriptures make it clear that, as fallen creatures, we all initially seek acceptance with God based upon grounds that He excludes, based on a flawed doctrine.³ That's what initial repentance in spiritual conversion is all about.

To most of my zealous friends, I encourage you to take stock of yourselves to insure that your zeal and passion are built upon truth. As I pointed out earlier, Paul the Apostle mentioned those who had a "zeal of God," but "not according to knowledge," portraying them in need of salvation. Again, the specific knowledge that they lacked was of Christ's righteousness.⁴ They did not know that His righteousness imputed was the only valid basis upon which a sinner is accepted before a holy God. I do not doubt your sincere interest in the things of God; however, if your zeal is accompanied by an unwillingness to test the validity of your own beliefs, as commanded by God,⁵ then it is truly detrimental to your spiritual welfare.

¹ Matt 7:24-27

² Matt 7:7-8

³ Prov 14:12; 16:25

⁴ Rom 10:2-3

⁵ 1 Pet 3:15; 1 Jn 4:1

“Touch Not, Taste Not, Handle Not” Religion

Many of my “fervent friends” do stand out relative to their more indifferent counterparts. Depending upon the individual, they are more sincere, more disciplined, more giving of themselves, more studious of the Scriptures, more moral, more prayerful, and the list goes on. It’s not just that they seem or appear to take their religion more seriously; they actually do. Consequently, I find among some in this group an even greater tendency to measure themselves based upon this stark comparison with others. Whether judging by their “do’s” (their proactive efforts of obedience) or by their “don’ts” (their discipline in refraining from that which they see as less exemplary, or “harmful to their witness”), make no mistake – these friends cannot help but make judgments and gain assurance by their self-evident contrast with others. They may seek to give credit to God for their contrasts, that which they judge to distinguish them from unbelievers, but their assurance is based on something other than Christ’s righteousness.¹

Some in this group are apt to select specific shortcomings (as they see them in others) and focus much of their religious conversation and attention around persuading others of these specific “sins.” As might be expected, the tendency is to judge more severely those “sins” that one personally has no particular problem with. Oblivious to the reprimands in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, they fail to see the irony of claiming to be saved by grace and therefore “dead” to these things in Christ, while at the same time, majoring on a “touch not, taste not, handle not” religious mentality which, in the hindsight of God-given faith, is so blatantly characteristic of the false religion of “works.”²

They fail to see the contradiction between the legalism they major upon and the concept of salvation by grace because, unlike the Colossians, their concept of grace isn’t contradictory to this legal mentality. The Colossians had been taught grace as God defined it with all that was necessary for a sinner’s salvation

¹ Lk 18:9-14

² Col 2:20-22

having been fully met by Christ alone. Unfortunately, this isn't the case for my "fervent friends," only giving further evidence that what they call "grace" is in reality a system of works in disguise. To many of these friends, their religion is so cloaked in the biblical language of grace that they are totally oblivious to their own self-righteousness.

Too Much Invested?

When my own beliefs were exposed, I recall the difficulty in facing up to how seriously mistaken I had been under the teachings of my former religion. Like many in this group, I was familiar with the Scriptures, yet under the preaching of the true Gospel many of these same passages took on a different meaning as I read them for the first time in their proper context, consistent with the Bible's overall Gospel message of grace. Having invested much in support of my former religion, it seemed that I had too much at risk to admit to being wrong – having so openly staked my eternal destiny on that which was now being exposed as "dead works." My former religious dedication, the investment of time, money, and the energy spent influencing others were all obstacles to an objective consideration of the Gospel; yet, the God I came to know through the Gospel was wise enough, powerful enough, and loved me enough to overcome all obstacles, making the seemingly impossible, a reality.

Like most, I do not like to be told that I am wrong and I certainly resist admitting as much. Yet this issue is far too important to allow our sinful pride to interfere. Is your zeal of God a misplaced passion? If you're truly serious about your religion, then take the time to continue this objective evaluation of your own state to insure that your passion is built upon God's truth. If your zeal is according to the knowledge of how God can be both a just God and a Savior, based upon the imputed righteousness of Christ, then it is to be applauded. Otherwise, I encourage you, my fervent friends, to continue your search with a genuine passion for the truth, no matter how much you may feel is at stake, no matter what position of leadership, reputation, or respect would be placed in jeopardy among your fellow religionists.

The reality is that your eternal destiny itself is at stake and that makes all of the other concerns pale by comparison.

Whether you consider yourselves to be a “good guy – but not so religious,” a “balanced buddy,” or a “fervent friend,” I hope that you will complete your quest to test the legitimacy of your own state before God. Amid the diversity of religious views and degrees of interest among my friends, I find a common thread that I hope will help you simplify and organize your thoughts by stripping away the seemingly important yet non-critical religious differences to get at the basic essence of your religion – what do you think removes God’s wrath and gains His favor?

From this perspective, the multitude of religious denominations and sects can be simply reduced to two. One is true. The other is false. In the following chapter, I hope you can accurately identify your own religion from among these two. In doing so, I ask that you take nothing for granted since one of the two is often disguised to resemble the other. An accurate assessment and awareness of the basic underpinnings or basis for our own hope is critical if our self-examination is to be legitimate. Let’s proceed.

Identifying Your Religion Grace or Works

God's Gospel, unique among its numerous and popular counterfeits, is truly the great equalizer of mankind. In raising my brothers and me, my parents had a positive influence over our perspective of things, including our relative sense of value and worth among others. I recall my mother standing ready to correct any notion that I might consider myself superior to others. To this day, I'm thankful that she taught me never to consider myself better or of more value than someone else, regardless of their station in life. Similarly, whenever I gave the slightest indication of feeling inferior or of being intimidated in the presence of someone of greater notoriety, I would hear my dad's familiar refrain, "He puts his pants on one leg at a time, just like you do."

As we progress through life, interacting with others, it is certainly useful to recognize and appreciate the worth of every individual, including ourselves. At the same time, we readily recognize many differences among us. Some are smarter than others. Some are more artistically gifted. Some have personality traits and people skills that cause others to gravitate towards them. Some are more athletically gifted and the list could go on. Our position and status in this life is typically affected by how well we cultivate, apply and capitalize upon our own individual gifts and strengths while mitigating our weaknesses.

This is not the case when it comes to our position and status before a holy God. In the Bible we learn that God does not regard our position before Him based upon any personal characteristic that we may possess or cultivate.¹ As we've already discussed, one can only be reconciled to God based upon something that cannot be produced by finite man – the righteousness

¹ Acts 10:34

of God which Christ alone produced by His substitutionary life and death. This concept of being favored by God independent of any condition met by the object of that favor is perhaps the most important concept of the Scriptures. I'm referring to the concept of grace.

The doctrine of grace distinguishes true Christianity from all other religions. We are told explicitly in God's Word that He saves sinners by "grace," not by "works."¹ In other words, any who are saved come to God receiving the gift of salvation, a gift that they cannot and do not merit. That is, salvation is not conditioned upon them in any way, to any degree. God says that by man's efforts and actions, man's works, that none are justified before Him.² So what is grace? **Grace is salvation conditioned on Christ alone.** Do you see how then the Gospel of God's grace is truly the great equalizer of all? Male or female, black or white, rich or poor, smart or dumb – all are helpless to produce that which God requires. Any and all that are saved are saved by grace – that is, based upon the merit of Christ's work alone.³

Any other concept of how one might be saved from God's wrath and gain eternal favor with God, apart from grace, would necessitate that something, some work, be done by the sinner himself. If Christ alone did not fully satisfy all of the conditions for one's salvation, then one must conclude that salvation is ultimately conditioned on the sinner, at least in some way or to some degree. The Bible refers to this as works. Put simply, **works is salvation conditioned on the sinner.** We're taught throughout the Bible that salvation by works, conditioned on the sinner in any way or to any degree, is impossible before a holy God.

By reducing all of the religious clutter down to these two simple concepts, grace and works, perhaps we can proceed with identifying the religion to which you belong – the religion of grace or the religion of works. God tells us through the Apostle

¹ Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:5

² Rom 3:20; Gal 2:16-21

³ Gal 3:28-29

Paul's writings that these two concepts are opposites and cannot coexist. There is no in-between. This moment, the specific religious doctrines that you hold dear reflect your adherence to one or the other – either the religion of grace or the religion of works.¹

What About You?

Most of my friends consider themselves to be “Christians.” Perceiving that “grace” is an integral concept of Christianity, they sincerely think that they believe in salvation by grace. Most everyone who believes in the Bible will readily agree that it makes clear that salvation must be by grace. In the introduction of this book, I challenged you to confront the reality of your own beliefs and thoughts toward God. Now I particularly ask that you consider whether your concept of salvation by grace is in keeping with God's definition of grace – His way of salvation. I have no doubt that most of my friends sincerely consider themselves doctrinally sound when it comes to the biblical doctrine of grace. This was certainly true of me long before I heard the Gospel and its message wherein God's righteousness is revealed. Why, long ago I memorized Ephesians 2:8-9, a classic passage on the subject, and shared it often with those I taught. I too, truly thought that I believed in salvation by grace; however, I have since discovered that my perception in this regard bore no resemblance with the reality of God's truth.

If you are at all like me, you may take some pride in your willingness and courage to confront reality. I've always considered myself as one who would face the facts head on. Nevertheless, reality cannot be confronted as long as our perceptions do not match up to the reality. For example, I begrudgingly will admit of my growing baldness; however, as incredulous as it now seems, for quite some time I failed to recognize just how far my “slightly receding” hairline had moved. Many of my kind friends love to point out how my face has grown longer and longer over the years, and I must admit, those who know me

¹ Rom 11:6

would get a big laugh if I continued to characterize my growing baldness as a “slightly receding” hairline.

Several years ago my wife and I took a vacation cruise in the Caribbean. I’ll never forget how startled I was upon getting the pictures back to see a glaring shot of me and my balding head as I posed on the bow of the ship with the sea breeze in my face. Believe it or not, I saw for the first time what others had known all along – I was going bald. Prior to that photo, the frontal angle at which my face stared back at me in the bathroom mirror simply hid how far back my hairline had moved. I concede the possibility that I may have subconsciously desired to avoid confronting this reality but it was more of a case of simply not knowing any better. This erroneous perception was suddenly remedied by the reality exposed in the less than flattering photograph. Until then, I really thought I still had a head full of hair. It wasn’t that I was unwilling to confront reality. It was simply that I needed a little more light (or glare) on the subject.

Grace Reigns through Righteousness

So it was when I discovered the Gospel of God’s grace. For some time, I had studied and taught what I thought to be the doctrine of salvation by grace; however, the light of the Gospel exposed that what I called “grace” was in fact the exact opposite – a cleverly disguised system of works. My sincere perception of grace did not match the reality of God’s truth. The Bible teaches that sin reigns or results in death and that grace reigns “through righteousness unto eternal life.”¹ That is, if we are found in our sins, owing a debt to God’s law and justice, we shall eternally die. However, if we are under God’s grace, having our debt to God’s law and justice fully satisfied for us by virtue of Christ’s righteousness having been charged to our account, we have eternal life. So we see then that the underlying theme of the religion of grace is the truth of righteousness. If grace reigns through righteousness, then it follows that we cannot grasp the concept of grace unless we understand this righteousness through which grace reigns. God’s grace is manifested

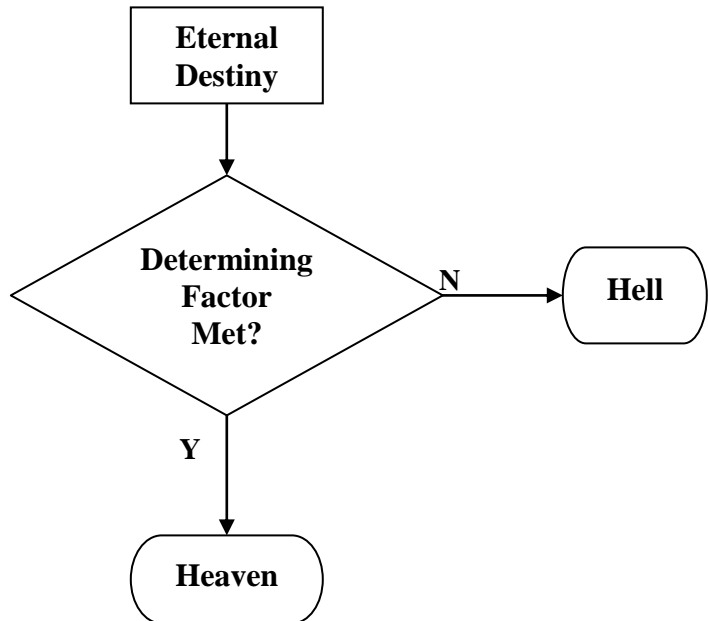
¹ Rom 5:21

in the very gospel we are commanded to believe, by the revelation of a righteousness that meets God's requirement.

Like most of my friends, I had some concept of grace prior to hearing about the righteousness of Christ. I defined grace as the unmerited favor of God. However, apart from having heard of God's requirement and provision of righteousness through Christ, by default I had to rest at least partially in something that was done by or through me. I now see that what I called grace, unmerited favor, really did leave something left for me to earn or merit. Failing to see that all of the conditions for my salvation were fully met by Christ's substitutionary work on the cross, His righteousness alone, I imagined that something else remained to be done by or through me. This was a denial of grace and exposed me to be an unwitting participant in the religion of works. The deception of today's popular brand of "Christianity" begins with the use of biblical terms such as "grace," redefined to suit man's natural reasoning and contrary to God's definitions. If, while still ignorant of the righteousness of Christ as the standard and ground for salvation, I had been confronted with the above definitions of grace and works, I likely would have maintained that I did not believe salvation to be conditioned on myself but on Christ – but let's consider the reality. To help, consider the following flow charts:

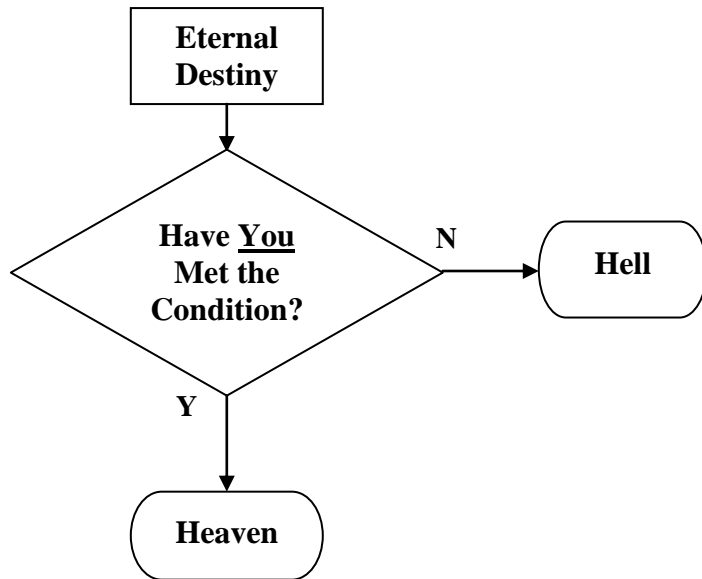
Essence of Religion

(Reconciliation between God and Man)



“Works” Model of Salvation

Salvation Conditioned on the Sinner

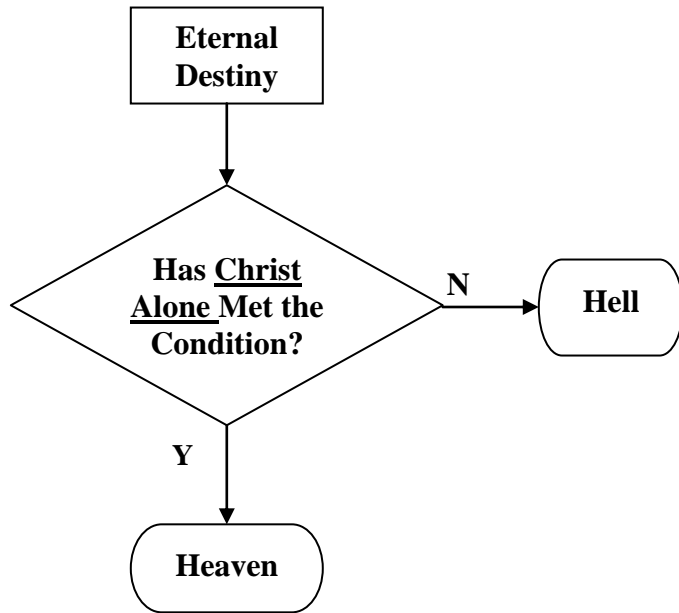


Determining Factors or Conditions Typical in the Religion of Works, Disguised as “Grace.”

- Faith – *Have you believed?*
- Repentance – *Have you repented?*
- Perseverance – *Are you persevering?*
- Obedience – *Have you obeyed?*
- Confession of sins – *Have you confessed?*
- Something God has enabled you to do

“Grace” Model of Salvation

Salvation Conditioned on Christ Alone



God’s Requirement or Condition as Set Forth in the Religion of “Grace:”

- Perfect Satisfaction to God’s Law & Justice, the Righteousness of God in Christ – Freely imputed to the sinner. God-given faith trusts in Christ alone, based upon that which He fully accomplished in His life and death on the cross.

Note that the critical element in identifying which religion we belong to lies in the diamond-shaped decision block. Therein lies the determining factor. In short, that is what this entire book is about – how may I have a true hope of heaven, knowing my sins are completely forgiven, rather than continue to face the sure reality of hell and eternal separation from God because of my sins. If you can accurately identify for yourself that which makes the ultimate difference in your eternal destiny, then this should in turn help you determine whether you truly believe in salvation by works or salvation by grace. The deceptive nature of today’s version of “Christianity” is that what most call “grace” is nothing more than “works” in disguise, a wolf in sheep’s clothing.¹

Consider that any obedient response to a command of God is a “work,” or “deed of the law” to use the scriptural language. Few would argue that the first act of acceptable obedience by any sinner is to exercise faith in Christ. Although faith itself is a “work,” something done by the sinner in obedience to God’s command, yet it is a biblical truth that faith is a gift of God, purchased by no less than Christ’s blood, His righteousness.² It is a work that God causes the sinner to perform. The Bible plainly teaches that by our obedience, or by “deeds of the law” none can be saved.³ So the obedient exercise of faith cannot form any part of a sinner’s ground of acceptance before God. God-given faith always includes as its object the righteousness established by Christ and always excludes as its object any “deeds of the law.” So genuine **faith excludes itself** as being a contributing or determining factor in salvation by grace. Rather, true faith is the fruit, effect, and evidence of what the Lord Jesus Christ fully accomplished in His death on the cross. God-given faith plays no causal role in procuring God’s blessings.

Contrary to this, I once thought that my faith was the determining factor in salvation. In other words, although I called it grace, I was really banking on something done by me. Like

¹ Matt 7:15

² 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23; Eph 1:12-14; 2 Pet 1:1

³ Rom 3:20

many of my friends, I would say that God gave me the faith and the Holy Spirit enabled me to believe. Yet, now I know that the Holy Spirit would never lead me to substitute the work of faith in place of and as a rival to the infinitely valuable work of Christ in establishing and fulfilling righteousness. I thought I highly esteemed the work of Christ in dying on the cross, but now I see something that only the light of the Gospel of God's grace could expose – that I sinfully and erroneously thought that my salvation was in fact ultimately conditioned on myself. Faith is a gift of God, but God-given faith does not rest in itself as the determining factor, ground, or cause of salvation. True faith in Christ leaves no room for boasting in the sinner and as the Bible makes clear, God will not share His glory.¹

Underneath the “Works” Model flowchart, I noted a few of the typical conditions or requirements various denominations that call themselves “Christian” may substitute as the determining factor(s). Whether you believe that salvation is ultimately determined by one of the conditions that I listed, by several of them, or something else, the implication remains the same. If the essence of your religion results in salvation conditioned on you in any way or to any degree, then your religion is the religion of “works.”

Identifying Your Savior

In the preceding flow charts I've tried simply to show that in everyone's mind there exists some factor or factors that determine one's eternal destiny. Whatever truly makes the ultimate, final difference between heaven and hell belongs in that block. In short, that is your savior. Some may describe their religious doctrine in terms similar to those I used in years past, believing that Christ was miraculously conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary, that He lived a perfect, sinless life on this earth, that in an expression of infinite love, He willingly was crucified at Calvary, and that He was raised from the dead to reign and rule in heaven.

¹ Isa 42:8; 48:11; Rom 3:24-28; Eph 2:8-9

Now all of that is true, yet ultimately, in ignorance of what His work actually accomplished, I concluded that the real difference was in whether or not I believed. Christ could not have been my Savior, though I sincerely thought Him to be – because He alone didn’t make the difference between heaven and hell. The differentiation for me, “my savior,” was faith. That is what belonged in my “determining factor” block, exposing that what I called grace was really the religion of works. I now know that faith, or any other seemingly honorable act of obedience, when placed in the “determining factor” block is not an acceptable act of obedience at all but actually evil, dead works in the sight of God.

The Bible tells us plainly that to believe that God’s requirement of righteousness for salvation can be met by any obedient effort of ours under God’s law, including faith itself, is to view the work of Christ as worthless, to regard His death as being in vain.¹ Sadly, most of my friends do not even recognize that they have substituted an act or acts of obedience, their work, in place of the work of Christ Himself.

I heard an excellent sermon several years ago in which four categories of religion were identified. Three of these describe subsets of the religion of works, while only one describes the religion of grace – God’s way of salvation. These categories are:

Religion of Works:

1. A Work of Man for God

This is blatantly “works” based religion and is characteristic of those who openly admit that salvation is conditioned upon the sinner.

2. A Work of Man with God

This would include those who emphasize the work of man, but credit God with enabling or assisting them in meeting the condition for salvation. This is typical of those who suggest

¹ Gal 2:21

that God simply expects us to do our best and He'll do the rest – or make up the difference.

3. A Work of God with Man

This seems to emphasize the work of God, with man left to simply cooperate in some way with God so as to make salvation effectual. This is often characterized by those who suggest that God has done 99 + % of what is required and the only thing left for you is to _____<fill in the blanks>.

Religion of Grace:

4. A Work of God for Man

God's way of salvation as set forth in the Bible.

You will observe that all three of the descriptions falling under the "Religion of Works" heading depict salvation as conditioned in some way, and at least to some degree, on the sinner. I listed these in the order of which I consider to be increasingly deceptive, based upon the increasing emphasis placed upon God's role in salvation. However, none of the first three categories place their hope solely in Christ, based upon the righteousness He established and through which grace reigns.¹ Consequently, I hope you can see that if any of these accurately depict your religious views, then your religion isn't the religion of grace but is instead the religion of works – no matter what you may call it and no matter how camouflaged it may be.

In my own case, I was found in that third category, among those who seem to put relatively greater emphasis on the work of God. Hopefully you've seen from the earlier section on the "Gospel Basics" that such a mere emphasis that seems to give much credit to God will not suffice. God's strict standard and requirement of righteousness must be met and God must receive all the glory, consistent with the revelation of His character in the Person and work of Christ.

¹ Rom 5:21

Because man's religion, the religion of works, promotes salvation conditioned on the sinner, its main emphasis must be on trying to motivate you to sin less, do better, or perform in accordance with whatever constitutes the condition(s) or requirement(s) you must meet. It works upon fallen man's natural feelings of guilt, legal fears of punishment and mercenary desires for gain and reward. The sad result of such an emphasis is to exacerbate the problem – fueling the very condition that needs to be remedied. Man's religion of works turns us even further away from the true God than we already are by nature. As natural born enemies of God, we are actually being encouraged by most of religion to compound our culpability by committing the “wicked works” of trying to establish a righteousness of our own.¹

True grace is totally a work of God for man. In an earlier chapter on the sinfulness of man, I discussed the totally depraved condition in which man finds himself. The Bible tells us that God justifies the ungodly.² Clearly then a work of God for man, apart from any contribution from the ungodly sinner is required if the holy demands of God's law and justice are to be met. As the ancient hymn proclaims, this work of grace by God for man upon which our hope is to be built is “nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness!” Only by grace, salvation conditioned on Christ's righteousness alone, are any saved. That's sound footing – a solid rock!

¹ Col 1:21

² Rom 4:5; 5:6-9

For Whom Do You Think Christ Died? Redemption

I would be remiss if I did not devote some of this book to a discussion of a widespread error that strikes at the heart of the Gospel – at the redeeming work of Christ. I have found that mere agreement with God’s truth on this wondrous and vital doctrine does not give proof of one’s state; however, the converse is true. I hope to show you that it is impossible for one to cling to the popular view of the death of Christ as held by most of my friends, while at the same time truly trust in Christ’s righteousness alone for salvation.

By “redemption” I am referring to that which Christ accomplished by His obedience unto death on behalf of sinners so as to remove God’s wrath and gain His favor. Christ paid the debt due unto sins before the justice of God so as to reconcile sinners unto God.¹ Most of my friends believe as I once did about Christ’s death. They believe that God loves every individual that ever has or ever will live, without exception, and consistent with that love, Christ died on the cross for all of the sins of every individual that ever lived. In belief of a universal atonement, they believe that Christ died for all, although they do not believe in universal salvation – that all shall be saved and go to heaven. As we proceed, I hope that you too will come to identify with my discovery of how tragically wrong I was in my regard for the work of Christ. If you are like I was, you may be resistant even to entertain the possibility that Christ did not die for all without exception. Like most of my friends, I was taught specific Bible verses with an interpretation that certainly seemed to indicate that Christ died for all. Nevertheless, I once again urge you to set aside your preconceived views and consider objectively what I have to say. More importantly, consider whether or not it is

¹ Rom 5:10; 2 Cor 5:18-19; Col 1:21-22

consistent with an accurate accounting of what God has to say in His Word.

The John Owen Question

Over a period of years, I had been discussing the Gospel with one of my dearest friends. A few years back, he was attending a large Protestant church, pastored by a well-known preacher who would later become the president of his denomination's national organization. Knowing that I opposed what I consider to be the false gospel propagated by this minister and his denomination, my friend presented me with an interesting opportunity. His pastor had set aside some time in one of their worship services to respond to questions that were to be submitted in advance by the congregation. My friend, though still unconvinced of my doctrinal views, had been unable to refute them and offered to submit any questions I might offer up, assuming his pastor to be better equipped to address the issues.

Having heard this minister speak on television before, I knew that he was one who spoke often of the blood of Christ, of His sacrificial death, and one who proclaimed many important facts about Christ's death. I knew, once confronted, he could not in good conscience or without contradiction continue to view Christ's death as a literal payment for sins, a true redemption, and still maintain that Christ died for all. With this background, I submitted the following two-part question with the accompanying commentary and follow-up questions:

A. For whom did Christ die?

and

B. What did His death accomplish?

I wrote further: "I gather you believe Christ paid for all the sins of all men without exception. If so, then why aren't all saved, their debt for sin having been fully paid by Christ? The most common answer is, 'Because of

their unbelief.’ If unbelief is a sin deserving eternal punishment, then did Christ undergo the punishment for it (the sin of unbelief) or not? If unbelief is not sin, so as to be included among all the sins that Christ paid for on the cross, then why should any be punished for it? If as some say, Christ’s death simply made salvation possible and faith makes it effectual to the individual, does that not make faith, rather than Christ, the Savior since, according to that view, our faith makes the ultimate, final difference in our eternal state, not the obedience and death of Christ? Please reconcile your views on these thoughts.”

This question was my modern day paraphrase of a question set forth in a book titled The Death of Death in the Death of Christ by a 17th century theologian, John Owen. As you might imagine, my friend’s well educated, seminary trained minister would not fully answer the question to his satisfaction. He quoted a verse out of context that is frequently misinterpreted in support of his universal view of Christ’s redemptive work, yet he would not answer the questions directly, initially citing time constraints as the prohibiting factor. At the close of the service, my friend spoke with his pastor, asking if he would consider a written response as time permitted. The pastor seemed glad to oblige my friend, agreeing to his request at the time; however, as time wore on without a reply, it became apparent that he had decided otherwise. Subsequently, in a final attempt to solicit a response, my friend again approached his pastor and was brushed off with a response that indicated that he saw no usefulness in entering into a debate such as that. My dear friend recognized the “cop-out” for what it was and reluctantly admitted that it would appear his minister was unable to answer the question. I applauded my friend’s discernment at the time. And I am thrilled to say that since then, God has graciously revealed Christ to him in belief of the glorious Gospel of God’s grace.

For my many friends who, like myself for years, believe that Christ died for all, I challenge you as well to answer the questions above. I was not surprised that this minister would not

answer the questions because I knew that he could not do so while continuing to cling to a universal view of Christ's death. There is no reasonable answer, consistent with God's Word, other than the truth – Christ could not have died for all the sins of all men without exception. If He did, then His death accomplished nothing in the way of a real payment for sin. If Christ died for even one person who ultimately perishes, then His work on the cross cannot be characterized as a work of redemption or as having actually paid the penalty due unto those sins.

Without a doubt, the Scriptures teach that Christ did live and die for all of the sins (past, present, and future) of some of the people.¹ Who were these for whom Christ died? The Bible teaches that Christ died for all of His "sheep," those whom God had elected or chosen before the world began and for whom God the Father had appointed His Son, Jesus Christ, to become incarnate so as to satisfy all of the conditions for their salvation as their Substitute and Representative.² In obedience to God the Father, Christ came in the "fullness of time" and was made under the law of God so that he might fulfill that law on behalf of all those whom He represented.³ This satisfaction to both the law's precept and penalty, culminating in the sacrificial death of Christ, accomplished God's purpose of glorifying Himself based upon the righteousness established by His Son.⁴

DEFINITE Redemption

Despite the popularity of the universal view of Christ's death, I've yet to find anyone who would continue to cling to such a view after an objective consideration and examination of scriptures taken in context and pertinent to the subject. Among my friends who have discovered the truth of a definite or particular redemption, most previously believed that Christ died for all

¹ 1 Jn 1:7

² Matt 20:28; Jn 6:37-39, 44, 65; 10:11, 14-15, 26-28; 17:6, 9-10; Acts 13:48; 20:28; Rom 8:29-34; 9:11-24; Eph 1:3-7, 11;

1 Thess 5:9-10; 2 Thess 2:13-14; Titus 1:1-2; 1 Pet 1:1-2; 2:9-10

³ Gal 4:4-5

⁴ Jn 17:4

without exception, changing their minds upon an honest assessment of relevant scripture. In my own experience, I have yet to see this process in reverse. I have yet to see anyone who, after having once held this truth of a definite or particular redemption, subsequently adopt a universal view of Christ's death. Many, including myself, began an examination of this issue with a healthy skepticism, reinforced by their familiarity with Bible verses that seem to support the universal doctrine. In Chapter 16, "Addressing Common Objections," I deal with some of these in detail.

I have found that any who are willing to study the issue will soon discover that either (a) the Bible contradicts itself or (b) the passages that seemed to support such universal notions have been misinterpreted and/or taken out of context. Since this book is written under the assumption that you, the reader, believe the Bible to be God's Word and standard for truth (and therefore not contradictory) then, upon an objective study of the doctrine, I maintain that you too will find that the Bible clearly sets forth that Christ died for a particular people, referred to in the Scriptures as His "elect."

Unfortunately, many are not willing to set aside their pre-conceived notions, not willing for their doctrine to be tested. Common responses include: "I already know that Christ died for everyone so I have no need to look into scriptures that you say indicate otherwise," or "I know that's not true so there's no need to examine it further," or "I've been taught that by men much wiser than you," and so on. This ostrich-like "head in the sand" mindset will not serve you well, and it is contrary to the scriptural command to test your doctrine. I've often wondered what would make us so afraid to test that which we claim to be so sure about, so sure that we are willing to place our eternal destiny upon its accuracy. I beg those friends who remain unwilling to test the validity of their universal view of the death of Christ to reconsider given the vital importance of this issue.

Why is It Such a Big Deal?

I suppose this all-too-common “I’ll search no further” posture may stem from the fact that we don’t recognize the serious implications that accompany such a view of Christ’s work. It may help to recall the flow chart from the preceding chapter. As depicted, there exists some determining factor that makes the difference in one’s eternal destiny, ultimately resulting in two groups of people, (1) those who go to heaven and (2) those who perish. As I’ve stated, whatever you think that ultimate determining factor is equates to your “savior.” Now with this in mind, and in consideration of the biblical teaching that ultimately we all spend an eternity in one of two places – heaven or hell, just what difference did Christ’s Person and work make for these two groups?

Those who believe that Christ died for all without exception believe that He did the same thing (in dying for all) for those who go to hell as He did for those who go to heaven. So whatever you think makes the difference, it cannot be the “christ” you trust in since He did no more for those who end up in heaven than He did for those who end up in hell. Something else belongs in your “determining factor” block, not Christ. Whatever that something is – that’s your “savior” – not the Christ of the Bible.

At best, this view would reduce Christ’s work to something that merely made men savable but actually paid for no sins at all, redeeming no one. The Scriptures say otherwise. In God’s Word we learn that **Christ’s offering of Himself for sin is not merely a prerequisite of sorts that makes salvation possible but rather it got the job done.** We’re told that where the payment of His “one offering” has been made, there is “no more offering for sin.”¹ My former pastor often characterized this popular misconception as a “blanket amnesty” of sorts that does away with God’s strict standard of righteousness such that salvation’s ultimate determination still rests in the hands of the self-righteous sinner.

¹ Heb 10:14, 17-18

The author of the famous old hymn “Rock of Ages,” Augustus Toplady, wrote about the demeaning value such religious notions place on the work of Christ. In reference to those who believe that Christ died for all without exception or believe in salvation conditioned on the sinner, he wrote:

“I tremble at the shocking consequences of a system which, (as one well observes) considers the whole mediation of Christ as no more than ‘a pedestal, on which human worth may stand exalted:’”

I hope this demonstrates to you why your view of Christ’s death is such a big deal, exposing the deadly fallacy of continuing in this error that is so rampant today.

Among my friends there exists, to varying degrees, some familiarity with these two opposing views of Christ’s redemptive work. Among students of religion these views constitute a significant part of the distinguishing characteristics of those who are labeled either as “Arminians,” so named after the late 15th / early 16th century theologian Jacobus Arminius, or who consider themselves “Calvinists,” so named after the 16th century theologian John Calvin. The vast majority of my friends would be labeled as Arminians, although many have never heard the term unless they have studied or been confronted with the opposing Calvinistic viewpoint. Over the years, these labels have meant different things to different people; however, the most common and significant distinction lies in their opposing views of the redemptive work of Christ with “Arminians” believing that Christ died for all without exception and “Calvinists” holding to the view that Christ died only for the elect. Perhaps because most so-called “Calvinists” hold a minority viewpoint, practically all of my friends in this category are familiar with these labels.

For those interested, there are many books on the subject that recount the historic meeting in 1618 of the Synod of Dort in response to the doctrines set forth by Arminians. This led to the development of what is called the five points of Calvinism, often

denoted by the mnemonic, **T-U-L-I-P**: **T**otal Depravity, **U**nconditional election, **L**imited atonement (or redemption), **I**rresistible grace (or calling), and **P**reservation (or **P**erseverance according to some) of the saints. You can see that there are more doctrinal differences between the “Arminian” and “Calvinistic” views than simply the issue of the redemptive work of Christ; however, it is not the purpose of this book to go into all of those details as important as these differences are.

Although these labels (Arminianism and Calvinism) offer convenience for quick identification of one’s doctrinal position on the death of Christ, I have found that they fall miserably short of identifying whether or not one truly believes God’s Gospel. For example, many who adhere to the Calvinistic point of view regarding a particular redemption still give evidence of not having submitted to God’s only way of salvation in Christ, based solely upon the imputation of the righteousness He established. In the opening of this chapter I pointed out that mere agreement with God’s truth on this wondrous and vital doctrine does not give proof of one’s state; however, I noted that the converse was true.

It should be obvious by now that one cannot reasonably adhere to a universal (Arminian) view of Christ’s work and at the same time truly be trusting in salvation by grace, resting solely in the righteousness established by Christ. Clearly, such a person would have to be trusting in something else if they consider that Christ’s work alone was insufficient to save anyone. This is evidenced by the fact that they believe that even one person could perish for whom He died.

Though they are certainly fewer in number, I do have friends who claim to adhere to the biblical truth of particular redemption (or “definite atonement” or “limited atonement” as commonly called). As I’ve said, many of these still fail to rest in God’s way of salvation based solely upon the righteousness of Christ imputed. This next chapter is written with these “Calvinist” friends in mind. Consistent with the earlier section on “Gospel Basics,” we will examine those whose views seem consistent

with the biblical doctrines of grace, including the definite, particular payment for sins made by Christ. Now, what about you, my Calvinist friend?

Calling all Calvinists

Okay, so, in light of the previous chapter, you guys (Calvinists) are feeling pretty good as you continue this self-analysis of your spiritual state. After all, you're already convinced that the popular doctrine of a so called "universal atonement" is contrary to the Scriptures and actually amounts to no real payment for anyone's sins. Now I will ask that you, my Calvinist friends, continue to examine yourselves further in light of the basic gospel principles revealed in God's Word that we've discussed earlier in the book. This chapter is like an all points bulletin deserving your serious consideration. In this chapter, I am "calling all Calvinists" individually to evaluate their own position as it relates to God's Gospel of grace. To begin, consider the following illustration:

Burn the Bridges

In World War II, a Marine general was preparing his troops for a final offensive to retake a strategic island in the South Pacific. The enemy had been driven onto an island adjacent to the one held by the allied troops. The fighting had been fierce and the unyielding adversaries, determined to fight to the last man, had demonstrated their unwillingness to surrender. With time as a critical factor, the commanding general, having been ordered to secure the island by week's end, had no room for error. The next offensive had to be successful. Consequently, the general called his officers together and charged his 2nd in command to pull together a foolproof battle plan that would guarantee victory. Working throughout the night, the team of officers pulled together a brilliant strategy that seemed certain to deliver the 100% guarantee the general had ordered.

Early the next morning they presented their plan to the general. The plan called for initial involvement by the Corps of Engineers to rapidly erect a bridge to span the short distance between the two adjacent islands providing swift access to the

enemy held position. Given the combined artillery and air support, along with the meticulously detailed plans for the assault, it was apparent that the marines would quickly overwhelm the enemy forces, reducing their options either to an unconditional surrender or complete annihilation. The general was pleased with the hard work of his team of officers and he too believed that victory was in the bag.

Having finished his review of the battle plan, as an afterthought he asked if provisions had been made to blow up the bridge once the troops had gained access to the island, pointing out that this would eliminate any possibility that the enemy might escape. His 2nd in command quickly responded with a resounding, “Of course not!” He respectfully explained to the general that even though it would preclude any possibility of escape for the enemy, it would also be contrary to the conventional military doctrine of always maintaining a retreat route even under the most optimistic circumstances.

In disgust, the general rebuked his officers and ordered them to rework their plan until they were assured of victory – so much so that they would not hesitate to blow up or burn the bridges. Textbook strategy aside, the general demanded that their reworked plan be so sure and certain of success that the option of retreat would be unnecessary.

I concocted this story to illustrate an important observation regarding many of my so-called Calvinist friends. Though they too may seem convinced of the soundness of their doctrine, their unwillingness to “burn the bridges” tells a different story. Akin to the battle plan that left the bridge intact; there exists evidence among some of my Calvinist friends that they aren’t truly convinced of that which they profess. In the Bible, Abraham is portrayed as the father of the faith. In believing God’s promise, Abraham left behind his native idolatrous country. It was said of Abraham that he was no longer “mindful,” or maintained a fondness for that country; else he would have had an occasion to return.¹ In other words, he burned the bridges. This is indicative

¹ Heb 11:8-10, 15

of one who has exhibited the evidence of true initial repentance from dead works and former idolatry. Sadly, many of my Calvinist friends fail to demonstrate this basic evidence of salvation that always accompanies God-given faith. They have not repented from thinking that one could be saved based upon anything other than the righteousness of Christ imputed.

You might well ask how this could be discerned. After all, many of these have heard and give credence to the imputation of Christ's righteousness as the basis or ground for salvation. Shortly after I came to hear and believe the Gospel, for a time I was baffled by my discovery of the views of most so-called Calvinists. In retrospect, I'm thankful that, concurrent with my first exposure to the doctrines of grace (Calvinism), I was also taught God's Gospel wherein His righteousness was revealed. Unfortunately, this is not the case with most who wear the label "Calvinist." I came to see the truth of salvation as a work of God for man, necessary if God was to be glorified in my heart as both a just God and a Savior. It was in the context of the Gospel, consistent with the basics I've outlined earlier in this book, that I came to see the folly of Arminianism, of universal notions of Christ's redemptive work and of imagining that salvation was conditioned on the sinner, in sharp contrast to the truth of salvation conditioned upon Christ alone.

I came to see how that prior to that time, I had not known God in His redemptive character (a just God and a Savior). I knew that I had neither heard nor submitted to Christ's righteousness as the only ground of my salvation. Although I initially tried to reconcile my former beliefs with these newfound truths, once I saw the impossibility of this, I also saw the evil of that which I had thought was good and profitable for me. In short, by God's grace I became convinced that there was no hope for me apart from Christ and His righteousness imputed – so convinced that I repented from ever thinking I could be saved based upon anything else. Seeing the wickedness of my former religion from God's viewpoint, as revealed under the preaching of His Gospel, I burned the bridges – renouncing that in which I once trusted.

Suddenly, having exercised God-given faith, I naively assumed that all those so-called “Calvinists” out there were similarly like-minded. Why many of them had known for years that which I had been totally ignorant of, how Christ’s shed blood was an actual, effectual payment for sin; not some mere distorted example of God’s love that failed to eternally secure even one of its objects. Imagine how bewildering it was to me to realize that these seemingly like-minded friends, whose doctrine was so much more consistent with God’s truth than mine had been, were in fact inconsistent when it came to adopting God’s standard of righteousness as their own standard of judgment.

So again, how was this exposed? I sadly discovered that many of my Calvinist friends would consider themselves or others saved while they were still ignorant of or not submitted to Christ’s righteousness as their only hope. As the prophet Jeremiah put it – they would “cry peace where there was no peace.”¹ As I’ve already said, this is equivalent to promoting Satan’s lie made to Adam and Eve that they “shall not surely die,” contrary to God’s testimony.² Though they claim to believe salvation by grace, they believe that it is possible that one might be saved while believing the opposite.

Some would actually agree that my former views of Christ’s redemptive work were dishonoring to God and equivalent to calling Him unjust and unloving. They agreed that such views equated to a denial of His wisdom, His power, His omniscience, and so on. Yet these same folks would say that such a one (perhaps even themselves) were saved all the while. I could only conclude that they had not felt compelled to burn the bridges as I had – that they lacked the initial repentance that would testify that their faith was truly of God’s saving grace. As long as sweet old grandmother, grandfather, mom, dad, sister, brother, even themselves, could somehow be saved when they were ignorant of Christ’s righteousness, then the only reasonable conclusion is

¹ Jer 6:14; 8:11

² Gen 3:3-4

that they remain deceived and unconvinced of God's way of salvation independent of any claims to the contrary.¹

Consider how far some of my Calvinist friends will take this. Many of them will agree that the Arminian's doctrine equates to viewing God as unable to save, not all-powerful, not all-wise, a failure whose love is worthless, and an unjust judge. Yet at the same time they will consider some of these (presumably based on their having exercised faith in an unwise, powerless, unjust, failure they call "God") to possess spiritual life that would evidence their justification before God. "Go figure" was my bewildered response upon first discovering this.

Absent Repentance, Calvinism = A Doctrine of Pride

As time wore on, I began to understand how this could be. More often than not, I found that the popular brand of Calvinism was promoted outside of a "Gospel" context. That is, the "doctrines of grace," (including a biblically accurate understanding of particular redemption), are most often perverted and taught as merely some "higher doctrines" that the "Christian" grows into. In my enthusiasm to share my wonderful discovery of the Gospel, I alienated many of my friends in my feeble though well-intentioned attempts to show them our common error and the remedy for our condition. I experienced a type of rejection and disappointment like I had never known, particularly among my more "fervent friends." I soon saw why most of my Calvinist friends did not encounter such resistance. The issue was life and death to me (and still is), but not so with some of my Calvinist friends. Some of them would make a big deal about their "higher knowledge" of the doctrines of grace, but to them this had no significance with regards to assessing one's own state before God. I wondered why then they would bother to make such a big deal of it – as some of them do. I sure wouldn't have.

Prior to 1985, my family and I enjoyed a much larger religious fellowship and close friendships with religious folks that we had a great deal in common with. I certainly would not part

¹ Acts 7:51

company with them over something that I thought was inconsequential in the whole scheme of things. To make such a big fuss over something non-vital seemed ridiculous to me. I could only imagine that a sick sort of intellectual pride would drive someone to argue and divide over something that they ultimately considered non-essential. Although such a “non-judgmental” position may appear humble and loving, in reality it is just the opposite. Real love is displayed in confronting the implications of the false doctrine we held and in alerting others to the peril of continuing therein. Real humility is displayed by knowing, without a doubt, that nothing that proceeds from me could ever gain God’s favor and that to think otherwise is the height of pride and self-righteousness. As the Bible teaches, to possess knowledge without love makes us proud and arrogant, counting for nothing.¹ In contrast, true Gospel knowledge results in the exact opposite – true humility in the discovery that if it were not for the grace of God, we would be eternally lost.

Effective (& Deadly) Deception

As strange as this all may seem, some Calvinists zealously emphasize their differences with Arminians because they consider these things very important – just not vitally so. Some occasionally even promote Christ’s righteousness as the ground of salvation; however, they will not consistently do so. The Bible warns us of the subtle deception of those who are “transformed <into> ministers of righteousness,” temporarily promoting God’s truth but failing to persist in it.² This inconsistency is often exposed by the fact that they refuse to judge salvation (saved or lost) by the very doctrine they seem to be promoting. God says of such who do not “abide” in the doctrine of Christ that they are not of Him.³

It’s been said that the most effective lie is one that is surrounded by an abundance of easily substantiated truths. Perhaps this is why this type of deception is so subtle and so deadly.

¹ 1 Cor 8:1b; 13:2

² 2 Cor 11:13-15

³ 2 Jn 9

Concurrence with the prevailing Calvinistic position I just described allows one to agree with many of the vital Gospel precepts I've explained herein yet avoid the radical transformation of genuine repentance with its disturbing implications about the spiritual state of ourselves and our friends. The Bible warns us that if it were possible, such false teachers would deceive even God's chosen people, His elect.¹

It was certainly unnerving for me, a former "Arminian" in doctrine, to discover how mistaken I was regarding my doctrinal views pertaining to Christ's work. Some of my Calvinist friends had discovered the very same error in their former doctrine yet their world, unlike mine, remained quite upright. All things did not become new.² They changed doctrines but they did not change gods. Having learned this doctrine as I've depicted, as merely some deeper or higher knowledge, any initial anxiety had been alleviated. They were erroneously taught that though they had been in error, nonetheless, they still gave evidence of having been saved while ignorant of God's way of salvation. To go no further in one's discovery of God's truth than this is to remain unconvinced of sin and, sadly, to remain ignorant of the vital knowledge of God's Gospel – the knowledge which must and shall be revealed by the Spirit of God to all for whom Christ died.

As fallen creatures, naturally opposed to God's way of salvation before true conversion, we have an innate tendency to latch onto anything that would allow us to continue to judge ourselves and our loved ones as saved. I warn my friends not to fall prey to these natural inclinations, remembering that we all begin our discovery of the truth as ungodly enemies of God. The falsehood can be subtle and deceptive, particularly in light of the mindset of our fallen nature. The truth of the doctrine of saving grace in Christ alone is easily substantiated by God's Word; however, when this truth surrounds and camouflages Satan's subtle lie that says "though you were ignorant, you still were saved," then it is not taught aright but rather in direct opposition

¹ Matt 24:24

² 2 Cor 5:17

to God's Gospel – His one way of salvation. Remember, God's Gospel calls men to true repentance, an about-face reversal from that which they before esteemed, valued, and considered profitable before God.¹

It is sad indeed for those who have merely gained an intellectual familiarity with God's Gospel, but fail to acquire a genuine "love of the truth."² This fatal deficiency is evidenced by their ability to promote the Gospel occasionally but yet refuse to "abide" in it continually and judge themselves and others by it.³ According to God's Word, to remain in this company, knowledgeable of the Gospel yet unrepentant, is to face a judgment far worse than even the most immoral among us.⁴

Certainly not all of my Calvinist friends place the same degree of importance on (or care to debate over) what they often refer to as the "doctrines of grace," but it is still puzzling to see how far one will go and yet stop short of Godly repentance. Some will even label those who believe that Christ died for all as heretics; yet maintain that these "heretics" somehow give evidence of being saved in spite of their heresy. One dear friend even agreed with me, in comparing our former religion to his discovery of the "doctrines of grace," that it, our former doctrine, was actually "another gospel."⁵ Yet this same friend considered himself while totally ignorant of Christ's righteousness, while believing "another gospel" simply because he would not repent – and to this day he still stubbornly refuses to burn the bridges! My prayer for him and others like him is that God might yet grant them true repentance. Although it does not require spiritual life for one to understand and believe what is commonly called the "doctrines of grace," it does take a miraculous work of grace, a God-given new birth, for any to make the radical change of mind that characterizes true repentance. God requires no less.

¹ Phil 3:7-9

² 2 Thess 2:10

³ 2 Jn 9-10

⁴ Matt 11:20-24

⁵ Gal 1:6-8

No Fear of God

As disconcerting and puzzling as these “Calvinists” were to me in my spiritual infancy, it again served me well to attempt to examine things from the vantage point of my unrepentant Calvinistic friends. As I explained in an earlier chapter, true repentance involves admitting that before God-given faith, we did not know God, that we worshipped and served a god who could not save, an idol of our imagination. It involves admitting that our works, efforts, and experiences in religion were dead works to be repented of. In light of this, why would any person ever come to such a radical change of mind and admit to such things?

To answer this, it is useful to recall God’s design in all things, especially His purpose in the salvation of His sheep. The only reason any would ever make such a radical change is because when God is glorified in their hearts, they become more concerned for God’s glory and Christ’s preeminence than they are for their own pride. As the Scriptures point out, prior to this repentance we all have “no fear of God before our eyes.”¹ To fear God in this context does not refer to a legal fear of punishment, but rather it means to have a reverential respect for the honor of God’s character in salvation, His glory. This fear is the beginning of true spiritual wisdom.² **Until one sees and values how God’s glory is at stake in the Person and work of Christ,** then it stands to reason that **he can only view the truth of the doctrines of grace as a “higher knowledge,” not vitally linked to actually knowing the true and living God as He is uniquely revealed in the Person and work of Christ.**

Hopefully you understood from an earlier chapter on “God’s Glory” how salvation itself consists of God glorifying Himself in the heart of the sinner, revealing His redemptive character in and through the Person and work of Christ.³ For those who will promote Satan’s lie by refusing to judge salvation according to God’s standard, we can only conclude that, failing to see God’s

¹ Rom 3:18

² Prov 1:7

³ 2 Cor 4:6

glory as an integral part of salvation, they simply have “no fear of God before their eyes” – no regard for the redemptive character of God as a just God and a Savior.

Misconstruing THE Gospel

In order for one who claims to believe the doctrines of grace to judge even one person as saved who believes Christ died for all without exception, they typically must redefine the gospel, contrary to the Scriptures. As noted earlier, most all will agree that whoever believes the Gospel shall be saved. So, for the sake of consistency, they must redefine the gospel one must believe to allow for the dishonoring implications of God’s character that constitute the “Arminian” viewpoint. Clearly, if the essential Gospel did not include a revelation of the righteousness of God, Christ’s perfect satisfaction to law and justice, then it (the Gospel) would certainly have far more advocates than I’ve suggested.

I do not believe that a God-given knowledge requires a deep understanding of all the mysteries of the Scriptures, but I do know that the Scripture is clear in asserting that the essential good news of the Gospel, wherein the righteousness of God is revealed, must be understood and believed if one is to conclude that true spiritual conversion has taken place. If you have become convinced of some version of the doctrines of grace, but, like so many of my friends, still believe that you or others might have possessed God-given faith while still believing that Christ died for all, please reconsider the essential elements of the Gospel – that which God reveals in the hearts and minds of all who are blessed with spiritual life. I encourage you to review again the chapter on the “Evidences of Salvation” where I summarized the basic Gospel message, testing this definition against God’s standard of truth, His Word.

Finally, I’m delighted to say that I also have some friends who not only believe the doctrines of grace, but who also (and more importantly) give evidence of genuine God-given faith, having repented of their former idolatry. They have grasped

how God is uniquely glorified as both just and merciful based upon the Person and work of Christ.¹ In turn, they rest solely in Christ, based upon His righteousness imputed as their ground of salvation. They have a God-given regard for the honor of His redemptive character such that they refrain from promoting Satan's lie of false comfort. I hope that many more of my friends, whether Arminian or Calvinist, will continue to seek the truth, taking God at His promise of salvation for to save any and all who seek it in accordance with His prescribed way – who come to Christ pleading His imputed righteousness as the sole basis of their acceptance before God!

In this section of the book, “Let’s Get Personal / What About You?,” I’ve described many different views held by a wide variety of my friends. I assume that you’ve been able to identify some of your own beliefs among the characterizations of my other religiously diverse set of friends. I hope that you found the accompanying commentary both thought provoking and, ultimately, conducive in your quest for the truth. My objective in this section has been to encourage and provide you with ample reasons to test your own beliefs against God’s standard of judgment and in light of the basic Gospel principles outlined in the previous chapters. So what now?

¹ 2 Cor 4:6

PART

IV

THE QUEST FOR TRUTH

What Now?

Objections & Obstacles

The disease has been diagnosed but you remain unconvinced that you're really dealing with a life-threatening illness. The only cure has been prescribed and as logical as it sounds, you wonder if this miracle cure is really sound medicine. After all, it is certainly unconventional – not promoted by the mainstream experts. Perhaps this describes your own thoughts about what you've read up to now. When I first heard God's Gospel presented in such a way that distinguished it from its numerous counterfeits, questions immediately surfaced that needed resolution. The pivotal question then becomes, "What will you do with this new information?" It is likely that at least some, if not most, of what I've written is at odds with your own long held thoughts and beliefs. So how will you resolve this conflict – what now?

The Bible explains that there is a "spiritual warfare" that men engage in upon earth.¹ Keep in mind that we enter into this world allied with Satan as enemies of God. So if and when we begin to seriously consider God's Gospel, there is a sense in which we actually enter into a spiritual warfare of sorts with ourselves. This warfare is described in the Scriptures as "casting down imaginations" and anything that would rival Christ's righteousness or stand in opposition to knowing God in His proper character. We read that this warfare takes place in the mind and that we are to make all of our thoughts "captive to the obedience of Christ." This, Christ's perfect obedience in His earthly life and death, is the establishment of the very righteousness that God requires.

One of my best friends aptly describes that which takes place in spiritual conversion as "taking sides with God against yourself." The Bible describes this radical change of state as being "born again." In other words, we actually become

¹ 2 Cor 10:3-5

something that we weren't before, with a new principle of life.¹ Those who are blessed with spiritual life are granted the accompanying faculties of life. And with this revelation of faith, believers see, hear, and understand how God's way of salvation is so diametrically opposed to that which previously had seemed so right to them in their former state of spiritual blindness.² From this perspective you can see that we do actually take sides against ourselves – against our natural way of thinking prior to conversion. As long as we continue to cling to any possibility that salvation is conditioned at all upon the sinner, we continue on the wrong side of the battle. If this is the case, we aren't engaged in this warfare on God's side. This is evidenced by the fact that our thoughts are not captive to the only hope for salvation – the imputed righteousness of Christ (His obedience unto death).

Objections – Deal with Them

As you contemplate the validity of what you've read so far, you will have to grapple with some long held notions that stand in contradiction. This is a necessary process. If you've yet to discover that your prior concept of God's character and of how He saves sinners is flawed, then obviously you could not have yet experienced the initial repentance that evidences salvation. One certainly can't turn from an idol he has yet to recognize. This is a pivotal point in our discussion. What you do in resolving these contradictions is of eternal significance. Notice that I am not asking for you simply to set aside or ignore your long held notions. Rather I am encouraging you to deal objectively with them.

I know in my own case, upon first hearing of Christ's righteousness as revealed in the Gospel, my thinking was immediately challenged by many genuine concerns and obstacles. I was confronted with the fact that what I was now hearing did not wash with all that I and most of my friends had been taught.

¹ Jn 3:3-7; Eph 2:1-10; 1 Pet 1:23

² Prov 14:12; 16:25; Matt 13:16

During that time, I was listening to a nationally known minister who had allegedly settled the issue of the opposing views of Christ's redemptive work. Referencing what he considered to be contradictory scriptures on the subject, he proclaimed it to be an "irreconcilable paradox" and implied that an acceptance of that fact was adequate resolution in and of itself. Although I had beforehand highly valued this gentleman's seemingly keen insights into the Scriptures, I knew that this pertained to a subject far too important to be so easily dismissed. It is true that there are many things we finite creatures cannot know about the infinite mind, nature, and ways of God. They are too high for us. But God has revealed the things we are responsible to know. We are responsible to seek and to learn what God has revealed, especially the knowledge of salvation by His grace through Christ.¹ Since faith (believing the record God has given of His Son) is a true evidence of salvation, then it follows that we must know something in order to believe it. Faith must have an object. We must and can know the essence of God's Gospel wherein His righteousness is revealed. If we were unable to reconcile our own contradictory thoughts regarding the very work of Christ necessary for salvation, then it would be impossible to know God as He is revealed to those He saves.²

So what now? If you're determined to seek and find God's truth, then it's imperative that you resolve that which at first seems contradictory. My experience has been that those who are unwilling to work at reconciling contradictory positions tend to cling to the status quo, simply assuming anything to the contrary to be in error. That is especially true for the subject at hand. For you to even entertain the idea that you could be mistaken as to your eternal state is equivalent to embarking on an internal warfare with yourself. Remember, I'm your friend and it's likely you'll need one if you're to do battle with your archenemy – yourself. With eternity at stake, it's worth the effort! Let's charge ahead.

¹ Deut 29:29; Psa 139:6; Rom 11:33; Eph 1:9; 2 Tim 3:15

² Jn 17:3

Addressing Common Objections

In this chapter I will address many of the common objections that I've encountered over the years. I'll show how some of these are illogical and amount to nothing more than disingenuous excuses used to dismiss the subject. More importantly, I've also listed some very real and legitimate concerns that naturally surface. I personally had to wrestle with many of these objections to a point of resolution in my own quest for the truth. I suspect that you too may identify with at least some of these.

It would be impossible for me to anticipate every objection or obstacle that you might raise. Some related issues have already been addressed in earlier sections of the book and I will refer you back to those sections to avoid unnecessary repetition. Given that fact, and for the sake of brevity, I have not exhaustively addressed each specific objection. Some objections warranted lengthier commentary than others; nevertheless, I do hope that you find all of the responses sufficient to demonstrate that your conflicting views are not irreconcilable, but to the contrary, there are reasonable answers that truly add up. Granted, further study beyond my abbreviated remarks may be necessary for you to resolve fully all of your objections; however, my aim is at least to prompt further consideration by you. I know that you too will ultimately discover that it all adds up if you earnestly and objectively continue in your search for the truth.

Some of these objections may not be personal concerns of yours. Although I encourage you to read this entire chapter, you may opt to only read that which is directly applicable to you. For this reason and to assist your navigation through this lengthy chapter, I've listed below all 18 objections to be addressed in the pages to follow:

Objection #1: We actually agree – p.141

Objection #2: That would mean <so-and-so> is lost! – p.143

Objection #3: I believe in Jesus, not a doctrine – p.146

- Objection #4: The “Love” Argument – p.149
- Objection #5: Judge Not! – p.152
- Objection #6: An Excuse to Sin – p.155
- Objection #7: I know my conversion was “real” – p.159
- Objection #8: How could so many be wrong? – p.161
- Objection #9: What about Obedience and Good Works? – p.164
- Objection #10: God would not judge those who have never heard the Gospel – p.178
- Objection #11: Your doctrine would mean God is unfair – p.181
- Objection #12: The Holy Spirit enabled me to meet God’s requirement for salvation – p.189
- Objection #13: If it’s predestined, then why bother? – p.191
- Objection #14: You make knowledge a condition – p.195
- Objection #15: Scriptures that (seem to) indicate Christ died for all – p.198
- Objection #16: I insist that I was born again, even while misunderstanding Christ’s work – p.208
- Objection #17: One may evidence their salvation through belief in the gospel while ignorant of what Christ accomplished – p.211
- Objection #18: Still was converted – I just didn’t consider these things – p.215

Objection #1: We actually agree

- *We actually agree on most things. We're simply traveling on different roads to the same endpoint.*

I have heard some version of this response many times from friends who still adhere to that which, in repentance, I've actually renounced. This is most consistent with the "I'm okay, you're okay" mindset so prevalent today. Some of the kindest people will go to extremes for the sake of unity, even to the extreme of forsaking truth and reality. God's Word makes it clear that there are not "different roads," but rather only one way to heaven. The road most traveled is broad, but as the Scriptures point out, it leads to destruction.¹ Having never heard the Gospel wherein Christ's righteousness is revealed, many genuinely believe that most religious folks (at least all who call themselves "Christian") are actually in agreement on the vital issues pertaining to eternal life, independent of the doctrine they hold. In light of the fact that most religions believe in a higher power, a god whose favor is gained and whose wrath is appeased based upon some condition or requirement met by the sinner, it's surprising that the presumed umbrella of spiritual brotherhood among religionists isn't considered even broader.

Most of this book, and particularly Part III, points out the difference between God's Gospel and mainstream religion, including today's popular brand of "Christianity." In particular, Chapter 12 should show many of my friends that although we are on different roads, the destinations are not the same. That is, the religion of works and the religion of grace are mutually exclusive – they do not agree. Sadly, I suspect that this "we actually agree" response is sometimes less than genuine. That is, it's not that they fail necessarily to recognize the stark difference, but rather it's simply an excuse to dismiss the subject because of their unwillingness to confront the reality for whatever reason. To these I can only repeat the numerous encouragements throughout the book to evaluate objectively these differences because they do matter, the consequences being

¹ Matt 7:13-14; Jn 14:6

eternal. Your friend issues this urgent appeal: Don't dismiss this concern for your welfare as if it is invalid without checking into it further.

Objection #2: That would mean <so-and-so> is lost!

- *If what you said is true, then that would mean_____ <fill in the blank> is lost and if anyone is saved, he (or she) is.*
- *If it was good enough for my daddy <or fill in the blank>, it's good enough for me.*
- *You're saying I'm lost and I do not wish to discuss it further*
- *You're saying that I and my friends (or family) are all going to hell and I'm becoming angry – I'll hear no more!*

One of the strongest emotional obstacles that we must confront when considering the truth of the Gospel comes from a consideration of its implications on the state of others whom we hold dear. I know such was the case for me. It is particularly heartbreaking when this discovery forces a reassessment of the state of a departed loved one. Inevitably, when someone begins to understand and seriously consider God's Gospel, His way of salvation, particular loved ones spring to mind – a loved one we know to have been ignorant of the Gospel knowledge God reveals to all He saves, the knowledge of God as a just God and a Savior based solely upon Christ's righteousness imputed. This disturbing assault on our emotions may ultimately rob and undermine the comfort we once enjoyed, the solace of having considered one's eternal place in heaven secured. This is no small obstacle and one that we will not overcome apart from saving grace. As unsettling as this may be, my prayer is that it will not deter your objective pursuit of the truth.

The Scriptures themselves tell us to expect this sort of emotional cost that accompanies God-given faith and repentance. God, through His revealed Word, never said that it was easy.¹ Why would anyone want to draw conclusions with such sad implications? I certainly did not! The answer lies in God's work of grace in the giving of spiritual life. In spiritual birth, a new principle is imparted that puts a regard for God's honor and

¹ Matt 10:34-38;

glory above all else – so much so that we will rest in God’s truth, independent of the consequences and implications, even as it applies to those we cherish most. One of the basic sinful principles that characterize sinful man is self-love. The dearest of loved ones, one’s own self, will also rebel at the suggestion of being lost. I have witnessed firsthand the anger that follows when one discovers that, “If what you’re saying is true, then I am lost.”

If we are to seek the truth objectively, then we must examine the defective reasoning reflected in this sort of out of hand dismissal. It is true that if (1) we know with a certainly that someone is saved, justified before God, and (2) furthermore, we know that they were either ignorant of the doctrine in question or considered it to be invalid, then it would follow that the body of truth, the doctrine, would not constitute essential knowledge revealed by God-given faith as I have asserted. In other words, if there is any basis for accurately judging someone to be saved who is either ignorant of, or not submitted to, Christ’s righteousness imputed as their only ground and basis for salvation, then that would prove this entire book to be based upon an erroneous premise. The operative word in such reasoning is “if.” The reasoning falls apart if the premise is false.

So how do we know if the premise that a particular individual can be considered among the saved is accurate or not? That’s what this book is about. It relates the standard set forth in God’s Word by which He judges saved and lost so that we might adopt this true standard of judgment as our own (Refer to Chapter 3). Upon what basis do you conclude that you or someone else is saved and destined for heaven? God’s Word says that we determine this by whether or not they abide in the doctrine of Christ.¹ Your dad, mom, a grandparent, or someone else for whom you have the utmost regard is not the standard. Do you see how unreasonable it would be to discredit the very doctrine that identifies whether one is saved or not by such a presupposition? An honest, objective consideration of these truths requires that you weigh them against the standard of truth – God’s Word,

¹ 2 Jn 9

not by jumping to the conclusion as the premise for your determination. Actually, one who responds in this way has not really made any judgment at all as to the validity of what has been asserted in this book. A more honest answer would probably show that in light of the implications, they simply refuse to examine it any further.

I know that this response is sometimes given in anger. Although I've never told anyone that they or their friends were going to hell, I have been accused of such. In anger, I'm sure that's what they thought they heard as they realized the implications of what I was saying regarding their current state. It is true of many of my friends that they, like me in years past, are on the road to destruction; however, I hope and pray that they too shall prove to be objects of God's saving grace by coming to hear and believe God's Gospel. Such an angry response clouds our ability to listen and objectively consider opposing views. This is a testimony to the sinful principle of religious pride that God overcomes in drawing sinners to Himself. Over the years, I have attempted to discuss the Gospel with some whose objective, logical, deductive reasoning abilities I hold in high esteem; yet when it comes to discussing the issue of the Gospel, these attributes seem to evaporate. They stubbornly refuse to give it any consideration, basing their dismissal upon this same faulty and illogical premise – totally inconsistent with the way they evaluate other things. This phenomenon demonstrates how God-given faith is not at all a product of one's intellectual or reasoning abilities, but rather underscores that none will come to the true Christ of the Bible unless God draws them and gives them spiritual life. In the Scripture, we learn that God always draws His elect by the very Gospel message some refuse even to consider.¹

¹ 2 Thess 2:13-14

Objection #3: I believe in Jesus, not a doctrine.

- *I'll leave all that doctrine for the theologians to figure out. All I know is that I'm simply trusting in Jesus.*
- *I believe in a Person, Jesus Christ, not a doctrine.*
- *You make it too complicated.*

What does it mean to simply trust in Jesus? Admittedly, those who are saved trust in Jesus, but which one? The Bible says that there are many counterfeits.¹ The identity of the true Christ is discovered in doctrine. That's how we distinguish the true Jesus from all counterfeits. To illustrate, I ask, "Is your Jesus truly God?" Most of my friends would answer in the affirmative, having embraced this accurate concept of Christ because of doctrine – the doctrine of His deity. We know Jesus Christ by the doctrine of Christ. I refer you to Chapter 9, "The Glory of God," where I discussed at length how our knowledge of God is derived from observing and learning of that which He has done – His work. Also, in Chapter 10, I addressed how an accurate knowledge of Christ requires an understanding of that which He accomplished – His work of redemption.

In short, the Person of Christ and the work of Christ cannot be separated. His Person and His work were both absolutely necessary for righteousness to be established. As expounded upon in Chapter 10, to be ignorant of this work of righteousness is to be lost, not trusting in Jesus at all. To discredit doctrine is to reject that which God's Word says is necessary. To claim that we can believe in Jesus based upon some mere mystical view of Him apart from the doctrinal truth that identifies Him is heresy. The Bible instructs us to look to Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. It tells us to look to Jesus, as sent by God the Father as the One who merits our entire salvation by His finished work on the cross.² Elsewhere the Scriptures tell us to look to Him as the Messiah, the Lord our righteousness. All of the prophecies and types of the Old Testament identify Him as the Son of God incarnate who would establish an everlasting

¹ Matt 24:23-24; 2 Cor 11:4

² Jn 17:3-4; Heb 12:2

righteousness of infinite value by His obedience unto death.¹ If we believe God's Word, this should readily settle this objection.

I usually find this sort of protest to be nothing more than a crude diversionary tactic. After all, one who "simply trusts in Jesus" must have some concept of this "Jesus" in whom they trust. That concept of the Christ they trust in, whatever it is, makes up their doctrine. Although they may consider God's Gospel, as related herein, as a deep doctrine reserved for theologians, they too believe in a doctrine – just not this one. Upon examination, I think you can see how this response is often simply a convenient excuse to avoid the effort of giving further consideration. Do not make this mistake. The Scriptures are clear that all who enter heaven will come by faith – a Spirit revealed knowledge of God.² That knowledge consists of doctrine that even a child can understand.

As to the charge that it's too complicated and something better left to theologians, I refer you to Chapter 11 where I dealt with this common misconception. There, in discussing my "good guys – but not so religious" friends, I referred to the "baggage" of our preconceived notions and how this masked the simplicity of God's Gospel. The Bible is very candid about this baggage we bring into our consideration of these things, referring to it as a "darkness" which doesn't comprehend the "light" – specifically, the light of the Gospel and God's redemptive glory.³ The Scriptures teach that all, before the knowledge of Christ in truth, tote this same baggage, even the wisest among us. In our natural state, these powers of "darkness" (self-love, self-righteousness, and religious pride) keep us from understanding and receiving the "light" of truth.⁴ But it isn't that it is too complicated to understand. Rather we cannot come to God simply because we will not, not because of an intellectual deficiency but rather a spiritual one.

¹ Isa 9:6-7; Jer 23:5-6; Dan 9:24-27

² Jn 17:3; Rom 1:16-17

³ Jn 1:5

⁴ 1 Cor 2:12-14

The Bible tells us we naturally hate this “light” that reveals and exposes our deeds and ourselves as evil.¹ This “light” excludes the concept of establishing any merit before God based upon our very best efforts. So, in response, we naturally love and cling to the “darkness” that allows us to count others and ourselves spiritually alive and in fellowship with God, even while we were ignorant of (or not submitted to) the righteousness of God in Christ. No, it isn’t that it’s too complicated. Rather, as fallen creatures, we just hate any “light” that would show us otherwise.

¹ Jn 3:19-20

Objection #4: The “Love” Argument

- *I know much of what you say is true, but I can't go that far with it (to repentance) because it seems unloving, inconsistent with the spirit of “love” towards others that God commands*
- *I don't gain a sense of the love of God or the accompanying fruits of the Holy Spirit from your doctrine.*

This response is most often heard from friends who, upon counting the cost, decided it was a little (or a lot) too steep. To the natural man, a true Christian's refusal to compromise the Gospel is often sincerely viewed just this way – as unloving. This view is derived from a subjective perspective of the love of God, i.e. – based upon that which we want to hear. Conversely, the objective definition of the love of God unveiled by the Scriptures is tied to that which we need to hear. In God's Word, love is always inflexibly connected to truth.¹ Objectively, we know that the medical doctor who relates the true though unwelcome news of a serious diagnosis is not motivated to do so because he is unloving (Refer to Chapter 1). Likewise, when we adopt God's strict standard of judgment, we discover the peril that awaits any who do not possess that righteousness equal to Christ's Himself. Convinced of the terror awaiting any who are void of this righteousness, in love we seek to persuade them² and, consequently, often suffer, at least to some extent, what the Bible calls the “offence of the cross.” Christ Himself was hated because He declared that the world's very best efforts at religion were actually evil deeds to be repented of. So it is with those who, convinced of God's Gospel, follow Him.³

In Chapter 2, I related some of my own personal history and the rejection that followed my early efforts at warning my friends. As I explained, genuine love actually demands that we

¹ 1 Cor 13:4-6

² 2 Cor 5:11a

³ Jn 3:19-20; 7:7; 15:18-16:3; Gal 5:11

share what may be unwelcome news with those we care about.¹ Unfortunately, the vast majority doesn't recognize this as love. Instead, promoting Satan's lie by reassuring someone of his or her false hope (refer to Chapter 6) is what many consider to be an expression of love. Obviously, if they were convinced by God of the certainties of His judgment in righteousness, they too would be compelled to act accordingly. This is why this ultimate manifestation of true Christian love is unrecognizable to the lost masses.

I think that some simply hide behind the "love argument" to justify their rejection of what they otherwise know makes sense. They are determined to avoid the associated cost. In applying God's standard, one quickly sees that alignment with that strict standard would require that he change his assessment of others – and that's admittedly quite a burden. Many who claim to agree with the doctrine of Christ and God's Gospel simply refuse to abide in it. Lacking initial repentance, they reveal their lack of love for the truth.² This position allows them to escape the offense and "lovingly" speak comfort to others. On this subject, Abraham Booth (1734 – 1806) wrote:

"He, indeed, who pretends to be a friend to revealed truth, but is cool and indifferent to its honour [*sic*] and interest; whose extensive charity is such, that he can allow those who widely differ from him in the capital articles of the Christian faith, to be safe in their own way; may enjoy his peculiar sentiments without much fear of disturbance. But though such conduct may be applauded, under a false notion of Christian candour [*sic*], and of a catholic spirit; though it may be the way to maintain a friendly intercourse among multitudes whose leading sentiments are widely different; yet it will be deemed, by the God of truth, as deserving no better name, than a *joint opposition* to the spirit and design of his gospel. For such a timid and lukewarm profession of truth is little better than a denial of it – than open

¹ Prov 27:5-6; Gal 4:16

² 2 Thess 2:9-10; 2 Jn 9

hostility against it. To seek for peace at the expense of truth, will be found in the end, no other than a wicked conspiracy against both God and man. Such, however, as love the truth, will boldly declare against all its counterfeits, and every deviation from it: and, whatever may be the consequence, they will say with him of old: *Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel, let him be accursed.*”¹

¹ Gal 1:8

Objection #5: Judge Not!

- *You should be ashamed for making such judgments concerning the spiritual state of well-intentioned “Christians.”*
- *The Bible says, “Judge not” and I find your doctrine far too judgmental.*

This objection deliberately avoids addressing the vital doctrinal differences that I’m asking you to consider in this book. Instead of evaluating the assertions in light of God’s testimony, it dismisses out of hand any consideration under the premise that, “you must be wrong because you are willing to make judgments and draw conclusions based upon one’s doctrinal views.” Usually this objection is accompanied by the implication that such judgments and distinctions are “mean spirited” and sinfully in opposition to God’s command to “judge not.” Perhaps many forget the Bible’s account of Christ Himself telling the religious leaders of His day that they were “of their father the devil” or the biblical account of Stephen telling his religious audience that they were lost, having resisted God just as their fathers had.¹ Surely one wouldn’t suggest that the spotless Son of God was likewise sinfully mean spirited.

This accusation is often backed by one of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible, ***Matt 7:1-2 – “Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.”*** Many will use this to assert that God forbids all judgment; however, if examined in context, we discover further along in the very same chapter that this is a false interpretation of the verse. Consider that in vs. 15 Christ warns them to “beware of false prophets” and that we “shall know them by their fruits.”² If we are to heed this command, it follows that we must make a judgment. The Bible is full of similar warnings and commands to be on the alert, identify, and reject the many false prophets, counterfeit christs, and counterfeit gospels that are to be found in

¹ Jn 8:44; Acts 7:51-53

² Matt 7:15-16

the world.¹

In *John 7:24* we are commanded: “***Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.***” Just as this verse also commands us not to judge by outward appearance, it also commands us to judge – to “judge righteous judgment.” To do this, we must judge according to truth. Being sinners, the only way we can judge righteously then is to judge according to God’s truth. As I stated in Chapter 2, this book assumes that you believe in the Bible as the revelation of God and standard for truth. This truth is doctrine.²

So what is the proper interpretation of “Judge not” in Matthew 7? By interpreting scripture with scripture, and in context, we see that the issue is the standard by which we judge. The passage is warning us not to judge by outward appearance, revealing that by whatever standard we judge others, we shall also be judged. Do you see the implications of this as it pertains to the most important judgment of all – the one regarding your own state and eternal destiny? If we fail to adopt God’s standard of judgment (See Chapter 3), Christ’s perfect righteousness, then by whatever standard we judge others, we too shall be judged. So any who judge salvation to be conditioned upon something done by, or through the sinner, in turn, shall be judged accordingly.³ Based on God’s strict, holy requirements of perfection, (See Chapter 4), I am certainly glad that someone showed me that my salvation wasn’t conditioned upon my own personal character and conduct because I don’t want to be judged accordingly, based on that which proceeds from me, a sinner.

Judging is not the issue, and most who use this argument are not thinking but rather reacting to the offensiveness of the Gospel message itself. As I mentioned in Chapter 15, if we are to complete our search for truth, we will enter a spiritual warfare of sorts with ourselves. It is not to be taken lightly and it can be distressing – drawing out our natural hostility. The Bible teaches

¹ Matt 24:24; 2 Cor 11:4; Gal 1:6-8; 1 Jn 4:1-2

² 2 Jn 9

³ Matt 7:2; Rom 2:1-3

that such animosity springs from the Gospel exposing that those very things we naturally consider good and by which we judge our state, are actually evil in God's sight, revealing a diametrically opposed standard of judgment.¹

If we're honest, we must concede that we all judge all things. If we exercise faith of any kind, it must have some object – we must believe “something.” Whatever this “something” is, we have judged it to be true and its antithesis to be false. If from the world's smorgasbord of religion, we conclude any one religion to be doctrinally accurate or, conversely, any to be doctrinally false, then we have made a judgment. Do you claim to be a Christian? If so, then you have made a judgment. Do you conclude that anyone is not a Christian? If so, again you have made a judgment. Right now, you are judging what I've written to be true or false, and so it should be. I've encountered some who stop short in their examination of the vital doctrinal issues at hand because they refuse to align themselves with that which is so offensive to the natural mind. They cry, “Judge not,” as if refusing to make any judgment is a badge of honor, reflecting their love and humility towards others, in sharp contrast to mine.

I hope that you see how irrational this objection is since, in reality, we all judge. I've often suspected that, in many cases, the honest expression of this objection would sound more like, “Don't judge me” or “Don't judge those I know and care about.” No matter what your thoughts might be, my desire is that you will objectively continue to seek God's truth, undeterred by man's natural aversion to God's way, His truth, and His standard.

To summarize, judging is not the issue here. The critical issue is the standard by which we judge. Before hearing God's true Gospel, our standard of judgment is fatally flawed. In the Gospel itself, that standard is revealed. We discover that we must possess a perfect righteousness that we are unable to produce. As God commands, “judge righteous judgment.”²

¹ Jn 3:19-20; Lk 16:15

² Jn 7:24

Objection #6: An Excuse to Sin

- *This doctrine seems to be nothing more than an excuse to sin.*

Based upon the “works” mentality that characterizes most of religion, this is a reasonable assumption. Why, what motive could any have to obey God and avoid sin if it has no bearing whatsoever on their state before God? In our natural state of spiritual darkness, our entire perspective on things is derived from our continuance in a spiritual economy of reward and punishment based upon conditions or requirements that we do or do not meet. The carrot (reward) and the stick (punishment) are as much in effect in most religious circles as it is in our everyday lives. Our entire secular way of life is significantly motivated by mercenary hopes of reward and legal fears of negative consequences. In the realm of religion the same is true for most. We are predominantly motivated by legalistic encouragements to earn our salvation and reward before God. Most have no real grasp of the Gospel concept of an unearned, spiritual inheritance (grace).¹ Based on the flawed supposition that salvation is conditioned to some degree on us, it would only make sense to think that our efforts to obey God and avoid sin would have some impact on our standing before Him.

Now someone comes along who embraces and promotes the religion of grace, salvation conditioned on Christ alone. Knowing that God hates sin and commands us not to sin, we naturally conclude that this person must be in error. We reason that the effect of this grace (as defined herein) would rob us of any motivation to obey God – that if our personal character and conduct had no bearing whatsoever on our standing before God, then all restraints would be taken away. This is equivalent to concluding that grace itself would be a license to sin.

But, God’s grace is not portrayed this way in the Scriptures. To the contrary, we learn that one who receives God’s grace also

¹ Rom 8:16-17; Gal 3:29; 4:6-7; Eph 1:11; Col 1:12; 3:24; Titus 3:4-7; Heb 9:15; 1 Pet 1:3-4

receives the desire to obey God. In true spiritual conversion, our desires to obey are not eradicated – only our former self-righteous, legal motives. The desire to obey God is no longer driven by the legal or mercenary motives that prompted all previous efforts at obedience. Instead, the one to whom God has been gracious is given a sincere desire to obey God from a spirit of adoption, in gratitude for what God, his Father, has done for him.¹

As self-righteous sinners, our legalism is so well entrenched; it is difficult to relate to this, especially for those involved in religion. With years of operating experience in a world where our own good performance affects our well being (and vice-versa), we naturally apply these same operating principles to our religious world. Sadly, most of organized religion the world over encourages no less. We can understand how love and gratitude could be a motive; however, before genuine faith and repentance, it's just not part of our reality.

Unfortunately, any bad behavior from one who professes belief of the true Gospel only fuels such erroneous thinking – seeming to substantiate the accusation that “your version of grace is nothing more than an excuse to sin.” In the Old Testament, the Prophet Nathan alerted King David, a true child of God, of this impact. He told David how his gross misconduct had given the enemies of the Lord great occasion to “blaspheme” God. He told David of the consequences that he would suffer in this life for his sin, but only after having assured him that his sins were still not charged to him, a redeemed sinner whose eternal life was secure in Christ, the promised Messiah.²

How then could the enemies of God use David's sin as an occasion to “blaspheme” God? David's bad behavior simply provided fuel for their self-righteous judgments. They could naturally judge that there is nothing to his God or the gospel he professed if such immorality was its byproduct. David's sin was wrong and regretfully fanned the flames of the self-righteous

¹ Rom 7:6

² 2 Sam 12:13-14

enemies of God. But, unlike God's enemies, David was not charged with his sins. David had righteousness imputed to him.¹ Two wrongs don't make a right. These enemies, by the occasion of seeing a professor of God's Gospel sin, may have gained a sense of vindication. But as for me, I'd much rather stand before God as David did, having the righteousness Christ would produce as my own, than feel vindicated in my continuance as an enemy of God, in opposition to the true and living God.

Granted, disobedience and immoral acts, including those committed by true believers such as David, are acts of sin. These acts are God-displeasing manifestations of the remaining sinful principles that we all retain as long as we live on this earth. A recipient of God's saving grace, regardless of his sins, is free indeed – free from the guilt and defilement of sin as an object of God's mercy. However, God's Word makes it clear – to exploit the freedom of grace, using it as an excuse to sin, is a perversion.² To be free in Christ is not freedom to sin, but rather freedom to serve God acceptably – an impossibility for even the most moral among us as long as we remain enslaved to sin, continuing to imagine that salvation is in some way (or to some degree) conditioned upon that which we do or don't do.³

The Apostle Paul dealt with this same objection in answering the rhetorical question of whether or not we should sin more so that "grace may abound." Later in the same chapter he exhorts believers to avoid sin and bow to God's will in light of their new state of spiritual life in Christ, as those who are already victorious over sin, based upon the work of their substitute Jesus Christ.⁴ In other words, those convinced of the Gospel of God's grace are motivated to obey God and avoid sin because they are already dead to the guilt and defilement of sin, their sins having been imputed or charged to Christ who put them away by His shed blood on the cross. So convinced, they realize that their sins have no further bearing on their standing as justified sinners,

¹ Rom 4:6-8

² Rom 6:15-16; Gal 5:1, 13

³ Rom 6:17-18; 7:5; Heb 11:6

⁴ Rom 6:1-2, 11-15

declared not guilty before God. To summarize, God commands the adopted heirs of Christ to show their gratitude by acting worthy of their standing as justified sinners, based upon their oneness with Christ in the eyes of God's law and justice.¹

¹ Rom 12:1; Eph 4:1; 5:1-2

Objection #7: I know my conversion was “real”

- *I see that what you say is true according to the Scriptures, but I cannot and will not deny my previous experience. I know that it (my conversion experience and subsequent relationship with God) was real.*
- *I know that I’m saved, contrary to what you say, because I enjoy a relationship with the living God which I know is real – I feel it and sense it daily. When you’re saved – you know it*

All of us have experiences, feelings, and emotions that are real. These cannot be denied. Before I had even heard the Gospel of God’s grace, I too “knew” that I was saved and I sincerely believed that I communed with God in prayer, that I truly knew Him and that I was heaven bound. I now know that I was sadly mistaken. That does not mean that my emotions, feelings, and zeal for my religious beliefs were any less sincere or “real” than they are today. In fact, if my experience, feelings, and sincerity were the standards by which I judged the validity of my former “gospel” against that which I believe today, I might as well flip a coin to decide. My religious experiences were just as real to me prior to 1985 as they are today.

In bringing up this objection, my friends actually impugn and insult my integrity and character, whether intentional or not. Unwilling to entertain the idea that their very “real” experiences may have been misleading and based upon false assumptions, they simply assume that I only differ and forsook their religion because my experience at the time was something less – as in “not real.” They can only imagine that if I had felt in my heart what they had, I too would have known that, doctrinal differences aside, we were worshipping the true Christ. The implication is that I must have been insincere or “playing games,” only seeming to be equally zealous and one with them in my former beliefs. I know better. Accordingly, I do not doubt the sincerity or reality of the religious experiences and feelings of most of my friends because I know how “real” my own experiences were.¹

¹ Rom 10:1-3

Consider that the Islamic fundamentalist is also sincere. His experience is so real to him that he will commit suicide in an act of terror in the exercise of his faith. To my knowledge, none of my “Christian” friends would judge such religious beliefs to be valid based upon how “real” it all seemed to the terrorist martyr. I simply ask that you apply the same standard to yourself. Like the Islamic fundamentalist, I’m sure you’re inclined to regard your own experience as much different – and I’m sure it is. Nevertheless, how are you to know that you’re not likewise mistaken? The answer is easy. **If your experience is really of God, it should stand up to God’s testimony.** The entire message of this book is predicated upon God’s Word, the Bible, being the standard by which we shall judge truth. Our experiences are validated or invalidated by that standard, not vice-versa.

If one refuses to further examine his spiritual state because of the confidence he places in his experiences, emotions, or feelings, then he is effectively elevating experience above the standard of God’s Word. Consider that you and the Islamic fundamentalist both truly feel something in your hearts that causes you to feel secure before your god. The Bible tells us that before genuine God-given faith, the heart is desperately wicked.¹ It stands to reason then that it would be foolish for anyone to determine the truth according to what they felt in their “desperately wicked” heart. In salvation we have a change of heart, no doubt, but that change occurs as God’s truth is heard and believed.² We must test our experiences by His Word and not the other way around. The Bible states clearly that whosoever “believeth” the Gospel shall be saved.³ It does not say that whosoever “feeleth” saved shall be. The Scriptures are ripe with examples of those who fully expected salvation only to discover their hope was a false one. Do not be found in their number.

¹ Jer 17:9-10; Jn 16:8-9

² Jn 8:32

³ Mk 16:15-16

Objection #8: How could so many be wrong?

- *I cannot believe that so many good, sincere, religious people could be so wrong or lost.*
- *I cannot believe that so many religious leaders and theologians for whom I have such great respect could be mistaken – men much wiser and more educated than you.*

I have often asked myself this question. Could it be that God has providentially opened the eyes of only a few to see something to which countless others seem oblivious and often even refuse to examine? Over the years, this recurring question has served as a growth catalyst for my assurance and confidence in the faith. You'll recall that at the beginning of this section, I asked that you not blindly concur with me by simply setting aside or ignoring the obstacles, but rather that you meet the objections head-on and deal with them. I know that I would not naturally choose the road less traveled, in opposition to the vast majority of mainstream religion, were it not for the clear, irrefutable truths from God's Word that lead me there. When confronted with the fact of how few seem to be in agreement with me, I am prompted to reexamine the fundamentals of my faith. In so doing, I emerge with even greater assurance and confidence, seeing how God's way of salvation, based on the imputed righteousness of God in Christ, must be so if God is to be glorified, if Christ is to be exalted, if grounds for boasting are to be excluded from the sinner, and if God's Word is indeed consistent and true.

I ask that you consider the following:

- (1) Do you believe the Word of God?
- (2) Is the Word of God the standard by which you determine His truth – including His way of salvation?

Most of my friends would answer, "Yes" to the first two questions. Assuming you concur, then –

- (3) Could you believe the Gospel set forth in this book if I could prove that this was God's way of salvation, His standard of judgment, revealed in His Word, the Bible?

Before you answer "yes" to the third question, consider the ramifications. Such a finding would be accompanied by an unsettling discovery concerning many, even most, of the good, sincere, and religiously well-educated people held in such high esteem by so many people. What you would discover is that most are tragically on the path that leads to destruction – believing and promoting error of eternal consequence. Will you seek to determine the truth based upon God's Word or will you stop short your search in fear of the ramifications and consequences that would accompany such a conclusion? If you can honestly answer "yes" to all three of these questions, then I have every reason to believe that you will find the basic Gospel principles set forth in this book to be derived from and totally consistent with God's Word.

If, as this objection hints, one were so inclined to determine the truth based upon the number of adherents, then I'd suggest that some of my friends would need to begin to consider some of the other non-Christian based religions so prevalent in today's world. I think this fact points out that it isn't that we have difficulty in accepting that so many could be wrong, but rather that so many whom we know and esteem could be wrong. A quick study of biblical history reveals that false preachers have always vastly outnumbered God's preachers. If we lived in the days of Noah or Isaiah, we would certainly have gone astray if we fell prey to the "herd mentality." As the Scriptures attest, their religion, God's religion, was anything but popular. The Bible tells us that many follow the broad spiritual path that leads to destruction while few find the narrow way that leads to eternal life.¹ Though this is a scriptural truth, there is no suggestion that the standard for determining the truth is to be measured by the number of adherents. To those who struggle with the obscurity of God's Gospel among today's popular religions, I've often countered that if we were going to determine which version of so-called

¹ Matt 7:13-14

“Christianity” is valid based upon its popularity, we would do well to locate and identify with the most obscure, least popular group around, given the biblical assertion of how few shall find the narrow road to heaven. In reality, God’s Word is the standard for truth, and there we find His way of salvation, based upon the righteousness of Christ freely imputed and graciously revealed God-given faith.

Objection #9: What about Obedience and Good Works?

- *What about our obedience and good works?*
- *Doesn't the Bible say that our works are evidences of our faith?*
- *If I believed as you, there would be no motive for obedience as the Scriptures command.*

The Bible proclaims that the good works and obedience of a believer are indeed outward evidences that his or her profession of faith is genuine. Where there is no such evidence, we can only conclude by God's testimony that the faith is "dead."¹ At the same time, the Bible exposes that the same outward manifestations of good works among many moral, kind, well intentioned, and sincere religionists are considered by God to be evil. One person visits the sick, gives to the needy, leads a moral life, and generally strives to do that which is right and consistent with God's will. God views this one's efforts as good works, acceptable and pleasing unto God. Another does the exact same: visits the sick, gives to the needy, leads a moral life, and generally strives to do that which is right and consistent with God's will. God views this one's works as evil. What gives?²

Our tendency is to evaluate whether our deeds and actions are good or evil based upon our natural conscience. For example, we all know that to murder or steal is wrong. Although God forbids these things, it takes no special revelation from God for us to discover that gross misconduct or acts of immorality are sinful. Conversely, we know that God commands acts of kindness and compassion and that these are inherently good. What we do not naturally realize is that God's standard of judgment regarding our deeds goes far beyond these outward manifestations of our conduct. This gets to the heart of the issue – our motive for obedience.

According to our natural way of thinking, we object to the notion that our standing or state before God isn't affected to

¹ James 2:14-26

² Lk 16:15; Rom 7:4-5

some degree by our character and conduct. As self-righteous sinners, we know that our primary incentive to obey God would be removed if we bought into the idea that our character and conduct had no bearing on our standing before God. Such reasoning clearly proves how self-centered and consumed with self-love we all are by nature. From our sinful perspective we naturally conclude, “If my obedience actually has no bearing upon my acceptance before God, then I am left with no valid motive to even try to obey God.” And this is a reasonable conclusion in light of the religion of man, (the “religion of works” – See Chapter 12), which typically majors on trying to motivate sinners to sin less by working upon fallen man’s natural feelings of guilt, fear of punishment and death, and his natural mercenary desire for gain and reward. (See Objection #6). Such an emphasis only serves to strengthen our sinful resolve to establish a righteousness of our own. God calls such widely respected efforts evil and “fruit unto death.”

So what makes the difference? How can we identify whether or not our deeds are good (“fruit unto God”) or evil (“fruit unto death”)?¹ The Bible teaches:

1. That our standing before God (justified or condemned) determines if our deeds are good or evil.²
2. That our ultimate spiritual state in this life (spiritually alive or dead) exposes our standing before God.³
3. That our spiritual state is evidenced by the presence or absence of true, God-given faith and repentance.⁴
4. That the validity of our faith is revealed by the ground or basis of our hope for salvation as set forth in the gospel doctrine we believe.⁵

¹ Rom 7:4-5

² Eph 1:3-6; 2:10

³ Lk 6:43-45; Jn 1:12-13; 6:37-40

⁴ Mk 16:15-16; Lk 13:3; Jn 3:14-18; Acts 17:30; Rom 10:13; Heb 11:6;

2 Jn 9-11

⁵ Rom 1:16-17; 3:20-28; 10:1-4; Phil 3:9

5. That our gospel doctrine (grace or works) is reflected in our motive for obedience.¹
6. That the motive behind our deeds then serves as an identifying characteristic as to whether our deeds are good or evil.²

From this we then see that all else pales in comparison to this main issue – **what is the ground of your salvation, the basis of your hope for eternal life?** God judges one's deeds of obedience as good if that one stands before Him as a sinner justified by the blood of Christ, having Christ's righteousness imputed to him. We can discern that someone is justified before God if his ground or basis for salvation is valid, in alignment with the one whose judgment matters, God Himself. (Refer to Chapter 10). If a person's hope is based solely upon the imputed righteousness of Christ, then he performs good works that are acceptable unto God, for he has been accepted based upon his oneness with Christ, his Substitute and Representative.³ With Christ's righteousness as the sole basis of his acceptance, his standing before God cannot be improved. This fact, when made known to a sinner by God-given faith, then makes void the mercenary and legal motives that would naturally inspire his efforts to obey.

These natural motives are replaced with a far nobler motive to obey God. The believing sinner now strives to perform many of the same deeds as does the moral, but lost, religionist – only now from a motive of grace and gratitude. He obediently acts, not in order that he might gain God's favor or remove His disfavor, but rather from a new principle of gratitude, as one who's standing before God cannot be improved. So we see that **our spiritual state also determines our motive** for obeying God. Therefore, it follows that **our motive for obeying God is an identifying characteristic of our spiritual state**. Based upon righteousness imputed, the justified sinner is truly one with Christ! A born again sinner discovers that those same efforts to

¹ Rom 4:3-6

² Rom 7:4-6

³ Jn 3:21; Eph 1:6

do that which was right prior to spiritual conversion, though outwardly praiseworthy among men, were an affront to a holy God in that they were placed in a position of rivalry with the work of Christ Himself, whose perfect righteousness alone has gained favor with God. He now sees these efforts as God does, as “dead works” to be repented of.¹

Notice that neither the quality nor quantity of any acts of obedience that we may perform has any bearing upon their acceptance before God as good. And this does not mean that a born again believer never sins for we all continually think and act contrary to God’s perfect revealed will. Consider King David, whom the Scriptures identify as a saved sinner, a “man after God’s own heart.”² Yet this born again sinner who could and did “bring forth fruit unto God”³ also could and did sin, even committing adultery and murder.⁴ So how could it be said that such a sinner as King David no longer brought forth what the Bible calls “fruit unto death?”⁵ It is because with God-given faith and repentance, David’s perspective and motive for obedience changed as he saw the necessity and certainty of his oneness with Christ, (the Messiah who was to come).

God had revealed to David that his sins could not condemn him and put him under the sentence of eternal death because he was justified before God by the sure and certain future cross work of his promised Messiah – possessing (by imputation) His perfect and unchangeable righteousness. Accordingly, the guilt or demerit of David’s sins was not charged to him, being charged to his Substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ, who would pay the debt due unto his sins and thereby put them away by the bloody sacrifice of Himself on the cross. So by blood-bought faith, David came to no longer find confidence in the flesh by seeking to gain or maintain God’s favor.⁶ In true God-given faith, his

¹ Gal 2:21; 5:1-5; Phil 3:7-9; Heb 9:14

² Acts 13:22

³ Rom 7:4

⁴ 2 Sam 12:9

⁵ Rom 7:4-5

⁶ Phil 3:3

confidence was not derived from his performance of works of obedience or from his abstention from the commission of sins. Rather he based his hope solely in the doing and dying of another – in the obedience unto death (the righteousness) of the promised Messiah.¹

But what about the one who may be moral according to man's standard, but according to God's standard his works are characterized as evil, "fruit unto death?"² This would refer to any who remain in spiritual darkness, still striving to establish their own righteousness. Of such, God refers to all of their best, sincere, moral, religious efforts as "dead works," an evil to be repented of.³ The motive for performing these works is legal and / or mercenary in that they are futile attempts at removing God's wrath or gaining His favor. So, it is the legal or mercenary motive behind such works that exposes such deeds to be "dead works" and evil in God's sight regardless of how highly esteemed they may appear before men.⁴

We all naturally know that dishonesty and immorality are wrong. But, before hearing and believing God's Gospel, we are deceived about those things we naturally consider to be good. (See Chapter 5 – re: "the sin that deceives us"). Only the light of the Gospel will expose this to us. So even those justified by Christ's blood at the cross of Calvary act in concert with this evil motive, undistinguishable from the condemned (the "children of wrath") until God is pleased to give them spiritual life and draw them unto Christ by His Gospel.⁵

So, rather than begging my friends to flee from immoral behavior, (behavior that most of them already know is opposed to God's commands), I feel it is far more critical to caution my friends to stay away from the religion of this world – a danger to which we are all naturally oblivious. There is nothing more

¹ Psa 32:1-2; 130:3-4; Rom 8:1; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:3

² Rom 7:5

³ Heb 9:14

⁴ Lk 16:15

⁵ Eph 2:1-3

deadly to our eternal well-being.¹ Consider again what God has engaged in His way of salvation, based on righteousness – the obedience and death of His Son. In light of that, we see that it is the highest form of pride, the highest reproach and insult to this holy, just, and righteous God, as well as the most blatant denial of Christ for any sinner to imagine that God would save him based on anything other than the righteousness of God, established by Christ alone. Anytime a person performs a moral or religious act while thinking it recommends him unto God or contributes to attaining or maintaining fellowship and favor with God, then he is bringing forth evil “fruit unto death.” These are those things that God says are highly esteemed by others, but an atrocity unto Him.² This is why I beg you, my friend, to avoid false religion and false gospels as you would avoid a deadly plague.

Given my religious upbringing, I am able to relate specific experiences in my own life to the deceptiveness of religion and the perverted emphasis it places on performing good works. In hindsight, I now clearly see how some of the very things from which I derived comfort, which I thought were good works of obedience, were in reality the evil fruit of a lost, spiritually dead sinner. Although most of my high school buddies would characterize me as a pretty normal, fun-loving teenager, I did have my religious side. I recall as a teenager being asked to deliver the Sunday morning message as part of a designated “youth day” at our church. In delivering my “sermon,” I majored on many of the principles and virtues I had been taught as a youth, lacing my message with numerous sports metaphors and exhorting my audience to “get in the game” for Christ rather than being a mere “spectator.” The cliché that formed the centerpiece of my message was, “I’d much rather see a sermon than hear one.” In future years I would hear other similar admonitions repeated such as, “You’re the only Bible some people read,” and “One act of obedience is better than a hundred sermons.”

It is true that we should practice what we preach, but don’t

¹ Matt 23:15

² Lk 16:15

be misled – God is pleased to draw His people to Christ by the means of their hearing and believing His Gospel.¹ Character and conduct, though important, can never take the place of the preached Gospel, for therein, not in our conduct, is His righteousness revealed. I now shudder at the religious pride that would suggest that others might be lead to Christ by watching and observing my life – my outward character and conduct – my works of obedience. This reminds me of the old hymn, “Let Others See Jesus in You.” As I’ve heard it said, “Why, when Christ walked on this earth they didn’t even see Jesus in Jesus!” I had the audacity to suggest that this, our efforts to obey God, was what it was all about. I remember being congratulated (or perhaps patronized) for delivering such an inspirational message and I’m sure I gained some comfort from having “done something for the Lord.” But my friend, that was not the Lord of the Bible, but a counterfeit. My presumably stirring message was anything but “good” in God’s sight. It was evil.

To cite another example, one of the largest protestant churches in my area was involved in a major fund raising drive to build a new sanctuary. In one of their televised services, I listened as the pastor appealed to his congregation to give sacrificially, suggesting that they imagine what it would be like to face God at the judgment knowing they hadn’t given all they could give – hadn’t done all they could do. He elaborated on this, pointing out that simply giving a lot wasn’t the issue – but rather suggesting that they would be judged by whether they had given all that was possible. Admittedly, I find most of today’s religion a little more subtle than this in disguising their religion of works under the cloak of grace. The implication of his message was clear – that God’s standard of judgment would be your works. I wanted to ask, “Just how much do you think it would take to buy God?” Though usually more cleverly disguised, this is the essence of today’s legalistic religion in which salvation is presumed to be conditioned on the sinner, not on the Savior whose name is so deviously invoked to camouflage their works-based doctrine. I could write an entire book of such examples, but the concept promoted by the religion of works is always the

¹ Rom 10:13-14; 1 Cor 1:21

same – salvation conditioned (at least in some way or to some degree) on the sinner.

I hope you're beginning to see the standard by which God judges our "fruit" or works – whether good or evil. Using the two examples above, it would seem to be a virtue, not a vice, to encourage others to practice what they preach and to give sacrificially. This would seem to be "good fruit," yet when we adopt God's standard, we discover this to be rotten fruit – evil in God's sight. Why – because it promotes the legal or mercenary motive that would prompt you, the sinner, to consider your "good" deed in rivalry with the only righteousness by which any sinner can be found accepted before a holy God – the perfect righteousness of Christ.

The scripture reminds us that we cannot gather figs from thorns or grapes from a bramble bush. We have to look at the tree or bush – the source of the fruit. We see that "good" comes from the "good treasure" of a good man's heart. Likewise, "evil" comes from the "evil treasure" of an evil man's heart. The Bible goes on to say that we can know what someone's heart (the mind, the affections, and will) treasures and values by what they say – that is, what they believe – their doctrine.¹ Here is how we examine the spiritual state. Remember, the basis for our hope, our ground of salvation, identifies our state – saved or lost. The Bible tells us that in true conversion, we change from being "servants of sin" to being "servants of righteousness."² We are still servants, still working, still striving to obey, but our spiritual state is different, and this is evidenced by a change in what we believe – our doctrine. When our spiritual state changes, so does our motive to obey.

One whose hope is based upon anything other than the Person and work of Christ (His righteousness) is walking in darkness, thinking and acting in concert with the unjustified sinner, as one who owes a debt to God's law and justice. But this debt is far beyond his means to pay. He is in need of the regenerating

¹ Mt 12:34-35; Lk 6:44-45

² Rom 6:17-18

work of the Spirit of God to reveal Christ in him. If his salvation is presumed to be conditioned upon himself to any degree, it stands to reason that his efforts could only be motivated by a desire to affect his standing before God. The Bible tells us that God judges such a one as a “servant of sin” whose deeds are evil.¹ Before true conversion, we self-righteously judge saved and lost by the outward appearance or by some standard other than that by which God judges. This is why the Bible says that the way that seems right to man ends in death.²

An examination of biblical testimony concerning the religionists in Christ’s day helps us to see more readily how things we think are good can actually be evil. For example, those who persecuted the disciples of Christ thought that they were doing God a service.³ In their own eyes they considered themselves children of God, eternally saved, moral, ethical, and in the service of God. In reality, they were children of the devil, lost in their sins, immoral, unethical, and in the service of Satan. So it is with most of today’s religion that comes in the name of Christ but denies the doctrine of Christ that is integral to the Gospel message itself.

To examine this further, think for a moment of the most sinful thought or act you can imagine someone committing. Now consider this same question from God’s perspective. His Word teaches us that as God sees it, the most sinful thoughts and acts a person can commit involve seeking or claiming salvation from Him based on something other than (or in addition to) the only thing that magnifies God’s law and makes it honorable – the righteousness established by the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴

To discover just how God views our best efforts to attain salvation by any other standard we only need to eavesdrop on God’s message to Israel as recorded by His prophet, Isaiah. There he compares the religious Israelites with Sodom and

¹ Rom 3:19-20; 6:17-18

² Prov 14:12; 16:25

³ Jn 16:2

⁴ Matt 7:21-23

Gomorraah, considered to be the most notoriously immoral people on earth. What kind of sin, what sort of gross immorality were these Israelites practicing? Surely it must have been worse than the sexual perversions of Sodom, perhaps murder or worse. No, instead we learn through God's prophet that their sins were more awful and disgusting than even those of Sodom and Gomorraah. He exposed how Israel's sin was worse because it was rebellion against the light of God's law and the Gospel. He showed them how in their zeal to perform the duties of the law (to obey Him), that they had lost sight of the main purpose of the law towards sinners. They failed to see that the law they were to obey was given as a tutor to lead them unto Christ. Their rebellion was directly opposed to God's glory in redemption through Christ.¹ This, along with other passages, teaches us that the worst sin a person can commit is to reject Christ and His righteousness and to seek to establish a righteousness of his own. This is legalism, self-righteousness, and religious pride which God hates.

Some might object, then why would God command true believers to seek righteousness and holiness as a goal if they are already righteous and holy in Christ?² It is because our character and conduct do not yet equal our present standing in Christ. We are truly holy and righteous as it pertains to our standing before God legally,³ yet we need much improvement in our character and conduct experientially. So, again, what is the believer's proper motivation? As someone once said, "What I do and don't do in no way determines nor establishes my relationship or right standing with God. But my relationship and right standing with God most certainly determines and establishes the spirit and motive of what I do and don't do." The Bible does command us to perform good works, but not in order to attain or maintain salvation. Instead, it is a believer's reasonable response and responsibility because of the mercy he has been given.⁴ Upon

¹ Prov 6:16-17; Isa 1:9-15; Matt 11:24; Lk 16:15; Rom 9:31-10:4;

2 Cor 3:6-14; Gal 3:24

² 1 Pet 1:15-16; 1 Jn 2:1

³ Col 1:21-22

⁴ Rom 12:1; Titus 3:5-8

believing God's Gospel of grace, one can now obey acceptably, bringing forth good fruit because his state has been changed whereby his standing as a sinner justified solely by Christ's obedience unto death has been revealed unto him. With this change of state (regeneration and conversion), being brought from darkness to light, comes a change in his motive for obedience. By seeking to live in conformity to God's revealed will, a true believer expresses his thankfulness to God for what He has done. This is the Gospel motive of gratitude.

At the final judgment, all appearances will pass away and the reality of our deeds will be exposed, not based upon man's natural view of things, but as God sees things. Various scriptures point to the fact that at the judgment God will declare whether our deeds were good or bad.¹ On the other hand, the Scriptures also teach that fallen humanity in its natural state cannot do "good" in light of God's standard of righteousness, that our works have no part in establishing our acceptance before a holy God.² So one might well ask, how can anyone's works be judged as good? Obviously, nothing I do, even after true spiritual conversion, meets God's standard of perfection. The Gospel gives us the answer. It reveals that God accepts not only me, but also my efforts to obey Him, not because they are perfect, but because of my standing of justification by virtue of having the righteousness of Christ imputed to me. Because the legal guilt and defilement of sin was removed from me as a person, it is also removed from my less than perfect, sin-tainted efforts to obey God's law. It's not, as some would suggest, that Christ makes up the difference where we fall short. He is the only difference – the totality of all we need! A believer's obedience is accepted because of his oneness with Christ.³

To summarize, the character and quality of a person's works are determined by that person's standing before God. Their works are evidences, not the determining factor, of their standing

¹ Eccl 12:14; 2 Cor 5:10

² Rom 3:10-20, 28

³ Eph 1:6; Col 1:21-22, 2:9-10

before God.¹ We cannot discern whether one's works are good or evil based upon the outward appearance, for often there is no difference. What is different is the realm of existence, the spiritual state of the person performing the works, which, in turn, directly affects the motive.

Among finite men, good works can only be judged as an evidence of a sinner's justification when a profession of the true Gospel accompanies them. Apart from such a profession, our works fail to glorify God before men and actually stand in opposition to God's glory. So we see that, in this context, the very first good work performed by a justified sinner takes place at the time of conversion when, in obedience to God, the sinner exercises God's gift of faith in repentance – a change of mind, will, and affection toward Christ. These initial works disclose one's doctrine and, consequently, their true standing with God. Unbelievers cannot recognize these good works. The Bible commands believers to let their "light," God's Gospel itself, shine so that others might recognize and distinguish their works to be good.² So works are only recognized as "good" in light of the Gospel. Obviously then, one who hasn't heard or doesn't understand the true Gospel of God's grace can't make this distinction. This "light" is the very same light that exposes the works of the vast number of today's religionists as being evil. As the Bible tells us, this is why men naturally love darkness and hate the exposure of the Gospel light.³

One might ask, but what if someone claims to believe the true Gospel but shows no outward evidences of obedience or good works? As we've already discussed, we cannot judge by simply observing the deeds. But a genuine profession of the Gospel, by definition, is always accompanied by some acts of obedience. Obviously, the initial obedient acts of true God-given faith and repentance fall into this category because they are directly related to the doctrine that reveals a person's true state before God. Similarly, one's attention and diligence to

¹ Eph 2:10

² Matt 5:16

³ Jn 3:19-20

God's prescribed means for worship and growth revolve around a body of faith, a doctrine. Living things must have food and so it is with spiritual life. Diligence to obey the true God in worship, prayer, and study that revolves around His way of salvation, His Gospel, accompanied by a refusal to endorse any other way is identifiable as a good work, just like true faith and repentance.¹

Conversely, disobedience in tending to the means of spiritual nourishment is justifiable reason to doubt the genuineness of one's profession. Sadly, I have seen friends who professed to believe God's true Gospel but who, over time steadily lost interest to the point that they abandoned the means altogether, ultimately revealing that their profession wasn't accompanied by a genuine love for the truth.² Where there is no fruit – there is no life. Like the “thorny ground” hearer in the parable of the Seed and the Sower, these ultimately have taken from them the basic understanding of the Gospel that they initially seemed to possess.³ That said, this is not the problem with most of my friends. I warn you to take no solace in any religious activity and worship under a false doctrine (as promoted by most of today's so-called Christianity). This is not the “good works” that redounds to God's glory as found in worshipping the true God under a true Gospel ministry.

In summary, the character and quality of a person's works must be judged “good” or “evil” according to the spiritual state of the person. And the state of the person must be judged according to the basis of their hope for salvation. And the gospel the sinner believes reveals both. At the final judgment, God will declare whether each person's works were evidence of their standing of condemnation in Adam or of their justification in Christ. God has graciously revealed in advance His standard for making this judgment in His Word (See Chapters 3 and 4). My desire for you, my friend, is that you too will submit to and adopt God's standard of judgment as your own, for it will be the only

¹ 2 Jn 9-11

² 2 Thess 2:9-10

³ Matt 13:1-9, 18-23; Lk 8:4-18

measure that ultimately matters. When we adopt God's standard we give evidence of a change of state – of having been born again. Being born of the Spirit, under the preaching of God's Gospel of grace we submit to God's standard of judgment in belief of His Gospel and in repentance from former idolatry and dead works.

Objection #10: God would not judge those who have never heard the Gospel.

- *I believe that most of what you say is true; however, I do not believe that God will judge anyone based upon that which they have never heard.*

Actually, this same objection is also raised towards today's popular brand of "Christianity." This springs from the scriptural truth, asserted by most of "Christianity," that Christ is the only way of salvation.¹ That said, I have found that the same objection often resurfaces whenever my so-called "Christian" friends are confronted with God's Gospel, a vital body of truth that they have never heard. As noted earlier, many of my friends have never even heard of the term, "imputed righteousness" and yet the Scriptures clearly proclaim that knowledge of this basic concept is a necessary component of the Gospel which is believed by all who are saved (See Chapter 10). If you are beginning to see that the central message of this book is a true and an accurate reflection of God's way of salvation, then a natural reaction might be to justify your position by thinking: "How was I to know? I've never heard of such before. Surely God wouldn't judge me or anyone else simply because we had not heard of this Gospel and of this Christ." I know I had thoughts similar to this upon first hearing and learning of these things.

There is an implied innocence that accompanies this objection. Some even ask it this way, "What happens to the innocent person who has never heard?" This makes a rather significant assumption – that the person spoken of is innocent. If so, the answer is easy. Such a one would not need salvation because a just God never punishes innocent people. The truly innocent person has no sin, and needs no savior. God punishes only the guilty. Yet, as most of my friends know, Christianity denies this assumption. The Bible teaches that there are no innocent people in the world.²

¹ Jn 14:6

² Rom 3:10-12,23

So the appropriate question is: What happens to the guilty person who has never heard of these things? Wherein lies his guilt? Can we be punished for not believing that which we've never heard? If so, this would be inconsistent with God's revealed justice. Does this mean then that having not heard, we are off the hook? If it does, I am anything but a friend in writing this book because, having now been told of the Gospel, you can no longer claim ignorance as an excuse. What I hope to show you is that this is not the case and that our ignorance does not make us any less culpable. Not knowing the true Christ or the true Gospel is not the only damnable offense.

The Bible teaches that the reason we must come to know Christ, God the Son, is because we need Him as the savior.¹ We need Him because we all have already rejected God the Father. Herein lies the universal guilt of man. It started in our representative Adam and if we live into adulthood, we all ultimately exhibit that same rebellious principle inherited from Adam. We too have personally rejected God the Father. Reconciliation to God the Father is made only through God the Son, based upon the merits of His Person and work, His righteousness. The Scriptures teach us that God's wrath is not against innocence and ignorance, but against wickedness and ungodliness.² This ungodliness begins with suppressing the truth of the general revelation that God has given of Himself to the entire world. Since the foundation of the world, creation itself has provided a clear, unmistakable revelation that God exists and that, as Deity, He has eternal power. The Scriptures point out how this knowledge alone is sufficient to render us all inexcusable. Under this general revelation, we are responsible to seek after the true and living God. We are responsible to walk in the knowledge that God has given and not suppress the truth.³

God promises that where men and women seek Him, the true and living God, they will find Him. Our problem is that we will seek our own notions of a god, a god of our own imaginations,

¹ Eph 2:1-9

² Rom 1:18

³ Psalms 19:1; Acts 17:22-31

but we will not seek after the true and living God. By nature, we reject the revealed knowledge of the true God.¹ Many of my friends, who have up until now never heard how God could be both a just God and a Savior, are indeed religious. It is here, in the realm of religion, that the truth of the general revelation of God is devastating, because the Bible tells us that the practice of religion does not excuse men.² Indeed, most religion stands as proof of the sinfulness of man, a testimony that man will stop short in his search, unknowingly settling for an idol that doesn't even resemble the true nature of God (See Chapter 10). In fact, such a practice of religion only compounds their guilt.

The Bible does reveal that people will be judged according to the light that they have.³ Since all men and women initially violate their very own ethic by stopping short in their search for the true God, being content with their own concept of who God is, they remain exposed to the judgment of God. So all need salvation. We need redemption, a way back to the Father. Christ is the only way back to the Father that we've all rejected.⁴ If we are to have fellowship with Him, He must be glorified and honored (See Chapter 9). Because God is holy, it is impossible for us to have fellowship with the Father apart from His law and justice being satisfied (See Chapter 8). So we come full circle to see why it is necessary that we believe the Gospel wherein Christ's righteousness is revealed, for only there can God the Father be revealed, glorified, and distinguished from the idols of our imagination – all based upon the Person and Work of Christ.

¹ Rom 3:11-12

² Rom 1:21-25

³ Rom 2:11-16

⁴ Jn 6:44-45; 14:6

Objection #11: Your doctrine would mean God is unfair

- *If Christ didn't die for everyone, then God would be unfair. He gives everyone the same chance to get to heaven*
- *What about man's free will?*
- *How can man be held accountable for that which he is unable to do?*

I believe that this objection initially crosses the mind of almost everyone who comes to see the truth of particular redemption, especially if they were initially taught that Christ died for everyone who ever lived. (See Chapter 13). This was true in my own case. Fortunately, the Bible addresses this very objection in the 9th chapter of Romans.¹ This chapter is very special to me personally because God, in His providence, used this passage to “upset my apple cart” so to speak, and to providentially prepare me to hear and believe the Gospel. In studying this chapter, I discovered how God was a sovereign God who chooses or elects a people based on His own good pleasure. This is clear, unmistakable and cannot be denied from this passage and from other scriptures as well. Later, under Gospel teaching, I saw how these same scriptures actually lead to a far greater apprehension of God than simply that of a sovereign Creator.

In these verses, based upon the example of Jacob and Esau, we see that a sovereign God chooses whom he will. Well, my first thoughts mirrored the same rhetorical question posed in the scripture, “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?” This can't be. Is God unfair? Why, that wouldn't be fair! These were exactly my first sentiments when I was told that God chose some to salvation but not all. This response is as natural to a fallen man as the taking of our next breath.

In analyzing this, we should realize that most religious people don't really think their god is unfair. No, they, like me, when confronted with the doctrine of election, simply are asserting that this can't be true because if it were, it would mean

¹ Rom 9:11-16

or imply that God is unfair. In other words, since we think it seems unfair, that serves as sufficient evidence to us that these verses don't really mean what they seem to say – that this can't be so. We will reason that, "After all, all of us fallen sinners deserve at least a chance." Fortunately, God gives us answers in the verses that follow.

If you study the passage, you will note that God's response to our charge "that would be unfair," was to quote from the passage in Exodus that I alluded to earlier in the book (See Chapter 9).¹ This passage is God's response to the request by Moses for God to show him His glory. So by studying the quoted passage along with this one, we discover that this sovereign God, who chooses whom He will, says He is like this, "I'll have mercy on thousands, and forgive sin," but I'm also a God that "will by no means clear the guilty!"² This revelation of God as one who will show mercy, but not at the expense of His law and justice, should encourage us to discover the absolute necessity of possessing a righteousness outside of ourselves for the pardon of sin. It is here that we begin to see that there is far more in God's design to glorify Himself than simply revealing Himself as sovereign.

The doctrine of election is not just that God chooses whom He will, but election consists of the fact that God chose a people unto salvation. He not only chose them, but He conditioned all of their salvation on His Son in order that he might have mercy and yet be just! To suggest that God would be unfair is to cling to a notion that salvation must be conditioned upon us sinners, a denial that the very character of God demands that He be both a just God and a Savior.³

We learn from this scriptural passage that if God is not sovereign in choosing a people and conditioning their salvation on Christ alone, then it must be of man's doing, of man's effort in the exercise of his own free will, and then not "of God who

¹ Ex 33:19

² Ex 34:7

³ Isa 45:20-22; Rom 3:23-26

sheweth mercy.”¹ What is the alternative? If God didn’t choose me of His own pleasure, then it must be something in me, in spite of God’s clear testimony to the contrary. It would mean that it must be of my decision, of the exercise of my free will, or based on my works. If that were the case, it wouldn’t even require mercy, and it would not be by grace! (See Chapter 12).

Look where this type of reasoning leads. As I just showed, if God is not sovereign in choosing a people, then it must be of him that “willeth” or “runneth” (see vs. 16). If that were the case, then righteousness is unnecessary because we know from other scriptures that “none are righteous.”² So if it’s of my free will or of my works, then righteousness is unnecessary and, in turn, law and justice do not need to be satisfied (See Chapter 8). To be wrong about God’s character in this regard reflects an ignorance of the most vital knowledge of who God is. It is to know another god, not the true and living God, but rather an imaginary god, an idol.

Now if you remain unwilling to concede that adherence to such views is clear evidence of a lost state, then you have to conclude that a sinner could somehow be pardoned and accepted without any provision made for the law’s requirements being fulfilled. This can’t be if we believe the Bible. Remember that is why Christ came. He came to fulfill the law.³ To disconnect God’s mercy from law and justice is to place no value whatsoever on the work of Jesus Christ (See Chapter 9). My desire is that you, my friend, are beginning to see that this common, natural objection (that God would be unfair) actually exposes one’s erroneous concept of the work of Christ and shows that he has yet to come to know God as He is uniquely revealed in the Person and redemptive work of Christ.⁴

The objection that God would be unfair unless man, in the exercise of his free will, makes the difference often leads to a

¹ Rom 9:15-16

² Rom 3:10

³ Matt 5:17-18

⁴ Matt 11:27; 2 Cor 4:6

discussion of man's responsibility to believe the Gospel. It is argued that if man is unable to come to God unless he is an object of God's electing love (and, in turn, among those for whom Christ lived and died), then he could not be justly held responsible for that which he could not do. To deal with this, we need to examine further this relationship between "responsibility" and "inability."

First, I do not believe that someone's inability necessarily relieves his or her responsibility. To illustrate, I'll relate a story from my high school days. The year I played junior varsity (J-V) football, our school had an awesome varsity team lead by a stellar senior class. I was an undersized underclassman who, along with the rest of my teammates, performed as the scout team for our older, larger, and exceptionally talented varsity squad. I will never forget one scrimmage in which the coach was working to perfect a fake field goal (or extra point) play. Our all-state senior quarterback, Andy Johnson (who would eventually end up as a professional running back and receiver in the NFL) was to lineup as the holder for the place-kicker only to keep the ball on a bootleg run around the right end. Our all-state guard pulled to lead interference as time and again they worked to perfect the play. I played defensive back and according to the upcoming opponent's defensive scheme I had outside responsibility on running plays. Each time they ran the play, it was my job to stop this phenomenal athlete. Although I stood no chance of playing off the huge guard's block, I could usually dodge him but to no avail. Each time we practiced that play it would end up with Andy and me, one-on-one in the open field near the goal line. Each and every time, without fail, the older, far more talented athlete would seem to vanish in thin air. I could hardly get a hand on him.

I dare say that no one could have wanted to tackle him more than I did, but try as I might, I could not – I was unable. That said, I never doubted for a second that it was my responsibility to do so. That responsibility came with the position. To accentuate this point, our entire beaten and totally exhausted J-V squad had to run hundred yard dashes (ten if I recall correctly) in full

uniform immediately following this memorable practice, because I failed in my responsibility to stop this play even once. My inability did not relieve my responsibility.

I recognize that for some this doesn't settle the objection. One might still argue that, unlike my football coach, a kind and gracious God would not hold anyone responsible or accountable to do something they lacked the ability to do. Some will assert that God wouldn't hold you responsible if you were unable. So, secondly, I ask that you consider the nature of our inability when it comes to our relationship with God. To illustrate, consider that as a business owner and employer, I have had numerous occasions to observe and address employee job performance issues. To solve any problem effectively, I believe it's first important to identify the cause or source.

As it pertains to poor job performance, I find that it's because the poor performer either (1) can't do what is expected, (2) won't do what is expected, or (3) some combination of the first two. If someone "can't," it may be because of lack of training, inexperience, misunderstood expectations, or (like me trying to tackle our all-state quarterback) lack of ability. Often, poor performance for this reason can be remedied as long as the employee remains willing. Even if not, our tendency is to be more accepting of this reason and subsequently, more accommodating. Unless someone had misrepresented their credentials, some might well conclude that it would be unfair if they were held accountable for failing under these circumstances. This sense of unfairness seems to parallel that which people have in mind when they suggest, "God would be unfair in His dealings with man if the doctrine you promoted were indeed true."

Now consider those who perform poorly simply because they "won't" do what is expected, what they had agreed to do in accepting the position? I have far less tolerance for slothful employees who simply will not do their jobs. As you might guess, if this behavior isn't corrected in short order, these become ex-employees. Most agree that employees who are unwilling to accept the responsibilities and perform the duties for

which they are being paid should be held accountable. Many of my friends would also agree with this principle as it pertains to God's dealing with us. In fact, most so-called "Christians" suggest that God is not at all unfair for barring someone from heaven if, after having given them the choice, they do not choose to accept Him as their personal Savior but instead reject Him. They would agree that this would be an appropriate and just consequence for someone who "won't" come to Him.

Here is where the accusation (that my doctrine insinuates God would be unfair) is flawed. In God's Gospel, men are commanded to believe the Gospel and they have the mental faculties to do so. In this sense, they "can," but they "won't!" God promises salvation to all who believe His Gospel.¹ The problem lies in man's natural aversion to what the true Gospel exposes. True, it reveals that we are in need of something, a perfect righteousness, that we can't produce; however, God has also graciously revealed that salvation is to be found in Christ, based upon the righteousness He produced and freely imputes to all who, in time, base their entire hope and trust in Him, in the merits of His Person and His work.² What men hate is discovering God's standard of righteousness, finding out that salvation is therefore impossible apart from God's mercy and grace – that it isn't conditioned on them at all, to any degree.

We are fully capable of understanding the doctrine of God's Gospel. As reasoning creatures, we "can" believe it if we only "will". Our inability is only derived from our fallen state and the principles of darkness that accompany that state. We are only unable because our own self-love, self-righteousness, and religious pride hinder us. What this means is that the real reason we "can't" come to the true and living God is because of our nature – a nature that "won't." Here we see that God is certainly fair and just to bar any from His presence in heaven who refuse to come to Him according to His terms. Our unwillingness to bow to God's way, His Gospel, doesn't relieve our responsibility to obey His command to do so.

¹ Mk 16:15-16; Acts 16:31; Rom 10:8-13

² Rom 3:21-28

To further illustrate, consider this fictional story that an old friend of mine shared with me recently about one of his former college buddies. We all understand that as citizens of a sovereign state, we are subject to the laws of that state. Like most, the state in which his college buddy lived had a law forbidding the operation of a motor vehicle while under the influence of alcohol. Now one day, on his way home from work, this fellow stops by the local bar for a few drinks. One drink leads to another and by the time he leaves the bar, he is totally smashed. He gets into his car and proceeds drunkenly down the highway, weaving from lane to lane. A trooper pulls him over but fails to recognize that the driver has had a few too many. Instead, he begins preparing to issue him a ticket for breaking some other laws, reckless driving and making improper lane changes. Now the drunk driver immediately objects, “But officer, you can’t hold me responsible for not staying in one lane given my current state. I’m plastered and, therefore, totally unable to do that.” Can you imagine the trooper responding, “Good point – no one in your condition could be held responsible to keep it between the lines,” as he proceeds to tear up the citation and send the drunk driver on his merry way?

I share this far-fetched illustration to demonstrate how ludicrous this same argument is as it pertains to the objection that God would be unfair. Again, when it comes to our inability to submit to Christ’s righteousness as the only ground of salvation, always remember that this inability is only derived from the fact that we won’t – because of who and what we are by nature – our state. As I explained earlier in the book (See Chapter 6), we enter into this world in league with Satan, alienated from God, in a state of unbelief, having sinned in our representative Adam. This original sin imputed to us casts us into this state, a state we further evidence by our own personal sins, compounding our culpability under God’s law. Like the drunken driver who put himself in that state, so did we, not personally, but through our initially untainted representative Adam. Now, who is to blame for that? Do we excuse our sin by our sin? Isn’t it true that the only reason we sinfully will not come to God His way, as He commands, is because as lost sinners in a state of unbelief, we

won't unless (and until) God makes us willing?¹ Actually it's this unadulterated version of "grace" that we all naturally object to – the idea that God really does have to show mercy for any sinner to be saved, that salvation is truly "of the Lord."² Again, ultimately the only reason we "can't" is because we "won't."

To summarize, consider:

- (1) That man has the intellectual capacity to understand God's truth, His Gospel, and to reject Satan's lies.
- (2) The Scriptures command God's people to proclaim this vital truth, the Gospel, to all without exception.
- (3) In turn, God reveals that all who hear the Gospel are responsible to believe it and are commanded to do so.
- (4) The Gospel contains God's declaration that anyone, without exception, who believes it is saved.

So if you believe God to be true to His word, then who is to blame? If you refuse to believe His Gospel, then you only exclude yourself. Until one is convinced of the impossibility of salvation conditioned on the sinner, it stands to reason that he may well continue to rebel against God's gracious provision of mercy in electing a people unto salvation, conditioned on Christ alone. Only when one becomes truly convinced of sin by God the Holy Spirit so as to discover their desperate need for the mercy that is uniquely found in Christ, based solely on the imputation of His righteousness (See Chapter 5), will he rejoice and thank God for His electing love, knowing that without it there would be no hope. My desire for you is that you would simply take God at His word.

¹ Jn 6:44, 65

² Psa 110:3; Jonah 2:9

Objection #12: The Holy Spirit enabled me to meet God's requirement for salvation

- *I do not agree that my belief that Christ died for all equates to salvation by works since it was the Holy Spirit who enabled me to accept Christ.*
- *Since the Holy Spirit enabled me to meet the condition, it is still of grace. He made the difference, not me.*
- *My belief that Christ died for everyone does not mean that I think salvation is conditioned on me. I "thank God" because He enabled me.*

This objection is often a first line of defense by those who are confronted with the ramifications that inevitably accompany a universal view of Christ's death (that He laid down His life for everyone without exception). As I've already pointed out, a logical person cannot deny that if Christ did no more for those in heaven than He did for those in hell, then something else, not Christ, must make the difference. Most of my friends have not confronted this contradiction. Like me in years past, they think they are trusting in Christ alone for salvation, thinking that they do believe in salvation by grace. Suddenly someone explains how their universal notions about the redemptive work of Christ, by necessity, expose a different reality – that they do unwittingly trust in something else, not Christ, to make the ultimate difference in their salvation. Quick minds fast-forward to the implication – that to concede this point would be an admission that they believed salvation was conditioned on them, a boastful claim of salvation by works. Many of my religious friends are well aware that God's Word explicitly excludes such notions.¹

So, as sinners naturally inclined to cling to a way of salvation compatible with our fallen nature, some seek to rebut and deny the implication by suggesting that because they credit God Himself with enabling them to accept Christ, their doctrine does not deny salvation by grace. Like the lost Pharisee we read about in God's Word, they thank God they are not "as other men are," sincerely but erroneously believing that this "credit giving"

¹ Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:4-7

negates the argument.¹ Believing that God the Holy Spirit enabled them, they assume this proves they still believe in salvation by grace, not by works. Some, upon recognizing that the Bible does speak of God's election of a people, will slightly modify the argument. They will continue to insist that Christ lived and died for all but say that God the Holy Spirit only makes Christ's work effectual to those He chose, His elect.

As I said, this is typically a first line of defense because it's not one that ages well. Unfortunately, given our natural opposition to God's way, many will conveniently fool themselves into thinking this resolves the conflict. Often they cast aside this pesky intrusion into their spiritually secure world with no further thought. This is far too important to be so casually dismissed. I ask you, my friends, to think a little further with me. Why did God the Holy Spirit decide to enable you and not others? What made you to differ from those He didn't pick to enable? Was it because you were better? Were you less worse, as in less stubborn, less obstinate, more pliable, or more teachable? Did God enable you and not others because He foresaw that you would be more amenable towards Him? If you believe Christ died for all, then your answer to these questions should help you identify your real object of faith, your real savior. No matter what we call it or how hard we try to disguise it, such is the religion of works, of salvation conditioned on the sinner.

My friend, salvation is conditioned on Christ alone. The Holy Spirit does give genuine faith and repentance to all for whom Christ lived and died. He enables them to trust in Christ alone – in the merits of His work. The Bible tells us that in salvation God the Holy Spirit doesn't direct us to Himself but rather to God the Son.² Christ, by His obedience unto death, purchased and procured the complete eternal salvation of all who come to Him.³ This means that the "enabling" by God the Holy Spirit itself is also purchased by no less than the blood of Christ. To think otherwise is only to fool yourself.

¹ Lk 18:11

² Jn 16:13-15

³ 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23

Objection #13: If it's predestined, then why bother?

- *If I believed as you about election and predestination, then why should I do anything? If I'm one of God's elect I'll be fine and if not, I can't do anything about it anyway.*
- *Doesn't this doctrine rob us of any motive to seek God or share His Gospel with others?*

As with many biblical doctrines, if we isolate a single doctrinal point from other vitally connected truth, we may “fail to see the forest for the trees.” For example, if we consider the fact that God chose a people before the world began, yet ignore the purpose of this election, then it would only be natural to develop the fatalistic mindset inherent in this objection. Some bow to God's irrefutable testimony of the truth of election without seeing how Christ's righteousness is connected. Such a “stand alone” view of election, separate from the concept of a necessary righteousness, can only lead to despair for reasoning people, assuming they are honest with themselves and follow their reasoning to its final conclusion.

Again, as with the previous objection, most of my friends do not truly believe that they have no responsibility, recognizing the obvious, that they are in fact not mindless robots. Many who would so object know that, to the contrary, the Scriptures are full of both commands to seek God and of assurances of salvation to those who believe. Instead, the objection implies that if the doctrine of election and predestination were true, that it would suggest man has no responsibility – an implication that other scriptures deny. God clearly sets forth man's responsibility to come to Him in faith and repentance, to obey Him and keep His commandments. Many think that to believe the doctrine of election and particular redemption is to accuse God of being the author of sin.

Unfortunately, some Calvinists feed this objection by promoting God's sovereignty to the point of portraying God as an arbitrary, capricious dictator who saves or damns upon a whim.

Some even deny the necessity of the blood-bought gift of faith and repentance that God provides to achieve His purpose of glorifying Himself in the elect sinner's heart.¹ Such teaching denies man's responsibility and turns God's sovereignty into a discouraging truth, leading folks to resign themselves to fate. Adherents to this way of thinking logically conclude, "What's the use – It doesn't matter what I do." This has not been the case with most of my friends; however, I'm aware that this type of mindset exists. In my own experience, this objection has more often been voiced as an indicator of why they conclude the premise, the doctrine itself, to be faulty. In either case, whether denying the sovereignty of God or promoting fatalism, both misrepresent and deny the true God.

With regards to the "why bother" argument, first I'll simply refer you to the latter part of my response to Objection #11, that "God would be unfair." The supported conclusion given there, that no one is excluded other than those who exclude themselves, substantiates the fact that responsibility isn't removed because of fallen man's natural inability. Man has the faculties to believe; he simply chooses not to. His inability is only derived from the fact that, in his natural state of spiritual darkness, he is so influenced by the sinful principles of self-righteousness, self-love, and religious pride that he will not choose God's Gospel and God's ways over his own. He can't because he won't. Only God can make men and women willing.² Before conversion, we naturally love this "darkness" and, consequently, we naturally hate and reject that which the Gospel light exposes – the fact that what we consider to be good is actually evil from God's perspective.³

So there is good reason to bother. This objection actually gets to a common mistake that stands in the way of one's search for the truth. The danger is in being sidetracked so as to address the wrong issues and ask the wrong questions. I am convinced that an honest, objective analysis of pertinent scriptures would

¹ 2 Cor 4:6

² Psalms 110:3; John 6:44

³ John 3:19-20

cause all of my friends to concede that the Bible teaches the truth of election.¹ Now, if you consider this truth separate from God's design to glorify Himself in salvation, separate from the preaching and teaching of the Gospel wherein Christ's righteousness is revealed, then you inevitably will be diverted away from the vital issues. Questions come to mind such as: "The Bible teaches election, but I don't know if He chose me or not? Am I one of the chosen? Am I one of the elect?"

Well, God does not intend for His Gospel to be presented to address any lost sinner as elect or non-elect, but rather He commands that His Gospel be spread to all ungodly sinners indiscriminately – all sinners in need of salvation by God's grace, in need of a righteousness they cannot produce. The very first recognizable evidence of election is genuine belief of God's Gospel in repentance of the way that beforehand had seemed right to us.² God deals with us on that level, never suggesting that anyone should try to determine whether or not they are among the elect by any other means or before believing the Gospel. As already stated, all who hear it are commanded and responsible to believe it. So, contrary to the objection, the Scriptures indicate that, in fact, you should do something. You should bother. All are commanded to seek God and repent from their former idolatry.³ God's elect will. No, the Gospel is not addressed to the elect, but rather to sinners who are perishing, sinners for whom all the blessings of grace are displayed and brought near for their relief.

To paraphrase an old theologian – for one to wrestle with trying to determine his salvation based on whether or not Christ's work was intended for him as one of the elect of God is as foolish as the following scenario: Someone dying of hunger is presented with a plate of food but he hesitates to eat it because

¹ Jn 6:37-39, 44, 65; 10:11, 14-15, 26-28; 17:6, 9-10; Acts 13:48; Rom 8:29-33; 9:11-24; Eph 1:3-7, 11; 1 Thess 5:9-10;

2 Thess 2:13-14; Titus 1:1-2; 1 Pet 1:1-2; 2:9-10

² Prov 14:12; 16:25

³ Acts 17:30

he doesn't know if God, his Maker, appointed that he should be nourished by it or not. We would all say that would be irrational. We would suggest that God providentially brought the plate of food his way – so eat before you die of hunger! So it is with the Gospel. The pertinent question you should ask is not, “Am I one of the elect,” but rather, “Do I have a righteousness that answers the demands of God's law and justice and how was it obtained?” You have a need, a disease, a hunger, and God has providentially confronted you with the cure, the very sustenance needed for eternal life. Chow down – it's free!¹

I hope you're beginning to see how the doctrine of election confirms the certainty of God's purpose being realized, His purpose to glorify Himself in the salvation of sinners. Further, it removes any doubt about God's faithfulness to fulfill His promise. When correctly understood, the doctrine of election is a great encouragement for all to seek salvation God's way through Christ. My friend, you have all the encouragement God's Word can give for you to rely, without hesitation, on Christ and His righteousness imputed. You have all the assurance which the very oath of God can impart – that in truly trusting in Christ and His righteousness, His perfect satisfaction to God's law and justice, you will be in the company of those who inherit heaven's eternal glory. No doubt about it!²

¹ Isa 55:1

² Heb 6:17-20

Objection #14: You make knowledge a condition

- *You say that salvation is conditioned on Christ alone, not faith or anything else, but it seems to me that you make knowledge a condition for salvation – as if you must be a theologian in order to be saved*

This objection acknowledges the fact that some specific knowledge is absolutely necessary according to the Scriptures. Some have made the accusation that the Gospel promoted herein would require one first to become an intellectual before they could be saved. In actuality, this objection is often a diversionary tactic to evade the issues of the Gospel that confront folks with the truth – truth that would expose their perilous state. If God is to achieve His design to glorify Himself in the salvation of sinners, then in conversion sinners must come to know and believe a particular truth – the truth of the Gospel. Even though the objection is often suspect as to its genuineness, it is common enough to merit our attention.

My suspicions here are derived from the fact that few actually oppose the concept that any and all knowledge is inconsequential in spiritual conversion. What all of us will naturally oppose is the specific knowledge revealed in the Gospel. Scripture confirms as much.¹ Most of my friends, including those who raise this objection, would agree that in salvation sinners come to know the gospel. Many of them would say that God does not save sinners apart from the gospel and that all saved sinners do hear and believe the gospel. So, most actually agree that there is some body of knowledge that must be believed. We then see that the real issue is – What is the Gospel? (See Chapter 10). Usually this objection over “knowledge” is actually an ineffectual camouflage of one’s real opposition to the basic and fundamental Gospel truths that stand in such sharp contrast to their “gospel.”

From the plain teaching of God’s Word we see that knowledge is indeed necessary for salvation, not as a condition

¹ Rom 3:11-12

sinners must meet in order to attain salvation, but as one of God's appointed means and instruments whereby He brings His elect to faith in Christ, the Savior, and repentance from dead works and idolatry. Some actually do say that knowledge is not required, but God says that it is – that all who are saved have a knowledge given to them by the Holy Spirit through His Word.¹

So what specific knowledge is necessary for salvation? What does a saved person come to know? To put it simply a person must believe the Gospel. In order to believe it, he must acquire knowledge of it. To review just what this body of knowledge consists of, I refer you to Chapter 9 as well as all of Part II, "Gospel Basics." The Gospel is very simple in its purity. To those who bring this objection, thinking it is too complicated, I refer you to Chapter 11 where I explained to my friends, the "Good Guys – But Not so religious," how it only seems that way.

If you've read this book up to this point, then you know that the vital knowledge spoken of herein cannot legitimately be considered to be a condition for salvation. This should be obvious since the main truth included in this body of knowledge is that Christ alone has met all conditions for the salvation of His sheep. This knowledge itself teaches that Christ's righteousness alone demands and secures salvation for God's elect before they know anything and before they make any efforts to obey God. Like faith and repentance, this knowledge is necessary, but the very knowledge a justified sinner comes to possess excludes itself as being a condition for salvation.

Finally, one of the more common reasons that someone disparages this specific knowledge is that they either believe they were saved before hearing of it or they have many friends or family members who either haven't heard it, do not believe it, or claim to have been saved without it. The tendency in such cases is to promote a sort of ignorance and false humility in the name

¹ Prov 1:7; 2:3-6; Isa 45:20-22; Jer 9:23-24; 31:31-34; Matt 11:27; Jn 6:37-45; 17:3; Rom 10:1-4, 13-17; 1 Cor 2:7-16; 2 Cor 4:3-6; Eph 1:9; Phil 3:7-9; 2 Tim 1:12

of godliness, boasting of how they simply trust in Jesus (See Objection #3, “I Believe in Jesus – Not a Doctrine”). The problem is in what they mistakenly do believe, not simply in its lack of depth. The issue isn’t the complexity of the Gospel message. The issue is that God’s Gospel is a different gospel, a specific body of knowledge that is opposed to that which those who would bring this objection “know.” Their body of knowledge leads men to worship an idol instead of the true and living God of the Bible.¹ My friends, I hope you’re determined to cast aside that which doesn’t add up and to gain this simple but marvelous knowledge of God’s true Gospel, knowledge vital to your eternal destiny.

¹ Isa 45:20

Objection #15: Scriptures that (seem to) indicate Christ died for all

- *I see what you say, but still there are many familiar scriptures that seem to suggest that Christ died for the whole world. (1 John 2:1-2, John 3:16, etc.)*

For most of my friends, who like myself have been taught from their youth up that Christ died for everyone without exception, this obstacle must be dealt with. As for me, once I saw the truth of the doctrine of particular redemption spelled out in God's Word, I still needed to revisit those scripture verses that had always been used to insinuate otherwise. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, in the interest of brevity, I will not exhaustively address any of these objections. Nevertheless, you will find the response to this objection somewhat lengthier by necessity. This is unavoidable since we must examine specific scriptures given the nature of the concern. Still, there are writings by others that go into greater depth in dealing with some of the more common passages used to promote universal notions of Christ's redemptive work. One such work by John Owen, The Death of Death in the Death of Christ, was extremely helpful to me in this regard.

As background for dealing with this objection, I refer you back to Chapter 13, which deals specifically with the question, "For whom did Christ die?" Instead of writing an extensive essay on each and every verse, I will address the common thread found in the majority of the verses that have been used to promote the erroneous doctrine of universal redemption. This common thread is the usage of the word "world" or the term "whole world." Other scriptural passages that use the words "all" or "any" have been similarly used. The same rationale and understanding that is gained in examining the usage of the word "world" may be applied to these verses as well. My response to this objection is almost entirely extracted from an excellent treatise on this subject prepared by my former pastor, William W. (Bill) Parker, a version of which was published in Reign of Grace Newsletter, Vol 4, No.3. Given the nature of this

objection and for ease of reference, I have opted to include some of the scriptural texts in the body of my response.

Remember that the doctrine of universal redemption states that Christ died for all the sins of every individual without exception. One of the most popular scriptures used to promote this is I John 2:1-2 where it reads, ***“And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”*** Many interpret the term ***“whole world”*** to mean every individual without exception. Therefore, by necessity, they do not view the death, the blood of Christ, as an effectual satisfaction ("propitiation") that fully secured the salvation of any sinner. They typically view Christ's death as a token or expression of God's love toward all without exception yet ineffectual unless a sinner by his own volition receives it and makes it effectual. They do not view the death of Christ as a satisfaction to God's law and justice equaling righteousness – a righteousness that demands the eternal salvation and final glory of all whom He represented in His death, burial, and resurrection. Instead, they view the death of Christ as if it were no more than a blanket pardon that, in and of itself, insures the salvation of no one. This false doctrine is far from the Apostle John's intention in this passage and is opposed to the Gospel of God's grace. It spawns a false gospel that tells all without exception that God loves them and Christ died for them. But this doctrine also conveys that God's love and Christ's death have no power to save any sinner apart from the sinner's exercise of faith. As I explained in Chapter 13, this makes faith, not Christ, to be the savior as it (faith), not Christ, ultimately makes the difference between saved and lost. As we have seen, the very description of the death of Christ as a propitiation exposes the fallacy and futility of such thinking. "Propitiation" is a biblical term used to describe Christ's accomplishment on the cross. It refers to that which appeases or removes the wrath of God by way of satisfaction to God's law and justice.¹

Someone might object, "But doesn't this verse read the whole world?" Yes it does, but we must accurately understand

¹ Rom 3:25

the meaning of this term. Consider this – If Christ made an actual payment, if He actually propitiated (appeased) God in the sense of having taken all the sins of every individual upon Himself, dying for them, and paying their sin-debt to God’s law and justice, then it would stand to reason that God cannot eternally be at odds (at enmity) with anyone. God could not charge them with their sins if He has already charged their sins to Christ who in turn paid for those sins. God would be unjust to let them perish because He could not for eternity justly hold their sins against them. So if Christ is the propitiation for the sins of every individual without exception, then everyone will discover they are at peace with God and no one can be eternally lost in his or her sins. No one will ultimately perish. All will live eternally with Christ. Universal redemption automatically means universal salvation. However, as most of my friends know, this would contradict scriptures that tell us plainly that multitudes die in unbelief and perish eternally.¹

How then should we understand this? The passages that speak of Christ as the savior of the “*world*,” with one exception, are all in the writings of the Apostle John. The word “*world*” has several meanings in John’s writings, as well as a few more in other New Testament books. Since there are several meanings to this one word, it stands to reason that the meaning in one passage is not necessarily the same meaning in another. Context, therefore, becomes of utmost importance to determine the meaning. Sometimes “*world*” means the whole universe of created entities, as in ***John 1:10***, including plants, animals, human beings, rocks, and planets. ***John 16:7-8*** refers to those in the world whom the Holy Spirit convicts by the truth. In ***John 16:28*** it means the inhabitable earth. ***John 15:19*** uses the word to designate unconverted people. In ***John 17:9*** “*world*” refers to the non-elect, those who will never come to faith in Christ and for whom Christ does not pray.

We could survey all the other passages in ***1 John*** alone that use the word “*world*” to prove different meanings of the same word and how context determines the meaning. For example, in

¹ Matt 7:13-14; 25:41-46; Mk 16:16; Rev 20:11-15

1 John 2:15-17 “world” is used six times referring specifically to the unregenerate (or unsaved) world, the world in opposition to Christ, His church, and His truth. Obviously this cannot mean every individual without exception, as it would most certainly not include believers in Christ. The same holds true in **1 John 3:1,13** where the apostle wrote in essence that the “world” of the unregenerate, the yet unsaved, will not be able to recognize and distinguish true children of God and would, in fact, hate true children of God. **1 John 4:1,3,4,5,9,14,17** uses the word “world” to refer to the inhabitable world, fallen humanity, and the world of mankind as it exists in its present state. **1 John 4:14** states that “*the Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.*” This is not saying that the Father sent the Son into the world with the intention of saving every individual in the world, but that the Father sent the Son into the world to save fallen humanity. To save fallen humanity Christ does not have to save all humans without exception. He saves fallen humanity by saving all who shall believe in Him. So, **1 John 5:4,5,19** obviously refers to the unregenerate, unsaved, world.

Perhaps the verse which is the best known and most often quoted on this subject is **John 3:16** – “*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*” “World” here cannot mean every individual who ever lives. The “world” here consists of the objects of God’s special redeeming love to the extent that they shall never perish. This does not include every individual without exception. The persons intended here are those for whom God has given His only begotten Son and who come to believe in Him. Faith here is the direct result of the giving of God’s Son, the one who has accomplished the redemption of His people. Those who never come to Christ in faith have neither a claim upon this redemptive love nor a part in the redemptive work of Christ. Those whom Christ came to save, for whom He is the propitiation for their sins, shall never perish.¹

¹ Jn 10:14-16, 27-29

The following verse, *John 3:17*, proves this – “***For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved.***” The whole race of humanity fell in Adam, our federal head and representative. God, therefore, did not send His Son into the world to condemn the whole race of humanity but to save it.¹ Obviously the world He saved was the elect, all who ultimately believe in Him. If Christ were the Savior of every individual without exception, He would be the Savior of both believers and unbelievers. This is contrary to His own declaration – “***He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned.***” (*Mark 16:16*).

If in the death of Christ God intended to save every individual without exception, Christ would be a colossal failure and His blood payment, His propitiation, His righteousness, would be of no real value in the salvation of sinners. It would also place the crux of salvation upon the sinner and require certain conditions that the sinner must meet to obtain and maintain salvation. This would destroy the Gospel truth of God’s unconditional love,² of the righteousness of Christ that secures and demands the salvation of all whom He represented,³ and of salvation by free grace.⁴ As I’ve shown in earlier chapters, if Christ died for all men without exception, His blood does not make the difference between saved and lost. Salvation would then be placed in the hands of ungodly sinners who by nature want no part of God’s free grace.⁵ There would then be no hope for the world because all would be lost, and all would perish without hope.

Christ said, “***For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world.***” (*John 6:33*). In commenting on this passage, an ancient author wrote, “No more can be designed by the *world* than those to whom this

¹ Jn 3:17-18

² 1 Jn 4:10

³ Rom 1:16-17; 5:21

⁴ Rom 3:24; Eph 2:8-9

⁵ Jn 3:19-20

bread of God gives life. It is clear that God does not give life to everyone without exception.” Can it be any clearer?

Those who insist on promoting God’s universal love and a universal redemption (i.e. – that God loves all without exception and Christ died for all without exception) may make the following objection after learning that the “*world*” does not include everyone without exception. They may object that surely in *1 John 2:2*, (the verse first mentioned above), the “whole” world must designate every individual without exception. Surely the phrase “*the whole world*” admits of no exceptions. To the contrary, there are several instances in the Bible where the phrase “*the whole world*” obviously does not mean every individual without exception. One of these is found in the very same epistle, *1 John 5:19* – “*And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness.*” Clearly the “whole world” here excludes the saved, those who knew that they were of God. It refers to the lost, the wicked who are under the power of Satan, the wicked one.

Those who insist on a universal propitiation have the burden to prove that the “world” means every individual that has been, is now, or ever will be. They cannot do this because the Scripture, the Gospel itself, is opposed to such thinking. As stated, God’s justice is opposed to such thinking, for God cannot justly charge the sins of those whom He loves to Christ and then turn around and charge the sins back to them.¹ *2 Corinthians 5:19* speaks of God who “*was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.*” If the “world” here were every individual without exception, then we would have to say not only that all individuals without exception are reconciled unto God but also that God does not charge them with their sin. First of all, we know that every individual without exception is not reconciled unto God. Secondly, if God did not charge a sinner with his sin but still sentenced that sinner to eternal death, God would be unjust. This is absurd. The

¹ Rom 8:33-34

“world” here includes all who have been and will be given spiritual life as evidenced by belief of the Gospel.¹

I cannot overemphasize the truth that “*propitiation*” by definition means salvation acquired and secured, not merely the possibility of salvation. Christ made a “*propitiation*” for the sins of His people, those whom He represented in His death, burial, and resurrection, by having the legal guilt and defilement of their sins imputed, or charged, to Him and by establishing a righteousness in His obedience unto death that was imputed, or charged, to them (See Chapter 7).² Just as sin imputed demands condemnation and death, His righteousness imputed to the elect demands their justification and eternal life.³ They cannot perish, and they will all hear and believe the Gospel. ***Romans 3:25-26*** proves this in speaking of Christ “***Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time His righteousness: that He might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.***”

God is not propitiated (reconciled) toward those who have died or are left to die in unbelief; therefore, if Christ were the Advocate of every individual without exception, including those who have perished in unbelief and those who will perish in the future, what comfort can it be to us that He is our propitiation? If His propitiation was ineffective in their case, what makes us think it will be effective in our case? One may answer, “Ah, but I have believed?” I would say to you then that faith, not Christ, is your savior (Refer again to Chapter 13). Your hope is not in the free grace of God and in Christ’s blood alone. It is in the fact that you have believed. The difference between you who claim to be saved and the lost is not God’s grace but your faith. I would also ask you how you know you will continue to believe. What if you die in a moment of doubt and unbelief? Where is your savior then? You would have no savior because your

¹ 2 Thess 2:13-14

² 2 Cor 5:21

³ Rom 5:17-21; 6:23

unbelief at that point would render Christ's work ineffectual, just as your belief had supposedly rendered it effectual beforehand. I hope you can see how ridiculous this is and how dishonoring such notions are to both God the Father and God the Son.

In what sense then can Christ be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world? I've shown what it cannot mean, but for that to be validated, it's important that we see just what is meant here. In biblical history the issue of salvation as it pertained to the world was most serious considering the national prejudices of the Jews. The Jews accounted themselves as the people of God, and they referred to the Gentiles as "the world." The Jews were God's chosen people under the terms of the Old Covenant – a covenant made exclusively for the nation of Israel. Given this backdrop, after the Messiah had come and abolished the Old Covenant, there was no problem with the truth of particular redemption in the early church, even among Jewish non-believers. Obviously, that is not the case today. Their problem back then was different. Most Jews believed that the blessings of the Messiah, when He should come, would be limited to the Jews and not extended to the Gentiles, the world. This is why they were so adamant to proselytize and gain converts to Judaism. This is also why many Jews who claimed to have been converted to Christianity desired to bring Christians back under the Old Testament law and have them circumcised. These false professors were called Judaizers.

The Old Testament had never taught that eternal salvation was only for the Jews, and it had never taught the fact that being a physical descendant of Abraham automatically made one a child of God, eternally saved. It had always taught that eternal salvation for any sinner, Jew or Gentile, was by the free, sovereign grace of God and based on the righteousness of the promised Messiah. It had always been foretold in the Old Testament that God had an elect people out of every tribe, kindred, tongue, and nation and that when the Messiah would come and finish His work, the Old Covenant would be abolished by way of fulfillment and the New Covenant would be established.¹

¹ Rom 2:28-29; 4:1-12; 9:6-8; Gal 6:14-16; Heb 10:9-10; Rev 5:9

One of the major signs of the establishment of this New Covenant was the Gospel going out freely to the Gentiles. This matter was constantly addressed by the Old Testament prophets and was one of the main reasons for which they were persecuted and murdered by the religious leaders of the nation. John the Baptist addressed it when he said, ***“Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).*** Simeon addressed it when he held the child Jesus and quoted from the Psalms and from Isaiah in identifying the child as the Messiah who would be ***“a light to lighten the Gentiles” (Isa. 42:6; 49:6).*** Christ Himself addressed this issue when He said, ***“And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.” (John 10:16).*** Consider how strong this prejudice was amongst the Jews as evidenced by the account of Christ preaching in His hometown of Nazareth. After He read from ***Isaiah 61***, He applied it to Himself as the Messiah of whom Isaiah prophesied.¹ When they rejected Him,² He used events from Old Testament history to illustrate how their rejection would ultimately be used of God to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles.³ This brought out their anger so much they wanted to kill Him.⁴

It was a major issue in the book of Acts where the apostles and evangelists continually sought to break the confines of Judaism and preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. It was a prejudice of which even the Apostle Peter had difficulty ridding himself⁵ but which had to be settled in the church.⁶ It was an issue that continually burdened the churches as addressed in the epistles since some congregations, especially these to whom John wrote, were mainly Jewish. Therefore, John is simply stating that the *“propitiation”* Christ had made for our sins was not only for Jews who believed the Gospel but also for Gentiles who believed

¹ Lk 4:21

² Lk 4:24

³ Lk 4:25-27

⁴ Lk 4:28-29

⁵ Acts 10:34-35; Gal 2:11-14

⁶ Acts 15:1-29

the Gospel. God has an elect people (for whom He sent Christ to die) all over the world, and it is made up of both Jews and Gentiles. A Jew, by virtue of being a natural descendant of Abraham and being circumcised, had no more qualification for, or right to, the benefits of Christ's "*propitiation*" than a Gentile. On the other hand, a Gentile, by the fact that he was not a natural descendant of Abraham and not circumcised, was not disqualified and barred from the benefits of Christ's "*propitiation*." All sinners, Jew or Gentile, who come to God for salvation based on the "*propitiation*" of Christ, pleading His righteousness alone, shall be saved. Refer to the scriptures footnoted below to see further how this was stressed in the epistles.¹

I hope that seeing the actual context of these passages proves to be helpful in settling what may at first have seemed to be contradictions to other scriptures showing that Christ indeed did not fail in His work of propitiation for His people.

¹ Rom 2:28-29; 9:6-8, 30-33; 10:1-4; 11:1-7; 1 Cor 10:1-12; Gal 2:15-21; 3:7-29; 5:1-12; 6:14-16; Eph 2:11-16; Phil 3:1-11; Col 2:6-19; Heb 13:9-14

Objection #16: I insist that I was born again, even while misunderstanding Christ's work

- *I see now that the doctrines of grace (including particular redemption) must be so; however, I believe anyone who sincerely accepts Christ as his Savior, even with an erroneous view of His redemptive work, shall be saved.*

In Chapter 10, I discussed the reality of idolatry common to all of us before salvation. Using the fable of the six blind men and the elephant as an illustration, I proceeded to show how a denial of any one attribute of God's character is equivalent to a denial of every other attribute and in essence a denial of God Himself. Furthermore, I explained how God cannot act contrary to any one of His attributes. Using myself as an example, I showed the far-reaching implications of having held erroneous views of the redemptive work of Christ. Failing to comprehend what Christ had actually accomplished, I showed how I had unknowingly trusted in an unjust god of my imagination, an idol who was powerless to save any. In discussing the glory of God in Chapter 9, we saw how we come to know who God is by His works, but more specifically, we learn something special about his character that is only revealed in the Person and work of Christ. If you fail to see the relationship between the work of Christ and the Person of Christ, I strongly suggest a review of these two chapters.

In reviewing Chapters 9 and 10, I hope you can see that to have an erroneous view of Christ's work of redemption is equivalent to having an erroneous view of Him, of who He is and of salvation itself. One who voices this objection typically is claiming to agree with the doctrine simply because he sees it is scriptural and realizes that it cannot be refuted. He might suggest that he only differs regarding how much, or exactly what, someone must know to evidence that he has been given spiritual life. A review of these previous chapters will show that it is no minor thing to have misunderstood the very thing Christ came to do – to satisfy God's law and justice perfectly for all those whom

He represented. Make no mistake; to misunderstand what Christ accomplished is to misunderstand Him.

So, that would mean a sincere acceptance of such a ‘christ’ as one’s savior is equivalent to acceptance of a counterfeit. It is to accept someone that you’ve been totally mistaken about. To learn the truth of the Gospel and of the righteousness revealed therein is to discover that you had previously accepted someone you may have called Jesus, but who has been exposed as a fraud. It is true that the historical outward acts of this “Jesus” here on earth may resemble the true Christ, but any resemblance ends once we recognize the slander upon the very character of God perpetuated by this fraud and our tragically erroneous assessment of what His work amounted to. We discover that the imaginary god revealed by this pretender bears no resemblance to the character of the true and living God of the Bible.

The Person of Christ cannot be separated from His accomplished work! To do so is to know or trust in another “Jesus” who in reality is no savior at all but a counterfeit.¹ To be ignorant of what He accomplished in establishing righteousness is not to know who Jesus is and ultimately, not to know that which is uniquely revealed of God the Father by His Person and work – how God can be both a strict judge as well as a loving, merciful Father.

In Chapter 10, I explained how the issue isn’t just if we believe but what or in whom we believe. With that in mind, we see that this objection may be nothing more than an excuse for man’s determined, natural resistance to God’s way of salvation. We rebelliously refuse to act upon and apply that which we say we have learned to be true. I hope this is not the case with you. If one has truly come to understand Christ’s work of redemption but refuses to repent from former idolatry, he is left with nothing of substance upon which to base his hope. This exposes the low value he places upon the truth itself. He must cling to that which he produced – a sincere, well-intentioned acceptance of a counterfeit. If that equates to salvation, then God’s standard of

¹ 2 Cor 11:4

judgment is reduced to this – If you want to consider yourself saved, then you are, independent of your concept of God. If such were the case, then Christ died in vain.¹ I believe you can see the folly of such reasoning. So, my plea to you is just that – let us reason!

¹ Gal 2:21

Objection #17: One may evidence their salvation through belief in the gospel while ignorant of what Christ accomplished

- *I concur with most of your doctrine; however when it comes to an individual's salvation, I believe that Christ's work is so effectual that he saves many who continue in ignorance concerning Christ and what He accomplished.*
- *I agree with much of your doctrine and with the necessity of believing the Gospel. I simply do not agree with your narrow definition of the Gospel and believe many are saved who remain in ignorance about just what Christ accomplished.*

Actually, I have heard this objection from two different viewpoints. Some object that knowing Christ is a more “personal” matter. Although it is truly personal, many who articulate such a view often portray salvation as something mystical. It’s not uncommon to hear folks say, “If you’re saved, you’ll know it.” Again, this is true, but unfortunately what is often suggested here is that the very standard for determining one’s own salvation is based upon whether they “feel” saved, independent of their doctrine or beliefs concerning Christ and his work (See Objection #7).

To a large extent, my response to the immediately preceding objection (#16) and the early chapters referenced there may be applied here as well. Again, Christ’s Person and work cannot be separated. Actually, the Scriptures are very clear on this issue. The Bible declares with no ambiguity that to abide in the doctrine of Christ is to have God, giving evidence of having been saved. Conversely, it tells us that to not abide in the doctrine of Christ is not to have God, to be lost.¹

Some will argue that God can do anything – after all, He is God. They suggest that He could have given me spiritual life and yet I remained ignorant of who He was – perhaps

¹ 2 Jn 9

regenerating me without me even realizing it. Since He can do anything, they presume that perhaps this is what He decided to do. I ask you to consider that there really are some things that God cannot do. For example, He cannot tell a lie.¹ He cannot be unjust. In short, the all-powerful God cannot do anything contrary to His character as an infinite and holy God. God is sovereign and He can do as He pleases. He is confined only by the necessity that He acts consistent with His very being.

That said, we can know something about what this sovereign God does do. God has graciously revealed in the Bible much of what He has determined to do, especially as it pertains to the issue of salvation. This revelation includes His design to glorify Himself in the salvation of sinners. He tells us specifically that in saving a sinner, He will be glorified in their hearts (in their minds, their affections, and wills) by revealing His redemptive character through the Person and work of Christ.² God tells us that He has decided to reveal something of Himself to those He saves in order that he might achieve His ultimate purpose of glorifying Himself. So we see that the objection that those God saves can remain in ignorance is unarguably not scriptural. God does not leave His adopted children in ignorance. In each successive generation, God will indeed save (deliver) all those for whom Christ died from their ignorance and spiritual darkness. God cannot lie and He tells us through His Word that He will reveal Himself to those He saves.³ Scripture tells us that idolatry and false religion itself springs from a lack of knowledge.⁴

Finally, some maintain that one might well judge himself and others as saved while yet ignorant of Christ's work of establishing righteousness because they do not believe this to be an essential part of the knowledge that is revealed by God-given faith. Though they concur with the necessity of believing the gospel, they simply differ in their definition of what the gospel is. What I consider to be basics of the Gospel, they would

¹ Num 23:19; Rom 3:4; Titus 1:2

² 2 Cor 4:6

³ Jn 6:45; 17:3

⁴ Isa 45:20; Rom 10:1-3

consider as unessential – and certainly not worth the effort put forth in writing a book on the subject. Some of these would reduce the gospel definition to little more than the historical facts of Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection, neglecting the significance of what these events actually accomplished, “according to the scriptures” (See Chapter 10).¹ If we’re to resolve this argument so as to side with God’s definition of the gospel, then the Bible must be our guide.

From the Scriptures we learn that this is indeed an extremely important issue – one in which there is no margin for error. God gives us specific instructions and warnings to beware of those who would promote any other gospel, or another gospel than that which He communicates to us in the Bible.² It is no surprise that, independent of how others define the gospel; they will apply these same warnings in reference to those who disagree with them. Just as I repeat the scriptural warnings to my friends to beware of that “other gospel” being promoted to them, I have discovered that others have said the same in warning their friends to steer clear of my beliefs.

So which warning should you heed? The obvious answer is that we should support and defend the Gospel as God defines it. Unfortunately, these same scriptural warnings are often used to deter someone from examining anything contrary to that which they currently embrace. Consider if everyone heeded this advice – then no one’s mind would ever change. Those who are tragically in error as to what the gospel is would never consider anything to the contrary. Given man’s natural predisposition to oppose God’s way and to define his own standard, (his own gospel so to speak), then no one would ever repent and come to a belief in God’s Gospel. These scriptural warnings should make us ever diligent to test that which we believe against any and all rivals, rather than blindly refuse to make an evaluation under the assumption that something is false simply because it is contrary to what I presently consider to be true.³

¹ 1 Cor 15:3-4

² 2 Cor 11:4; Gal 1:6-9

³ 1 Pet 3:15

As I pointed out in the introduction to this book, if what you believe is true, it should stand up to the scrutiny of God's Word. I encourage you not to be deterred from your search, but rather take seriously the scriptural admonition to discern and judge doctrine. Like mine in years past, your understanding of the gospel may be the one in error. I urge you to find out. If we are truly to be watchful and wary of false gospels, as commanded by scripture, then it is imperative to be absolutely sure that the gospel we embrace is God's Gospel.¹ Some of my friends take the position that they have no need even to consider what I have to say since they are already convinced they are right – confident they believe the true gospel. The only response I can offer to them is, "But what if you're not right? What if you are wrong?" No one intentionally opts to be wrong! Before hearing and believing the Gospel, I too was convinced I was right, that I too believed the true gospel, but I was mistaken – I was wrong! Without question, the Gospel I believe today is not the gospel I formerly believed – the same gospel that most of my friends still believe. By necessity, at least one of these gospels is false. There is only one Gospel and it's imperative that you determine the truth – God's Gospel that must be believed unto salvation.

If your definition of the gospel doesn't coincide with God's, then your confidence in His promise to save those who believe His Gospel is on shaky ground. That which has been your source of assurance is, in reality, mere presumption if what you consider to be essential gospel truth differs from that which the Judge of all declares to be the Gospel. To those whose viewpoint I have aptly described here, I strongly suggest you review Chapter 10 again and consider what is written there in answer to the question, "What is the Gospel?" Hopefully this will help you discover God's definition of the Gospel – the one that truly matters.

¹ Gal 1:8; 2 Jn 9

Objection #18: Still was converted – I just didn’t consider these things

- *I now concur with your doctrine; however, I do believe I trusted in the true and living God before gaining what you consider to be essential knowledge. Admittedly my conception of His character was flawed and in some respects, dishonoring; yet, I did know many true things about God as revealed in the Scriptures. At that time, I simply didn’t think about it from the perspective I now have.*

I am quite familiar with this last objection, for it too was mine. This was the last hurdle that I had to confront after having heard and understood the Gospel. I had conceded that God must save sinners based solely upon the ground of Christ’s righteousness imputed; yet I remained determined to force fit my former faith into this new found doctrine. Under the preaching of the Gospel, I came to see how many of my former thoughts of God were dishonoring. Being somewhat knowledgeable of the Scriptures, I did know many true things about God long before I heard the true Gospel. I’ll never forget the confrontation with reality that exposed my own former idolatry and need for repentance – the discovery that more than just a change in doctrine was called for – the realization that my god had been an idol concocted in the minds of fallen humanity (See commentary on “repentance” in Chapter 10).

At the time this objection came to my mind, God had providentially brought the Gospel of His grace, wherein Christ’s righteousness is revealed, to my attention. Despite my religious upbringing, I knew that for the first 32 years of my life I had never heard this truth. I still recall one specific Sunday in 1985. After having heard a sermon that clearly distinguished God’s Gospel from the false refuge I was clinging to, my wife asked, “So, do you still think you were brought to Christ under that?” – Referring to that body of belief that had been exposed as false. By then, my former confidence was shaken, yet I still needed to come to grips with my past experience. I started having lunch

with this young Gospel preacher, peppering him with questions – for this was all very new to me. Around that same time, this same preacher delivered a message on “essential truth.”

During lunch the following week, I delivered some version of this objection to him. Although I can’t recite the conversation verbatim, I remember well this turning point – well enough that I can convey the gist of the discussion. My argument centered on the possibility that, in spite of all my doctrinal error, I still could have accepted the true Christ and trusted in the true and living God of the Bible. I conceded that I could now see some of the implications that accompanied my erroneous concept of the work of Christ. For example, I knew that I had been mistaken in my universal view of Christ’s redemptive work – even that my concept would amount to no real redemption at all. Knowing my own sincerity and the strong emotions that attended what I thought to be a vibrant, personal relationship with Christ, I was struggling to make what I had recently learned fit with my past religious experience.

I asked this preacher why I should conclude that the god I worshipped then was not one and the same as the God of the Bible simply because my doctrine was in error. Why, for years I had believed that salvation was by grace – at least my concept of grace. I thought I believed salvation was based upon what Christ had done though admittedly my understanding of that was flawed. I would have even said that it was all of Christ, all the while believing doctrine to the contrary. I never had knowingly thought that my salvation was based upon my efforts or works, although I had come to see that my false doctrine exposed as much.

In hindsight, I was grasping for one last straw. I had learned of the essential truth that makes up the Gospel of grace – of salvation conditioned on Christ alone. Even though I had never heard the term, “imputed righteousness,” I considered it possible that I had acquired some vague understanding of that basic vital truth. After all, I would have maintained that it was all of Christ and He was the only way. Was it not possible that I had heard

enough of the true Gospel, of salvation conditioned on Christ alone, in a past sermon, no matter how clouded it might have been by other erroneous teachings?

In answer to this, this preacher asked me to consider the spiritual “conversion” of my youth. He said for the moment to assume that I had experienced true spiritual conversion. He asked if I would agree that, by necessity, this would mean I had been convinced by the Holy Spirit of sin, righteousness, and judgment – of the impossibility of being saved based upon anything other than the merits of Christ’s work of redemption. He knew that I now understood what God’s Gospel really was and that we agreed upon this and the necessity of believing this Gospel. This preacher, having attended a theological seminary sponsored by the same religious denomination that I had belonged to since my childhood, also knew my background well. We both grew up hearing and believing that Christ died for all without exception. This was consistent with our denomination’s doctrinal position. Knowing this, he said to assume for a moment that somehow I had heard the essential truth of God’s Gospel, even if the terminology wasn’t the same. Hearing and believing God’s Gospel would mean that I had rested totally in Christ as my Savior, and, having been convinced of sin, I knew that it must be based solely upon His work. With our common religious background, he knew that, subsequent to my assumed conversion, I would have soon heard the familiar refrain from that very same pulpit – the proclamation that God loves everyone and that Christ died for everyone without exception.

He then painted this picture for me. Suppose I had come to Christ, banking my eternal security on His provision alone – His satisfaction to God’s requirement for salvation. Now, remember we’re not talking about some minor point of doctrine but rather that which I believed crucial to my own eternal destiny. Upon hearing that Christ had died for the sins of all, and knowing full well that the Bible said that multitudes perish, does it not stand to reason that this would have caused immediate and considerable distress? Isn’t it clear that, had I truly been trusting in Christ alone, I would have immediately confronted this preacher

with the obvious? I would have told him in distress how I had believed his earlier gospel message and had placed all of my confidence in the Person and work of Christ, yet he was now suggesting that this wouldn't really fit the bill – that many of those for whom Christ had died would still perish. You would think I would have explained how that if Christ died for any who perished, then I was robbed of all hope, having been convinced that nothing other than Christ's atoning work for me would address my sin condition so as to remove God's wrath and gain His favor.

Given my background, it is predictable that this false preacher would have then offered comfort and reassurance to me, pointing out that although this Christ died for all, that it was my faith and trust in him that made the difference and secured my salvation. Obviously, had I truly been convinced of sin and of righteousness, such an answer to this hypothetical complaint would have offered no comfort at all – but rather would have driven me away to worship elsewhere, where the true Gospel (the one I presumed to have heard) was regularly preached and promoted, not just extracted by accident from a preacher whose message was routinely in opposition to God's truth. I had to agree that were the premise correct, that I had somehow heard and believed God's Gospel at that time, it would have been unreasonable for me to have repeatedly failed to react to doctrine which stood in stark contradiction to that which presumably constituted my hope for eternity.

My many subsequent years of continued support and fellowship with this same denomination, subsequent to my so-called "conversion" experience, made the irrationality of my position painfully obvious. My only remaining defense was, "but I didn't think about it that way." This preacher then gently explained how that fact alone – that it didn't even cross my mind – should answer my question and expose I was indeed lost at that time. The Bible characterizes those who are lost as having "no fear of God before their eyes."¹ As explained in an earlier chapter, this refers to the fact that before salvation we have no respect for the

¹ Rom 3:18

honor of God's character in salvation – how He must be both a just God and a Savior. Consequently, we don't even recognize the slander upon God's character suggested by such God dishonoring doctrines. It doesn't cross our minds because it's of no importance to us. We simply just "don't think about it that way."

Contrast that with how attuned and reactive most of us are to even the hint of anything that casts doubt on the honor of our own earthly family members. I know that as a kid, any disparaging remarks about my own mom or dad would have been fighting words for my brothers and me. Yet for years, when it came to defending the honor of my heavenly Father, I not only tolerated but also heartily endorsed the disparaging remarks implicit in the religious doctrine I was taught. Why, they effectively called my heavenly Father an unjust failure, unable or unwilling to save the objects of his worthless love. I wasn't attuned to defending His honor because I didn't recognize the slander. I didn't think about it that way. Actually, they were describing my heavenly father (an idol of my imagination), but it wasn't the true and living God of the Bible.

The Bible tells us that it is Satan's goal to blind us from God's glory – the revelation of His character.¹ Remaining oblivious or blind to such considerations is to remain in a lost state, spiritually dead, and alienated from the true and living God. As I hope you see, most of organized religion serves Satan well in this endeavor.

For any of my friends who identify with this objection and confront this obstacle, I hope that, as with me, this will be a turning point – a hurdle God also enables you to cross. We cannot and will not repent of an idol we've yet to recognize. As I pointed out in Chapter 10, until we experience this initial repentance, we give evidence that our faith is not of God. This reveals we aren't truly convinced that God's way of salvation is the only way if we continue to consider it possible that somehow we, or others, might have been truly converted while ignorant of (or not

¹ 2 Cor 4:3-4

submitted to) the imputed righteousness of God in Christ as the only valid basis upon which sinners are saved.

As a note of interest, I am pleased to report that this same “young” preacher, William W. (Bill) Parker, who first preached the true Gospel to me and successfully guided my search, remains my dear friend to this day. I thank God for a friend like this!

How Will You Respond?

If, like an adventurous explorer, you enjoy the excitement of discovering things rarely witnessed by others, then you should be on cloud nine by now! Actually, it is disturbing that so very few have been exposed to that which you've now read – God's standard of judgment and the gracious provision of salvation found exclusively in the merits of Christ's redemptive work, His righteousness. I know that when I first embraced the true Gospel of grace, of salvation conditioned on Christ alone, I marveled at how fortunate and privileged I was to have "stumbled" upon this glorious truth – a seemingly hidden treasure obscured by the clutter of today's more popular religious doctrines. I quickly became conscious of the fact that I didn't "stumble" upon anything. God, in His infinite wisdom and power, will reveal to His people His way of salvation, His Gospel. The sovereign God of our universe providentially orders our lives and circumstances to achieve His purpose in all things. He shall deliver His people from their spiritual darkness using the very means He has predetermined and made known to us in His Word.¹ God specifically makes known that all who are saved come to hear and believe His Gospel wherein the imputed righteousness of God in Christ is revealed.²

Although most all of my friends have been exposed to a "gospel," very few have even heard or concerned themselves with how God could be both a just God and a Savior, how He could be both merciful to them and still punish their sins. Very few have considered how God's law and justice must be satisfied in the salvation of any sinner. Few have even heard of the concept of Christ's righteousness being imputed and, in turn, discovered it to be the only basis upon which a sinner attains eternal life in heaven. Still fewer have been confronted with the necessity of repentance – a rejection of and a turning from that which

¹ Psa 110:3; Rom 8:29-30; 2 Thess 2:13-14; 2 Tim 1:9

² Mk 16:15-16; Rom 1:16-17

they naturally considered to be pleasing to God (such as their religious efforts) at a time when they were still ignorant of or not submitted to Christ's righteousness imputed as the only hope and basis upon which acceptance with God is achieved.

So, whether you agree with what I've written or not, perhaps you will concede this: that what I believe to be the true Gospel is definitely contrary to that which today's mainstream "Christianity" declares. The real issue now is, what will you do with this conflicting assertion? Consider for a moment, even if hypothetically, that what I've purported in this book is indeed consistent with God's truth and vital to your eternal destiny. If so, then you too have now experienced one of the greatest privileges afforded to any son or daughter of Adam. You are among a select group who have heard the invaluable and vital truths of God's Gospel, a message seemingly hidden and so rare in contrast to the far more prevalent "broad" path that leads to destruction.¹ You indeed are among the fortunate few. Assuming that you have read this book, I now know that God has providentially brought His Gospel your way. If God is in control (as He must be), then like me, you too didn't just "stumble" upon this new doctrine. What will you do with this wonderful privilege? How will you respond?

The options are several. Under the reasonable assumption that you've not yet been convinced of the validity of what I've written, you will now proceed on one of several paths. Yogi Berra, the famous baseball player, is quoted as saying, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." Contrary to Yogi's humorous quip, this is no light matter. Which path you choose in dealing with this issue really is important.

Clearly, if you don't concur with what I have to say, you may squander the privilege you've been afforded, not recognizing it as a "privilege" at all. My caution to you is simply this, "But what if you're wrong? Is it possible for you to have been mistaken? What if this is the truth, contrary to that which you now believe?" As I've stated earlier, recognition that this book is

¹ Matt 7:13

motivated by a friend's genuine concern for your welfare should, in itself, merit a thorough, objective consideration on your part. It is, from this friend's perspective, as if a doctor is begging a terminally ill patient to accept what the doctor knows to be a sure and certain cure.

In the Bible, we have an illustration of how people respond differently to the Gospel. In the parable of the Seed and the Sower, God relates how His Word, the seed, falls upon different types of ground, different hearers, and He divulges the accompanying results.¹ In essence, that is what this chapter is all about. Although the farmer attempts to prepare the ground, water, weed, and fertilize, ultimately God provides the harvest.

When I read this parable, I'm reminded of my mother. For much of my life, I witnessed firsthand her love for growing things. She so enjoyed tending to her many beautiful flowers, shrubs, and trees. For many years she painstakingly prepared a garden and with her green thumb reaped some of the most delicious homegrown vegetables I've ever put in my mouth. It was a good thing that she truly enjoyed this hobby because from my perspective it looked a lot like work – hard work. Each year, she carefully prepared the ground, planted, fertilized, weeded, watered, and nurtured her garden – seeking to optimize the probability of another wonderful and tasty harvest. Just one look at her beautiful flowerbeds and it was obvious that she truly had a passion for growing things.

I have, in one respect, tried to emulate my mother in my approach to this book. I too have taken great care in sowing this seed, hoping to be well received, as inoffensive as possible, and desiring good results from the effort. I truly hope that nothing I've written will detract from my treasured friendships. More importantly, I pray that this effort will prove fruitful in moving some of these relationships to a new and deeper realm, a spiritual kinship based upon a shared belief in the one true Gospel. My passion for this effort is kindled by the importance of the subject – a subject with eternal consequences. As I've said throughout,

¹ Matt 13:3-8, 18-23

this was written with my friends in mind. As objects of our love and concern, true friends deserve our utmost care and attention. While recognizing my limitations, I have still painstakingly attempted to present this vital information to my friends as clearly and convincingly as possible. I know God uses means such as these, and I consider it a duty as well as a labor of love as I unashamedly attempt to persuade and convince you, the reader, of what I know to be true and essential for eternal life.

That said, I haven't lost sight of the fact that God still gives the increase. We creatures are mere instruments. God does not fail. For all whom God chose, whom Christ died for, God the Holy Spirit will give life – spiritual life.¹ The ground (the sinner's heart) will be prepared, the seed (His Gospel) will be sown, and God will bring forth fruit unto eternal life. Mere mortal men such as I certainly can't botch the fulfillment of God's purpose to save His people – what a relief!

So again, what now? How will you respond? In my own experience, I've encountered many friends who casually seem to dismiss the subject after little or no consideration. I've seen others who gain an understanding but stop short in their search, much like the "stony ground hearer" depicted in the aforementioned parable. Thankfully, I've also seen those who continue their search until it all adds up. They seek and find the priceless treasure consistent with the very promises of God. Let's examine this further.

Early Dismissal – Passive Indifference

We each have a conscience, our personal seat of judgment by which we excuse or accuse others and ourselves. At issue here is this – how will you deal with your own conscience as it pertains to this important subject? The Bible teaches that there are only two types of conscience: (1) the legal, defiled conscience that each of us inherited from our natural father Adam, and (2) the cleansed conscience which only true believers have, given to them by God the Holy Spirit in spiritual birth.

¹ Rom 8:29-30

We've all heard of ruthless criminals who seem to have no conscience at all, a mind seemingly void of any sense of right and wrong. For whatever reason they have squelched their conscience to the point that it has no effect whatsoever on their judgments. Certainly this "squelching" of one's conscience can occur to varying degrees. In the Old Testament, when God's prophet revealed God's disfavor and displeasure with Israel, we read of how false prophets and other lost neighbors healed their hurt "slightly,"¹ the spiritual implication being that their religious efforts provided some relief but no everlasting cure. God's prophet, Jeremiah, would not speak peace to them and offer comfort that did not come from God. False prophets spoke peace and told the people what they wanted to hear, but such comfort was not based on God's testimony. Many who quickly choose to dismiss the truth of the Gospel as God defines it, mistakenly apply the same medicine. Believing salvation is ultimately conditioned on them (or that which they believe God has enabled them to do), their sincere religious efforts and actions serve as a salve to soothe their conscience and provide relief from the anxiety that accompanies a serious, objective consideration of these things. Unfortunately, such a course may indeed treat the symptoms but not the disease. Their home remedy (as opposed to God's prescribed remedy) does nothing to address the injury to God's holy law and justice. One who seeks salvation or some part of it this way, based upon something that proceeds from them, give evidence of being guided by a legal, defiled conscience.

As I've noted already, some of the objections listed in the previous chapter are often voiced by those who really have no intention of entertaining that they may be mistaken about the basis for their hope for heaven. They are comfortable with their religion because their way to heaven does seem right to them. It seems so right that they have no need even to look into something that would intrude upon this sense of contentment. This is the case with many despite the clear scriptural declaration that the way that naturally seems right to us leads to destruction.²

¹ Jer 6:14

² Prov 14:12; 16:25

That alone should make us willing to put our doctrine to the test.

This indifference is manifested in various ways. I've seen friends who, though exposed to God's requirement and provision of righteousness in the Gospel, will not even attempt to substantiate whether this is God's standard or not. Recognizing the implications that would accompany such a discovery, they will not seek to understand. Unwilling to address the scriptural based reasoning set forth in the Gospel doctrine that exposes the fallacy of all other ways, many simply determine to stay where they are. They are not willing to confront even the possibility that they are mistaken. To these I suggest that you put this book away for now in the hopes that somewhere down the road you'll be stirred to reconsider your friend's well-intentioned encouragements.

Early Dismissal – Shoot the Messenger

As I alluded to in the opening chapter, I have had some friends get offended, if not downright angry over being told of the necessity of coming to God His way – pleading the righteousness of Christ alone. Actually, most so-called “Christians” have no problem with that stand-alone assertion. Rather, the anger surfaces when they are confronted with how their own religious doctrine stands in direct opposition to God's way. Some of my friends who have reacted this way do not even understand the basis for such seemingly “unloving” judgments on my part. All they know is they do not want to hear anything if it doesn't coincide with their own current assessment of their religious state. These are not seeking the Lord. They are merely seeking confirmations.

The Scriptures indicate that anger over a confrontation with God's Gospel message is only natural because the Gospel light exposes even the best of our deeds as actually evil in the sight of God. For this reason men hate the light of God's true Gospel. The Scriptures teach us that it was for this reason Christ Himself was hated and that, in turn, His followers suffer the same scorn, at least to some degree. In this specific way, all naturally (before spiritual conversion) love what the Bible refers to as darkness,

not wanting that which they have considered to be “good” to be exposed as “evil.”¹ Often this anger blinds any further consideration of the validity of the message. Disliking the conclusion, some refuse to examine the supporting facts. One friend who bluntly told me that he wished to discuss it no more, to this day has not examined why I would conclude he is in such peril. He isn’t interested in understanding why I believe as I do. He simply rejects it because the accompanying implications are offensive to him.

Like the passively indifferent, those who become angry will also initially dismiss the subject without seeking to determine the validity. The only difference is that they tend to take it out on the messenger. Instead of seeking to determine objectively if the assertions are true, they will reason that since they already know they are saved and heaven bound, then I and my doctrine must be wrong. To those who feel this way, I encourage you to remember what this book is about. How can you know that you are the Lord’s indeed? We do not honestly attempt to determine the truth by jumping to a conclusion and then constructing the “truth” so as to validate that presupposition. That is the religion of man. Instead, I plead with you again to judge according to God’s truth revealed in His Word.

Although you may have been among those who quickly dismissed the Gospel upon hearing it initially, I am encouraged that this may not be the case with you now. The very fact that you’ve read this far through the book suggests some probability that you’ve moved beyond a passive indifference or angry rejection that culminates in an early and unreasoned dismissal of the subject. Whether you accept it or not, the Bible teaches that as fallen creatures, we all begin our journey in like league with Satan, prone to seek salvation our own way. So anyone who has ever come to true God-given faith is first providentially drawn by God to hear, understand, and believe His Gospel wherein God is glorified, Christ is exalted, and all boasting is excluded in the sinner.² The Bible tells us that God justifies, or saves, the

¹ Jn 3:19-21; 7:7; 15:18-16:3; Rom 8:17

² Jn 6:37,44; Rom 3:24-27; 10:13-14; Eph 2:8-9; Col 1:18-19

ungodly.¹ My prayer is that God's grace might likewise now shine upon you as well.

Almost Persuaded

I've also had friends who really did take the time to understand what I believe. Perhaps this was in deference to our friendship and recognizing the good intentions of a true friend. Whatever the motivation, they hear enough to see that it really does add up, that they cannot honestly refute the truth of God's Gospel of grace. Some will even go so far as to give some due diligence in terms of confirming that these startling new truths are indeed supported and confirmed by the standard of truth – God's Word. My biggest concern now for you, the reader, is that you too will understand and see at least some validity to what I've purported to be vital to your eternal security, yet stop short of exercising genuine God-given faith and repentance. I've seen friends who came close but suddenly retreated as the implications became evident. No doubt, if you're like me, the discovery of the true Gospel is certainly unsettling, especially to one already steeped in some form of organized religion.

I've witnessed friends who counted the cost and simply considered it too high. Consider the costs for yourself. If you're at all like me, confronting the reality will likely equate to some personally unsettling realizations such as:

- I have been mistaken, sadly mistaken, lost – even worshipping an idol of my own imagination.²
- All of my religious efforts that I thought were “good” were actually evil – fruit unto death.³
- Likeminded friends and relatives are in the same boat I've been in – lost and on the road to destruction.

¹ Rom 4:5

² Isa 6:1-5; Phil 3:7-10

³ Rom 7:5

- With respect to some deceased friends and relatives that I thought were secure in heaven, I sadly realize that they too were ignorant of that which I now know to be essential to saving grace.
- I would have to conclude that my years of sincere, “real” religious experiences and efforts, zeal, and fervor have all been worthless – even evil in God’s sight.

The list could go on but you get the idea. It can truly be unsettling, just as it was for me. None, including yours truly, ever take up this “cross” apart from the grace of God. As far as I can tell, it is because of ramifications such as these that many will simply cling to the status quo, even if it means flying in the face of reason and logic – more specifically, God’s reasoning and logic. They will simply put it out of their minds and choose to ignore the realities to which they’ve been exposed. I fear this is often the case with some of my “Calvinist” friends who agree on so much but stop short of repentance.

To repeat, my chief concern for you, the reader, at this point is that you might stop short in your search. This far into the book, you too have now been confronted with irrefutable truths – truths vital to your own eternal welfare. What will you do with them? Some may be “almost persuaded” (to use the biblical language) but stop short as they weigh the costs.¹ Let’s face it – there is risk associated with an honest search. The risk is that you may discover you’ve been wrong. I definitely found this to be the case with me.

To any inclined to abandon an objective consideration of these things, I plead with you to reconsider. It seems to me that one could not come this far in understanding God’s Gospel and honestly discard it. I suggest that to do so is to be dishonest with one’s self. There are many ways that this may be manifested. We can try to force fit what we’ve heard with our past, contrary to God’s Gospel that glorifies God, exalts Christ, and excludes all grounds for boasting in ourselves. We can take parts of what

¹ Acts 26:28

we've heard and weave it together so as to convince ourselves that it really isn't that different, contrary to the scripturally based evidence set forth in this book that proves otherwise.

Sometimes friends will counter that they're actually in agreement by considering one facet of doctrine and interpreting it in some convenient fashion that meshes with their preconceived viewpoints. As an example, I've often observed friends who upon being confronted with clear scriptures that set forth the truth of the doctrine of election, simply redefine it in terms suitable to their doctrine of works – of salvation ultimately conditioned on the sinner. Some will explain away God's election by suggesting that God simply looks down through the "telescope of time" and chooses or elects those whom He foresees will respond by their act of faith. Those who would so argue fail to deal with the implications of such thinking. They fool themselves by refusing to consider this would mean that almighty God reacted to the sinner, learned something He did not know before, found merit in that which He learned and responded by changing in kind. They refuse to recognize how this would deny many of the very attributes of God – His immutability, His infinite wisdom or omniscience, His omnipotence, and so on. Such an argument ultimately reveals that this person is clinging to an idol who "saves" him based upon conditions he foresees the person will meet. Anyway you cut it, it's still salvation conditioned on the sinner and that's the religion of works – not God's way.

This is just one out of a multitude of examples of how one may dishonestly reason away further consideration and cut short an objective search for the truth. Such efforts may soothe the conscience as we rationalize away the Gospel truths that oppose and undermine what we've believed up to now – but I suggest that such efforts are dishonest. Our rationalization doesn't necessarily equate to sound reasoning; rather, it may be nothing more than an effort to make our reasoning seem to be sound. In this case, the victim and culprit are one and the same – you're only being dishonest with yourself. My plea is that this will not be the case with you.

A Second Opinion

We've all heard the sound advice, "get a second opinion," particularly when it comes to a troubling medical diagnosis requiring serious treatment. To confront the realities exposed by the light of God's Gospel is paramount to submitting to radical surgery. It is a big deal – not to be entered into lightly. We must be sure of the diagnosis and the prescribed cure if we're to continue down this road. I've seen friends progress this far in their consideration of the true Gospel only to be sidetracked by a "valued" second opinion. I do not ask that you blindly believe what I have to say, but I also caution you about the difficulties involved in maintaining objectivity as you seek and receive the counsel of others.

Fortunately, in light of today's medical advances, second opinions concerning our physical welfare are more likely than not to confirm and validate that which we've initially been told. We often rely on the majority opinion to guide our critical decisions. Even at that, we are wise to make sure we understand why the diagnosis and prescribed cure make sense. After all, our health is at stake.

Unfortunately, the odds of arriving at the truth regarding our spiritual health based upon a majority opinion are slim to none. Without question, the diagnosis and accompanying remedy necessary for your spiritual health, as I've set forth in this book, is a minority opinion. The mere fact that I hold a minority viewpoint does not validate it to be true, but neither does it invalidate it (or prove it) to be false. I remind you again that when it comes to salvation, the Scriptures make it abundantly clear that God's way is in the minority. This should make us even more diligent to search objectively for the truth, to be wary and on guard against drawing conclusions based upon the consensus of the religious "experts." The Bible makes it clear that the vast majority of religionists are fatally mistaken.

Still, it is only reasonable that we seek the counsel of those whose opinions we hold in high esteem. As the premise of the

previous chapter suggests, we must not ignore, but rather deal with conflicting points of view if we are eventually to arrive at the truth. I am not discouraging a thorough evaluation, but I am warning you not to fall victim to the “herd mentality.” To repeat, when it comes to vital spiritual things, the Bible makes it clear that most are in error.¹ You should evaluate all assertions in light of this fact and with a determination to unearth the truth, independent of the popularity of the viewpoint or the reputation of the source.

A close friend recently exemplified the kind of dogged determination and discipline that is invaluable in the search for truth. This friend’s wife had been declined life insurance coverage because the test results from a physical examination indicated possible abnormalities pertaining to her liver. This in turn led to multiple doctor visits and further tests designed to ascertain the seriousness of the threat to her health. Fortunately, it was ultimately determined that the condition wasn’t life threatening and simply merited periodic monitoring. Although the qualified physician insisted that it was nothing to worry about, my friend wisely did not accept that at face value. I was impressed with my friend’s thoroughness and determination to make sure that it all made sense to him. Although the first doctor had made an accurate diagnosis, his explanation failed to answer satisfactorily the conflicting data – specifically that the insurance company had considered the abnormal test results of such importance that they did not want to assume the risk of providing life insurance for his wife. He wisely sought a second opinion from an equally qualified specialist.

Being told again that the condition was not serious and that it did not merit any treatment other than periodic monitoring, my friend demanded further explanation. He admitted to this highly credentialed specialist that he knew little or nothing about medical science; nevertheless, he did know when things did not add up. Unfazed by the doctor’s credentials and expertise in his field, my friend asked the doctor to explain why they should have confidence in this diagnosis given that the insurance

¹ Matt 7:13-14

company still considered his wife's life to be an unacceptable risk. My friend explained the obvious – that the insurance company thought it was serious, so serious that they appeared to place some probability on her dying prematurely. He understood the obvious – that insurance companies refuse to write life insurance to those they consider most likely to die. He insisted upon an explanation that would reconcile this conflict. He was determined to get to the bottom of it – and he did.

To make a long story short, when all was said and done, the doctor's explanation made sense – my friend had gotten to the bottom of it. He likely would not have bothered to reconcile the inconsistencies on matters of less consequence, but not in this case. It mattered! His dear wife's physical health was at stake – potentially a life and death issue – and he wasn't going to take easy, "just trust me" style answers.

I am simply suggesting again that when your spiritual health is at stake – an issue of **eternal** life and death – that you too refuse to settle for "easy" answers. If you genuinely seek to get to the bottom of this issue, then you may well begin testing my assertions by getting a second opinion. More often than not, before changing our minds about long held convictions, we turn to those who have taught us, whose guidance and instruction we have trusted in the past. When that course is pursued in evaluation of God's truth, it is a virtual certainty that one will receive a conflicting and dissuading viewpoint. I only ask that you force any who would seek to persuade you otherwise to address and defend the inconsistencies in their doctrine that I've pointed out in this book – in light of God's testimony. Like my friend, you may have limited knowledge on the subject, but you too know when things do or do not add up – if you choose to deal with it. This, our spiritual health, also matters – far more than anything else in this life and beyond.

Surprisingly, folks who will take a "show me" attitude with respect to things of far less consequence, will fool themselves when it comes to the subject at hand. Many will often go through the motions of seeking and searching, quickly

discounting what they've heard or read as soon as they receive a respected opinion that endorses their natural inclinations and resistance to change. Having proceeded beyond an out-of-hand dismissal, many still tend to latch quickly onto anything that might be used to justify clinging to their presumed hope of salvation. An uncontested second opinion often seems to serve this purpose, providing temporary relief from the frightful implications that inevitably accompany an unequivocal acceptance of God's Gospel.

If you're among those willing to draw such weighty conclusions based solely upon the fact that it is the uncontested viewpoint of someone else, then I fear that you too will have stopped short of exercising genuine God-given faith. It is not my opinion that matters, nor the second or third opinion. What does matter are the facts – the truth and reality of God's standard for judgment. Let God's Word be your standard for truth and do not rest until the vital questions pertaining to your eternal state have been resolved.

Seek and Find

If, like those I've described as "almost persuaded," you've read this far, it is probable that you understand what I believe to be essential Gospel doctrine, whether or not you are yet convinced of its validity. Perhaps the only difference between you and those whose persuasion stopped short at the "almost" stage is that you simply are not willing to settle, not willing to stop short in your search until things truly add up. I know in my own case, the truth of the Gospel continued to gnaw away at me in such a way that I just couldn't seem to put it aside. I now know that "gnawing away" was the effectual drawing of God the Father.¹ God had prepared the soil.

Assuming you're willing to continue your quest for the truth, I offer some encouraging news. I take God at His Word when He tells us, "Seek and ye shall find."² I am convinced that if you

¹ Psalms 110:3; John 6:44

² Matthew 7:7-8

accept this challenge and genuinely and objectively seek to know God as He is, aligning with God's way of salvation, you shall succeed (find). You may well ask, "But what about those who are sincere and religiously zealous, yet ignorant of God's way of salvation? Aren't they seeking, yet many of them die and perish, ignorant of the Gospel?" Just what does it mean to seek salvation God's way? How can I claim this promise of God?

Perhaps it will help to examine why men fail in their search. It is true that many seek after eternal life, yet fail to find it. Can one actually seek to enter into fellowship with God yet not be able? The Scriptures indicate this to be the case. The Bible actually encourages us to "strive" to enter in God's way while making it clear that many will seek to enter in yet not be able.¹ From other passages we learn that this inability is derived from a refusal to seek salvation God's way. Simply desiring salvation and fellowship with God, in and of itself, will not insure an effectual search for the truth. We must seek the truth – salvation God's way, to the exclusion of any other way. Who then seeks to enter into fellowship with God but is unable? Answer: The sinner who seeks salvation or strives to gain favor with God based upon anything other than the only basis upon which a holy God can and will be reconciled – the righteousness of Christ freely imputed and revealed by God-given faith. God makes this, His way, clear in His Word.² To strive for salvation based upon anything else is to be unable – it is to fail to find eternal life and favor with God.

Elsewhere in the Bible we read how the Israelites of old sought after God but failed in their efforts because they sought it "by the works of the law."³ Once again we can reduce all religion to one of two alternatives – the religion of works or the religion of grace. To seek salvation conditioned on the merits of Christ alone, His righteousness, is the truth of grace. This is God's way of salvation. Any other way makes salvation conditioned on the sinner, the religion of works, and is equivalent to

¹ Lk 13:24

² Jn 14:6

³ Rom 9:31-32

seeking after God “by the works of the law.” It really is that simple. Seeking God based upon grounds He has excluded shall prove to be a fruitless search.

The good news is that God assures us that we may only find favor with Him on His terms, the terms of the everlasting covenant of grace – salvation conditioned on Christ alone. Come to God His way, and you shall be saved!¹ He commands no less. His way is the way of truth.² If you’re determined to know His truth, you shall find it. With that in mind, I challenge you to test whether or not you are really willing to be honest enough with yourself to confront reality, even if it contradicts your current beliefs.

Early in this book, I asked that you heed the scriptural admonition to “examine yourselves,” to be willing to test whether you truly are “in the faith” or not.³ In essence, I was asking you to make a judgment concerning the validity of your hope for eternal life in heaven. For many of my friends, heeding this early encouragement would have been an exercise in futility had they read no further. Any such judgment requires the application of some standard, and if it is to be accurate, it must be God’s standard that is applied. Now that you’ve learned of His standard, God’s requirement of a perfect righteousness, you are well equipped to make this judgment objectively. While ignorant of the only valid basis upon which God could possibly save me, Christ’s righteousness imputed, my judgments were fatally flawed no matter how sincere. I was making judgments but according to some other standard – a wrong standard. If you are willing to be honest with yourself, to face reality and seek to know and judge according to God’s ways, then you shall succeed. The answers will all add up.

¹ Matt 6:33; 7:7-8

² Jn 8:32; 14:6

³ 2 Cor 13:5

Interpreting Scriptures

If you wish to find success in your search, then this resolve to deal honestly must also affect how you interpret the Scriptures. I've heard it said, "You can make the Bible say whatever you want." Actually I agree, but only if I disregard reasonable, logical approaches in trying to understand objectively what it says. It is incumbent upon me to use reasonable rules of interpretation in determining what God says. I should consider who is speaking, to whom he is speaking, the context, and in particular be sure that it is consistent with the rest of Scripture. For example, many passages are directed at believers exclusively. For an unbeliever, it is like he is reading someone else's mail if he mistakenly applies the message to himself. Unfortunately, most of us think we are believers long before we are even exposed to the true Gospel, the body of truth we are to believe. So, to seek God objectively in His Word requires that we lay aside all presuppositions and prior conclusions, even the self assessment of our own spiritual state.

Without a doubt, the Bible is its own best interpreter.¹ Practically any doctrine can be refuted by taking a verse or passage out of context so as to twist its meaning. In fact, essentially everything I've written could be discounted by using such devices. But keep in mind that whatever doctrine you settle upon, it too can similarly be laid aside if someone is determined to choose to interpret it as they "feel led." I point this out to expose the dishonesty with such an approach. Wouldn't you rather discover the truth than to be temporarily vindicated in believing a falsehood? I would and I certainly welcome my friends to show me if and when I'm in error when it comes to something this crucial – my eternal destiny. I must admit that hasn't always been the case. It stands to reason that an objective search for God's truth will not come easily. We see that in determining to truly seek God, we are engaging in an internal tug of war with our own pride since the Bible declares that, prior to God's work of grace in spiritual regeneration and conversion, we

¹ 2 Pet 1:20

all naturally choose our own way of salvation in opposition to God's way.¹

Further Food for Thought for Inquiring Minds

As you continue your search, I encourage you to peel away the layers to get to the heart of the matter. As an exercise to assist in this, consider this: How can I stand before God without my sins being charged to me so as to be found not guilty, not defiled, and not liable for eternal punishment? Just what is enough to pay the debt due for my sin, to gain peace with God, to remove His wrath and gain His favor? Whatever it is, it must be a remedy sufficient for my condition.

I recently heard a sermon in which this question was posed. The preacher asked, "Will any of the following effectively put away or pay for sin?" As an adjunct to this question I ask you to also consider, "Do you gain any comfort regarding your eternal destiny because of any of the things listed below?"

- Baptism
- Rededication
- Walking an aisle
- Teaching a Sunday School class
- Reading the Bible regularly
- Fervency in prayer
- Tears of remorse
- Repentance
- Confession
- Being sorry for your sins
- Being sorry enough to actually reform
- Promising to do better
- Actually doing better
- Cleaning up your act
- Standing up and saying you received Christ as your personal Savior
- Going to church
- Leading a youth group

¹ Rom 3:10-12

- Belonging to a Bible Study group
- Leading a Bible Study group
- Donating your money (a tithe and more)
- Self-sacrifice
- Suffering
- Witnessing to others about your faith
- Morality and sincerity
- Dying for your country
- Going on a mission trip
- Becoming a missionary
- Crying for mercy (apart from a consideration of God's injured justice)

I know in my own case, I would have insisted that none of these things constituted the basis for my hope and that only the blood of Christ could pay for my sins – yet, my former doctrine did not support this claim. I was unknowingly dishonest with myself. As I've already pointed out, believing His blood to have been shed for all, including those who perish eternally, was enough to tell on me. By the process of elimination I had to gain my comfort and sense of assurance from something that proceeded from me (such as the items listed above). If not, what was my hope really based upon? How about you?

What takes care of your sin problem? What does it take to put away sin? The Bible says it takes the establishment of a perfect righteousness that does not ignore, deny, or pervert God's justice. For your own sin problem to be remedied, this righteousness must have been established for you by a suitable substitute and actually imputed or charged to your account. The Bible says that where true remission or payment for sin is made there is "no more offering for sin."¹ That means nothing found on the list above has any bearing on our standing before God. If up until now you've been ignorant of (or unwilling to submit to) His righteousness as the sole ground of your salvation, then what is left other than items similar to those I have listed? His blood was shed as the culminating act in establishing this righteousness. I can sing "Nothing but the blood" all day long, but unless

¹ Heb 10:18

I understand and base my hope solely upon His accomplished work of righteousness, my words ring hollow.

Has Your State Before God Changed?

If we are to seek and find God's truth, then we cannot discount what God tells us in contrasting the two states of man – the state of spiritual death (lost) and the state of spiritual life (born again). At birth we all enter into this world in a state of unbelief as spiritually dead sinners – indistinguishable from the objects of God's just wrath.¹ At issue is whether or not our state has changed – that is, have we been born again of the Spirit of God so as to see by faith that the guilt and defilement of our sin was removed by Christ's shed blood at Calvary's cross. There is no middle ground between these two states. It is a dichotomy. You are, at this very moment, either spiritually dead or alive, no in-between. In the new birth sinners are converted and translated from one state into the other as they are given the spiritual life purchased for them by the redeeming blood of Christ. Without fail, all for whom Christ died will (in time) be brought by the Spirit to Him, being converted and translated from spiritual darkness into His glorious light.²

We have many scriptural descriptions to help us distinguish between these two states. Consequently, if we have been born again (our state being changed), then we are able to see how these biblical descriptions apply to us, both before and after conversion. In other words, one way to test whether or not your spiritual conversion is genuine is by examining whether or not the scriptural evidences of this miraculous transformation are true of you. For example, one telltale sign that true repentance has not occurred lies in one's failure to have recognized and applied to themselves that from which God's Word calls us to repent or turn. As further food for thought and self-examination, ask yourself the following:

¹ Eph 2:1-3

² Jn 6:37-40; Col 1:13-14

▪ **Have I ever considered myself to be an idolater?** The Bible says that we actually repent of our former idolatry.¹ It stands to reason we can't repent from that which we fail to recognize.

▪ **Has my standard of judgment changed?** The Bible indicates that prior to spiritual conversion and the accompanying adoption of God's standard of judgment, we all judge by outward appearance and not according to God's standard.² If your standard or basis for making judgments concerning your own salvation hasn't changed, then neither has your state.

▪ **Do I now count worthless that which I once thought actually gained favor or in some way recommended me unto God?** The Bible characterizes true repentance toward God in just this way.³

▪ **Have I ever been a servant of sin – actually in bondage to it?** The Bible teaches that whoever is ignorant or void of a righteousness that answers the demands of God's law is in fact a "servant of sin," that is – going about to establish a righteousness of his own. In true spiritual conversion, it is this bondage under the law that we are freed from when we become "servants of righteousness," having adopted God's doctrine concerning Christ and salvation conditioned solely upon His merits.⁴ It stands to reason that if our doctrine hasn't identified how our former religious thoughts consisted of servitude to sin, then we must not have yet been liberated or saved from ignorance and unbelief.

▪ **Do I now side with God in rejecting that which I, and the rest of humankind (including religion), naturally and previously highly esteemed?** The Bible tells us that man highly esteems that which is an "abomination" unto God.⁵ If we have

¹ 1 Thess 1:9

² Jn 16:8, 11; 2 Cor 10:7, 12

³ Phil 3:7-9

⁴ Rom 6:16-18, 20-21; 10:3

⁵ Lk 16:15

never considered our past religious thoughts to be repulsive unto God, then we have yet to recognize the depth and nature of our sin problem and tragically have misdiagnosed our own condition. In turn, our remedy (that which we base our own hope upon) will naturally be insufficient.

▪ **Does the Gospel (the light) I now believe oppose that which I formerly loved (the darkness)?** The Bible says that all naturally oppose God and are even enemies of God. If we haven't changed sides, so to speak, such that the object of our faith is actually diametrically opposed to that which we previously believed, then it stands to reason that we, perhaps unsuspectingly, are continuing even now in a state of spiritual "darkness."¹

▪ **Have you ever come to the realization that all of your past efforts to obey God and keep His law were actually what the Scriptures call "fruit unto death" – so much so that you are now ashamed of them?** The Bible refers to all of our works before genuine God-given faith, including our very best, sincere efforts at morality and religious obedience, as "dead works" and "fruit unto death" because their end is death.² If we remain unashamed of our past efforts and thoughts we once considered "good" – efforts aimed at pleasing God, gaining His favor, and removing His wrath, then it follows that we couldn't have repented of "dead works" and former idolatry, not having perceived these descriptions of fallen humanity as applicable to us personally.³

▪ **Has your conscience been "purged from dead works?"** The Bible says that this is the product of what the "blood," the work of Christ, effectually achieves for all for whom His blood was shed. That means that the satisfaction rendered unto God's law and justice by Christ's obedience unto death (His blood), was actually targeted at exposing to His people the folly of all of their efforts to appease His wrath and

¹ Jn 3:19-21; Col 1:21

² Rom 7:5

³ Rom 6:21; Heb 6:1

gain His favor (dead works). As a result, their conscience is cleared – knowing that their sins (past, present and future) can no longer condemn them, seeing that Christ has paid the debt by His one offering for them. They are no longer motivated to obedience based upon a fear of punishment by God. So if our concept of Christ’s work doesn’t equate to a “purging” of our conscience such that we look upon our previous efforts to obey as “dead works,” then we would have to conclude that the impact of His shed blood has not been applied to us as of yet.¹

▪ **Have you ever been carnally minded, walking after the flesh?** If your concept of being “in the flesh” matches with my former thoughts, then you would likely make this judgment based upon some standard of personal morality. In applying this definition many will judge that they are not carnally minded; however, the Bible teaches us that to be carnally minded is to be still in a state void of spiritual life that, if unchanged at the time of our physical death, ultimately exposes one’s condemnation to an eternal death. So if we have yet to discover how our own mind was truly at some point hostile and opposed to God (at “enmity”) – not just a mere self-assessment of being an imperfect sinner but an actual hater of the true God – then again, we have failed to recognize the sin that deceives us all and the accompanying need for repentance, a necessary evidence of true spiritual conversion.²

▪ **Do you now call and consider evil that which you previously thought was “good?”** The Bible teaches us that by nature, before regeneration and conversion, we actually consider things that are evil in God’s sight as noble, virtuous, and pleasing unto God.³ If we have yet to identify what this “evil” consists of, then it is impossible for us to have exercised initial repentance unto salvation. We will not reject and ashamedly turn from that which we do not recognize as evil.⁴

¹ Heb 9:14; 10:9-22

² Rom 8:6-8

³ Isa 5:20

⁴ Rom 7:8-11

As you can see, I've attempted to include in this list some of the distinctions uniquely characteristic of someone who has been granted the gift of spiritual life – that is, translated from a state of lostness into a state of peace with God, in heart and mind, because of the reconciliation Christ accomplished for them at the cross. If you're to deal honestly in this self-assessment of your own state, then take care to exclude as inconclusive any alleged evidence of salvation that fallen, sinful man can naturally attain or recognize on their own, apart from the grace of God. For example, we know that people from many diverse religious backgrounds, including “non-Christian” religions, can be moral, experience great reformations in character and conduct, sacrifice greatly for their beliefs, and even die as martyrs for their cause. Most all of my friends who consider themselves “Christian” do not believe that those of “non-Christian” faiths to have yet experienced God's saving grace; however, many of my friends defy all reason by gaining assurance about their own state based upon the very same traits they share with their lost “non-Christian” counterparts.

Knowing this, I encourage you to judge according to those things God's Word sets forth as distinguishing characteristics of a true Christian. I hope you see how easily we can deceive ourselves if we judge based upon outward appearance. My prayer is that a serious consideration of these things will prove to be thought provoking and useful as you continue your search.

Reign of Grace Media Ministries

For my searching friends, I highly recommend the “Reign of Grace Media Ministries” website, www.rofgrace.com, as a truly valuable resource. This ministry makes available an extensive array of valuable Gospel-centered materials and an extensive library of Gospel sermons. Supported solely by charitable donations, the materials are free for the asking, though priceless in value. Having supported this ministry since its founding, I wholeheartedly endorse the Gospel message that it helps to distribute around the globe. Perhaps this additional suggested resource will prove useful in your search.

Be a Friend Back

I offer one final suggestion as a self-test of how objective, honest, and determined you really are in your quest for the truth. In introducing this book, I shared my motivation – my sincere interest in the eternal well being of my friends and family. I am convinced that this subject is of such great importance that I am willing to risk valued friendships. I know firsthand that sharing news that everyone by nature initially does not want to hear can truly disrupt relationships. Consider that somehow this book came your way. It may very well be that it is because you are someone's valued friend. Whether you know them personally or not, someone is concerned for you, just as I am for my friends. In the introduction, I suggested that this friendship alone should merit your serious consideration.

Now, I ask for more. If you're not yet convinced of the vital truth I've shared, then I ask that you at least empathize with me or, if you know him or her, the friend who sent this book your way. Put yourself in his shoes. If you disagree or remain unconvinced, then one thing is clear – your friend is convinced that you are in great peril, traveling the road to eternal destruction. If you disagree, you have concluded that your friend is mistaken. I realize that your disagreement may not undermine your confidence regarding your friend's eternal destiny, but nonetheless, with regards to his or her assessment of you, you believe they are mistaken. I ask that you consider the other ramifications that would attend this presumed mistake. Your friend, having concluded that you and countless others are only a breath away from eternal destruction, is also carrying quite a burden. Think of the heartache as he is reminded of deceased relatives, folks for whom it is too late, who died still ignorant of what he calls "gospel." Isn't it incumbent upon you as a friend to relieve what you perceive to be his unwarranted anxiety and concern? If you're convinced he is wrong, why not show him how he is in error? Be a friend back.

I co-owned a successful engineering and technical services firm with my business partner for some twenty-six years. We

not only successfully coexisted, but we also prospered together over the years. I attribute this in large part to the fact that our shared business objectives were almost always in alignment. Other than that, my partner and I were as different as night and day. The fact that we always aimed for the same outcome served us well. We often disagreed; nevertheless, with a shared vision for the business, we successfully worked issues to a profitable resolution. With a mutual determination to succeed, we vigorously debated tactical and strategic issues over which we occasionally disagreed, with one or the other of us ultimately conceding to the more compelling point of view. This typically meant that one of us entered the discussion convinced of a position that subsequently proved to be flawed. The business won as the “right” decision prevailed. Admittedly, this was sometimes a painful process, but we always seemed to persevere in challenging one another until a winning consensus occurred. Why? It was just that important to us.

Now consider how much more important this issue is. Isn’t it worth gaining consensus over? After all, two opposing viewpoints can’t both be right. If you’re mistaken and remain so, then the consequences are tragic and eternal. But what about your friend, if he or she is mistaken, then think of the unnecessary burden of concern they carry for you and countless others. Is it worth your energy to put them at ease? Do you care enough for them to work at exposing their doctrinal error?

I hope you understand this is not some mind game I’m playing with you. You know that I am convinced of what I’ve written and do not anticipate being persuaded otherwise. However, I welcome having my beliefs tested and challenged. So should you. We should be relentless with our friends in trying to gain concurrence in the truth because this truth is so vital.

So, here is the self-test of how genuinely determined you are to find the truth. Will your search ultimately result in some dialogue or correspondence with your friend or, alternatively, someone like-minded? In other words, will you go through the process, even if painful, to insure that your conclusion is correct?

Why wouldn't you? I suggest that there are only a few possible reasons, and I challenge you to identify yours should this be the course you take. One possible reason would be that you're totally convinced that you're right but just don't have enough concern for your friend to expend the energy to persuade him otherwise. They just aren't worth the effort. I assume better of practically all of my friends. Secondly, you may think you're correct in your doctrine but you're just not sure enough to put it to the test. Do you really want to hang your entire eternal future on something of which you are that uncertain? You don't have to. Thirdly, you believe you're correct but consider yourself ill equipped to properly defend your position. If that is the case, how can you even know that your position is defensible?

To deal with this does involve risk, the risk of being wrong or of exposing how little we know. But as with my business, isn't this so important that it's worth the pain and the risk to our pride and ego? I've yet to see someone come to true God-given faith who wasn't humbled in the process, including yours truly. All true spiritual conversions disclose to us how tragically mistaken we have been. If you fail to resolve the inconsistencies with your position and remain unable or unwilling to give reasons for the basis of your hope, then do not be deceived. To take such a posture is to stop short in your search. None who do so are warranted to claim for themselves the outcome attached to God's promise that if we seek His truth and His way of salvation, we will find it. Instead, I encourage you to continue seeking until it all adds up. Be willing to put your doctrine to the test by "being a friend back."

Again – How will you respond?

My friend, I am convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that what I've written to you and set forth as the Gospel is indeed God's Gospel as so graciously revealed in His holy Word. To use the biblical language, "righteousness has been brought near" to you in this book.¹ The Prophet Isaiah wrote, "Seek ye the

¹ Isa 46:13

Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near.¹ It is only through the proclamation of God's way of saving sinners that the one, true Gospel – the one that reveals Christ's righteousness – is brought near. How will you respond? Only you, my friend, can resolve to seek diligently until you find God's truth concerning His way of salvation.² Anyone who desires to seek God as He is identified and distinguished in the Gospel can and will find Him. It's worth the trip – Seek and find!

¹ Isa 55:6

² Heb 11:6

The Greatest News on Earth

The word “gospel” in the Bible literally means “good news.” God’s Gospel is a specific piece of good news that reveals the way of salvation and eternal life. This truly is the greatest news on earth for all the reasons I’ve elaborated on throughout the book. It is “great” in that it is the very means ordained by God to reveal Himself to those He saves to an eternal life of unspeakable joy in heaven. It is the greatest news “on earth” because here is where it may be believed unto salvation – while we still live and breathe on this earth. The very fact that humanity continues to exist is a testimony of God’s longsuffering. God is not willing that any of His sheep (His elect) would perish but that they would all come to repentance.¹ God’s purpose shall be accomplished. All for whom Christ died shall exercise the God-given faith and initial repentance He purchased for them by His obedience unto death on the cross. So without fail, they all shall come to Christ in faith and repentance before they die a physical death, before Christ returns and before this earth is destroyed.² If you’re still breathing, then there is hope that the Lord has preserved your life for this very purpose – to graciously bring you to Christ, by His sovereign invincible grace.

We’ve seen how the good news of the Gospel reveals and declares God’s righteousness. It does so in two ways. First, it declares God’s requirement of righteousness. God cannot save sinners based on anything less than righteousness (perfect satisfaction to His holy law and inflexible justice) because God must be just when He justifies or saves the ungodly.³ Secondly, (and this is the good news) the Gospel declares God’s gracious provision of righteousness by the Lord Jesus Christ. It reveals how God’s love, mercy, and grace have provided in Christ all that His holy law and justice demand. What wonderful news!

¹ 2 Pet 3:9

² Jn 6:37-39

³ Isa 45:21-22; Rom 3:24-26

The Puzzle Parts Fit

For others, and myself who have heard and believed the magnificent news of the Gospel, we marvel in hindsight at its simplicity and how it radically changed our perspective on things. As one dear friend put it upon hearing and submitting to the Gospel, it is like a jigsaw puzzle in which suddenly all the puzzle parts fit together perfectly. It all adds up as we discover how every attribute of God's character comes into harmony and is magnified in Christ's finished work on behalf of His sheep so as to actually demand their eternal salvation. We see how it must be so and that no other way will suffice. Though sin demands death, righteousness demands life – proven by the very resurrection of Christ.¹

The Scriptures admonish us to avoid the corruption of our minds by being drawn away from “the simplicity that is in Christ.”² This refers to the singleness of Christ and His finished work of redemption as that alone which we are to trust in for all of our salvation. In this sense, the Gospel, as foreign as it may seem in today's world, really is this simple – that Christ single-handedly produced the justifying righteousness that procured all of salvation for all whom He represented, so that they come to Him in faith, repenting of every false way, pleading His righteousness imputed as their only hope for salvation. In light of this truth, everything else falls into place.

As the Scriptures tell us, “***God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.***”³ This was certainly true of me. Scriptures that I had been familiar with since my youth suddenly took on completely different meanings as I first saw them in the light of the Gospel. I marveled at how I could have missed what now appears so obvious. Perhaps this explains why I am so confident that you, my friend, will also come to like faith in the Gospel if you

¹ Acts 17:31; Rom 5:20-21; 6:23

² 2 Cor 11:3

³ 2 Cor 4:6

resolve to continue in your search until you've honestly tested it against the standard of truth – God's Word.

Not only scriptures, but old hymns such as “Standing on the Promises,” “At the Cross,” “There is a Fountain,” “The Solid Rock,” “At Calvary,” “Rock of Ages,” and “Amazing Grace,” just to name a few, all took on new meaning in light of the Gospel truth. I'll never forget the initial, new found appreciation that an understanding of God's Gospel brought to the words of some of these hymns. I encourage you to consider afresh the words of these familiar old hymns in light of what you've now read. Sorrowfully, I also came to realize that some of the hymns I had previously sung conveyed erroneous, God dishonoring concepts. You get the picture – belief of the Gospel truly changes one's perspective on almost all spiritual things.

To cite just one such example of how significant this new perspective can be, consider the Bible verse, I John 1:9. This oft quoted verse reads, ***“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*** Not long after my own conversion, a nationally known minister whom I had previously supported and endorsed elaborated on this particular passage in a televised broadcast. He asserted that the forgiveness of sins comes at the cost of the sinner's confession and repentance. Prior to that time, I, along with most of my friends, would have readily agreed with this common interpretation suggesting that the forgiveness of our sins is conditioned on our confession. After all, it does read, ***“If we confess our sins...”*** But now equipped with the truth of the Gospel, I recognize the “faithful and just”¹ God of the Bible requires far more – that only the infinitely valuable blood of Christ, His redemptive payment, could put away my sins. I then knew that the confession or repentance of a sinner, though necessary, could never satisfy an infinitely holy God. Because God is just, nothing that proceeds from me, a sinner, would suffice.

This highly esteemed minister was doing no more than echoing the refrain of today's popular concept of forgiveness,

¹ 1 Jn 1:9

even salvation itself, ultimately conditioned not on Christ alone, but, at least to some degree, on the sinner. The Scriptures tell us otherwise – that redemption, “even the forgiveness of sins,” is through the blood or righteousness of Christ.¹ I had discovered that a “confession of my sins” included a confession of the sin that naturally would deceive me, the sin of thinking that I could be saved and forgiven based upon anything other than (or in addition to) the merits of Christ’s work of righteousness. It became evident in this new light that God is only “faithful and just to forgive” my sins and to cleanse me “from all unrighteousness” based upon the establishment of a perfect righteousness on my behalf by my Substitute, Jesus Christ. How dare we place a mere sinner’s remorse, confession, or repentance in rivalry with the infinitely valuable blood of Christ – His obedience and suffering unto death, His righteousness!

Armed with the knowledge of how God saves and forgives sinners, it became clear that the confession of our sins mentioned in this verse cannot be a “cause” but rather an “evidence” – evidence that our sins have been forgiven and that we’ve already been cleansed of unrighteousness. It is a common error to take such “if” passages in scriptures and always assume the “if” to denote a condition when often it is indicative of an evidence rather than a condition as is the case here.

This verse is just one of countless passages which suddenly took on a new meaning in light of God’s Gospel. To state the obvious, the meanings of these verses do not and cannot change because God, the author, does not change. Rather, I was simply blinded by those principles of darkness that the light of the Gospel counteracted. It was my understanding that changed. I came to know the God who truly redeemed, and my standard of judgment concerning all spiritual things was radically altered. An entire book could be written on similar examples of common misinterpretations of scriptures that “seem right” to us as natural, fallen creatures, but are actually in direct conflict with the revelation of the God of the Bible. Before hearing God’s Gospel, we do not recognize these inconsistencies because we do not know

¹ Eph 1:7; Col 1:14

the true God as He is revealed and distinguished in the Gospel. By God-given faith, we see how it all adds up. Contradictions vanish as the parts of the puzzle regarding God's way of salvation all fall into place.

Good News that Dispels

The Gospel of God's grace is good news in part because of that which it dispels concerning man's natural reasoning. We discover in the Gospel that many things we may have considered to be true are not – surprisingly, much to our own comfort. For example, under the popular religion of works (often disguised as grace), some are taught that salvation is evidenced by our sorrow and despair over our condition and our sincere desire to avoid the wrath of God. The Gospel is good news that liberates us from such thinking. We learn that legal despair, grief, and sorrow over sins are not evidences, in and of themselves, of salvation. We see that fear of wrath and Hell and the doubting of God's promises to us personally are not evidences of salvation. Being convicted of sin means absolutely nothing unless we find rest, comfort, assurance, peace, relief, and joy in Christ and His righteousness alone.

Before true conversion, some actually wallow in legal despair, sorrow, and guilt over sin, yet they do not seek and find relief in God's grace based upon the merits of Christ alone. Some are even encouraged by their religious leaders to gain assurance from their feelings of despair, suggesting that this sorrowfulness itself evidences that they are saved. This is what the Bible calls the "sorrow of the world"¹ that leads to death because it leads sinners to base their hope upon something other than the imputed righteousness of Christ. In the Gospel, we discover that a sinner who finds relief in his own despair is actually no better off than one who would boldly boast that he has achieved sinless perfection in his own character and conduct. Both are lost, deceived and evil in the sight of the God of the Bible.

¹ 2 Cor 7:10

The good news of the Gospel dispels such notions. There we see that the evidence of salvation is in fact displayed in just the opposite – in finding rest, relief, peace, comfort, assurance, and joy in the righteousness of God’s Son as the only thing (and the sure thing) that removed the guilt and defilement of sin. We take comfort rather than wallow in despair, knowing that His righteousness secured our eternal state and the entire inheritance of grace. This is indeed good news!¹

Compelling Good News

The Gospel of God’s grace not only dispels false notions, but it also gives us all the encouragement in the world to forsake the religion of man and flee to God on His terms. The yoke of man’s religion is cast aside by the liberating news of the Gospel.² Why wouldn’t we yearn for the freedom that accompanies the realization that God does not charge us with the demerit of our sins, our sins having been charged or imputed to Christ our Substitute?³ In the Gospel economy, the motive to obey God no longer involves the seeking of merit. As the Bible puts it, we realize that His commands really are not “grievous.”⁴

In one sense this transition from bondage to liberty in Christ can be likened to the contrast between laborious work and an enjoyable hobby. My favorite past time is quail hunting. I enjoy almost every aspect of it, particularly the dog work. Over the years, I’ve never ceased to be thrilled when a brace of bird dogs I’ve raised and trained point a covey of quail, one dog honoring the other’s find, both frozen on point in anticipation of the heart fluttering flush of the covey. On occasion, some of the leadership in my company would ask me to entertain valued customers by taking them on a quail hunt. Although I occasionally obliged, I often resisted by suggesting that we instead purchase a hunt from one of the commercial hunting preserves. I selfishly wanted to preserve and protect every aspect of the enjoyable

¹ Isa 32:17; Rom 8:31-33; Phil 3:3; Col 1:12-14; 1 Pet 1:3-5

² 2 Cor 3:17; Gal 5:1

³ Rom 4:6-8

⁴ 1 Jn 5:3

atmosphere that I associate with quail hunting. On the few occasions in which I did act as hunting host and guide for business purposes I found it far less enjoyable. Suddenly, the very same sport I am so passionate about turns into work – an obligation of sorts. I’m still in the beautiful outdoors, watching the same dog work, and seeing the same exciting covey rises as I do when I’m simply hunting alone or with my regular hunting buddies, but something is different. To me it takes on the character of work, diminishing my enjoyment.

Similarly, upon true spiritual conversion, there is a sense in which this process works in reverse. The very same acts of obedience in seeking to serve and obey God that were once burdensome, are no longer so.¹ Realizing that I am not charged with my sins, I now serve and obey as an expression of gratitude for having been adopted into God’s family, no longer a servant to sin. I’m no longer enslaved by the requirement to keep God’s law perfectly as if I owed a debt to God’s justice for having failed to do so. Unlike before, I realize that I am not required to obey God’s commands in order to attain or maintain salvation. Like quail hunting for pleasure, my efforts to obey God are no longer like work because they are no longer designed to merit anything. That’s compelling good news or, as my fellow quail hunters might say, “That dog will hunt!”

When you consider the ramifications of being one with Christ, based upon His righteousness, the news is indeed fantastic and should be more than enough to compel all sinners to come to God pleading nothing but the righteousness of Christ. Consider this good news:

- If the blood of Christ pays fully for all of your sins and if His redeeming death alone has saved you, then there is nothing that you have done in the past or could do in the future bad enough to change your standing before God. Wow! God cannot and will not punish you for a sin debt that has already been paid by His beloved Son.²

¹ Matt 11:28-30

² Psa 130:3; Rom 8:31-39

▪ If God charges any person with their sin, then that one cannot be found innocent at the judgment – whether a Hitler or a Mother Teresa.¹ But the Bible teaches the good news that God does not charge or impute sin to those to whom He has imputed righteousness. These have discovered by God’s grace that although they are sinners in their nature and practice, they are not guilty and defiled sinners before God. They will never be charged with their sins because their sins were charged to Christ Himself. In this sense, as it pertains to my standing in Christ, He will remember my sins no more!²

▪ For all who believe the Gospel, God has provided the double cure for their sins in Christ their Savior. They are (1) saved from His wrath. That is, they are not guilty, not charged with their sins, and (2) they have been made fit for His presence. That is, no longer defiled but rather pure and holy – all based upon their possession of the righteousness produced by Christ and imputed unto them. Having this revealed unto them, they rejoice in the certain assurance that, as to their standing before God in Christ, and based solely upon His righteousness imputed, they are everything they need to be!³

▪ The work is done and the standard of judgment made crystal clear. When God the Father raised Christ the Son from the dead, he proved to the world that He would judge them in righteousness. We know this to be so because it was just that, righteousness, which satisfied God. This was confirmed by the resurrection of His Son. Just as sin demands death, righteousness demands life!⁴

▪ When Christ died on the cross and cried out, “It is finished,” He wasn’t “whistling Dixie” – the work was truly finished. All that was needed to insure the salvation of everyone He represented was complete.⁵ There is no work left undone,

¹ Ex 34:7; Ezek 18:4, 20; Rom 6:23a

² Rom 4:6-8; Heb 10:17-18

³ Isa 40:2; Col 1:12, 21-22; Heb 10:19-22

⁴ Acts 17:31; Rom 5:21

⁵ Jn 19:30; Rom 6:9-10; Heb 10:10-18

salvation being totally conditioned on Christ alone. That is good news to one truly convinced of sin and convinced that nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness will suffice!

■ In believing that the imputed righteousness of Christ is my only ground for salvation, I see my true oneness with Christ. As the Bible puts it, “as He is, so are we in this world.”¹ In this sense, a true believer is in the same position of advantage that Christ Himself is in. That is, I am free to obey and please God, not in order to seek or gain acceptance, but as one already accepted, not like a servant on trial, but as a son (an heir) “abiding in the house evermore.”² That is freedom!

■ Also, to be “as He is” means to be unblameable, unprovable, and even holy.³ That means that in God’s sight I am in need of no correction whatsoever as it pertains to my standing because there is absolutely no room for improvement. His righteousness is mine! How can it get any better than that? I am found “complete in Him” with my sins not charged or imputed to me.⁴ Amazingly, this is true of me, a sinner in my own personal character and conduct with much room for improvement and nothing in which to boast. However, in Him, as it pertains to my standing before God, I am impeccably holy based solely upon a righteousness I had no part in producing. I begin the walk of faith as a full-fledged saint. To be able to grasp and rejoice in this is to know with certainty that you’re saved and heaven bound! The news really can’t get any better.

You too will see that the good news of the Gospel is truly amazing if you become convinced of sin, of the impossibility of attaining or maintaining salvation based on anything other than Christ’s righteousness. Why would anyone cling to his or her old robes of self-righteousness, of salvation conditioned on themselves, when we’re commanded and invited by God to put

¹ 1 Jn 4:17

² Jn 8:32-36

³ Eph 1:4-7; Col 1:21-22; 1 Jn 4:17

⁴ Col 2:9-10

on His robe of righteousness, of salvation conditioned on Him? As fallen, sinful creatures, naturally full of self-love, self-righteousness, and religious pride, we are predisposed to cling to our own way, stubbornly rejecting God's way unless and until we are first given spiritual life.

But there is good news! God has graciously promised that He will give life and save out of this ungodly mass of fallen humanity any, and all who come to Him on His terms, pleading Christ's righteousness alone. Not only that, He provides us with an abundance of proof in the Bible as to why His way is the only way, and why it is uniquely rational and eternally profitable for us to submit to it.¹ Come to Him sincerely pleading Christ righteousness alone and be assured of eternal happiness with Him! God cannot lie and cannot fail.

Assurance, Not Presumption

God's Gospel is also good news because in submitting to it, we find that our hope for eternal life is solid – a sure and certain expectation of an eternity in heaven. As for me personally, like many others, I illogically possessed some sense of assurance at a time when I was ignorant of the only sure thing that could possibly secure my salvation, the righteousness of Christ. I know that others, perhaps more insightful than me at the time, wrestled with the uncertainty of their eternal destiny until they heard and believed God's Gospel, having sensed that something was amiss about their former religious doctrine. I now know that my past heartfelt "assurance" was nothing more than groundless presumption on my part, a "refuge of lies." God had to sweep away my refuge of lies by laying judgment "to the line and righteousness to the plummet."² He did this by revealing His Gospel to me. For me to claim salvation and assurance while ignorant and not submitted to the righteousness of Christ revealed in the Gospel was diametrically opposed to God's own testimony. That is presumption of the highest order.

¹ Isa 1:18

² Isa 28:14-18

But belief of God's Gospel eradicates all reasons for doubting your final destination. The removal of uncertainty pertaining to such an important matter is indeed good news. In fact, the Bible tells us that assurance of salvation, when derived from a proper understanding of God's testimony, is actually one of the main evidences of being a child of God.¹ As God tells believers, because of their oneness with Christ "in this world," they are to have "boldness (confidence, assurance, liberty) in the day of judgment."² God actually commands no less. I've heard it countered, "It isn't God or Christ that I doubt but rather myself" or alternatively, "the greatness of my sins." But in light of the good news of the Gospel, of salvation conditioned on Christ alone, we should no longer be troubled if we truly believe God. In submitting to God's Gospel, we look to Christ alone, not to ourselves.³ Granted, if you still think that salvation is conditioned upon yourself, even to the slightest degree, you indeed have every reason not only to doubt, but rather to be frightfully assured that the path you are on has absolutely no chance of landing you in heaven. Instead, we're commanded to look to the God who has engaged all that He is, His infinite self, to insure the well being of the objects of His love. He cannot fail. This way, His way, is sure and certain!⁴

The good news of God's Gospel not only gives me every reason to bask in the comfort of knowing that my destiny is secure, but it shows how thinking any differently is actually sinful. By now, I assume you can see how it is not only unreasonable but also sinful to presume to be safe and secure based upon grounds which God has excluded (man's way). God's Word shows us that if we profess to believe in His way of salvation, it is also sinful to persist in doubt as to its certainty. To do so is paramount to doubting God Himself. Are your sins greater than God's grace? The Scriptures declare otherwise.⁵ In belief of the Gospel of God's grace, I either claim assurance of

¹ Heb 3:6, 14

² 1 Jn 4:17

³ Heb 12:2

⁴ 2 Sam 23:5; Isa 28:16

⁵ Rom 5:20-21; Heb 12:1

salvation or else deny the value and power of Christ and His blood to cleanse me from all of my sin.¹ That would include a denial of God's faithfulness and power to do what He promised. Sadly, the only other source of sinful doubt comes from a discovery that one is not really looking to Christ for salvation but to himself, no matter what he may otherwise profess. This is unbelief.

Consider God's promises. God promises there is no possibility for any who truly trust Christ and submit to His righteousness that their sin could condemn them or make them subject to God's wrath. God's wrath against their sins was poured out on Christ as He suffered and died in their place.² God commands believers to examine and be sure of their election based upon the evidence of having been "called" by His Gospel, wherein the true Christ and His righteousness are revealed.³ They are to make this determination in light of God's testimony in the Gospel itself. In the Bible we're told that an unchanging God confirms this to His people by revealing that His way of salvation is consistent with His purpose, backed by no less than His promise. As such, in the good news of the Gospel, and there alone, one finds "strong consolation."⁴ So we see that to claim to believe the Gospel as explained in this very book and yet to remain unsure of our destiny would be equivalent to calling God a liar and accusing Him of being untrue to His promise.

Conversely, even one grain of assurance derived from a belief in any other gospel is no more than unfounded presumption since it hinges on a concept of salvation being conditioned upon mutable, fallible sinners such as us. I hope you can see that belief in God's Gospel, salvation conditioned on Christ alone, by definition, provides an assurance of salvation to all for whom those conditions were met – all who believe and rest in this, the righteousness of an infallible Christ, as their sole hope. Uniquely, under the Gospel of God's grace we find real

¹ 1 Jn 1:7

² Psa 32:1-2; Rom 8:1, 32-34

³ 2 Pet 1:10-11

⁴ Heb 6:17-18

assurance and certainty, supported and backed by none other than God Himself. Such certainty is indeed good news to this sinner!

Consider the Choices

Like me, all of my friends want to go to heaven. The question to you, my friend, is this: Is your way God's way?¹ Do you understand and believe the Gospel wherein Christ's righteousness is revealed or is your gospel one of the numerous counterfeits of which the Bible warns us to beware?² To know and believe the true Gospel is to know the true and living God as He is identified in His Word – distinguished from all counterfeits as a just God and a Savior. Eternity is in the balance. Is your religion God's religion – the religion of grace, of salvation conditioned totally on Christ alone – or is your religion man's religion – the religion of works, of salvation conditioned to some degree on the sinner?

Think for a moment of a person in your own life whose morality, kindness, religious fervor, zeal, and sincerity you most admire. What if their "goodness" could suddenly be credited to your account? Would this get you into heaven? By now, you should know that only the righteousness of Christ would actually measure up to God's standard of judgment. To assume otherwise would be heresy – stacking a sinner's best efforts up against the sinless God-man, Christ Himself.

Now consider for a moment one of the choicest saints of the Bible, the human instrument used by God the Holy Spirit to write most of the New Testament books, the Apostle Paul. We know from an abundance of scriptural testimony that Paul was a saved, justified sinner, righteous in the eyes of God – qualified and certain for heaven. What if I told you that you too could possess the same righteousness that the Apostle Paul possessed and rested upon? We know this to be no less than the righteousness of Christ Himself, freely imputed to Paul. The good news is

¹ Isa 55:8-9; Rom 3:12

² Gal 1:8-9

that all who come to see their desperate need of Christ and His imputed righteousness likewise have no less.

So basically it gets down to this – what will you plead as your hope for salvation? Consider the choices. What will you bank upon – some condition that you meet so as to put the finishing touch on your salvation process or that which the Son of glory, Christ, the God-man, alone accomplished in His work of obedience unto death – the righteousness of Christ? It cannot be both ways. In keeping with the biblical exhortation, “choose you this day whom ye will serve.”¹ Why would I continue to plead my own righteousness now that I’ve learned of Christ’s, now that I can actually plead His righteousness as my own?

As some of my close friends will attest, I am a sinner with flaws too numerous to mention. Even so, consider this: Today, with respect to my standing before Almighty God, in the eyes of His law and justice, I am just as righteous and holy as Moses, the Apostle Paul, or any of the other saints of the Bible. Their hope, the righteousness they banked upon, is the same as mine – no more and no less than the imputed righteousness of Christ!² So I, a sinner, can boldly yet humbly claim that in God’s sight, with regard to my standing, I am just as righteous and holy as none other than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Improve upon that! To know this is to base my hope upon (or glory in) nothing other than the finished work of Christ Himself. Thereby God is glorified as a just God and a Savior, Christ is exalted, and all boasting in me, the sinner, is excluded. That’s God’s way.

My friend, if our friendship is to continue on the other side, then you too must possess this same righteousness. It is brought near in the Gospel message – the words of eternal life. As God commands and invites us through the words of His prophet, Isaiah:

¹ Josh 24:15

² Gal 6:14

“Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”¹

“Incline your ear, and come unto me: Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David.”²

“Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near:”³

We are commanded to come and drink of this fountain, to partake of this wonderful offering freely provided. If you, my friend, become truly convinced (1) “of sin” – of the impossibility of salvation based upon anything other than Christ’s righteousness; (2) “of righteousness” – the perfect satisfaction to God’s law and justice produced by Christ the Son; and (3) of God’s standard “of judgment” – that apart from that righteousness there is only condemnation, but where it is found there is life eternal⁴ – then you’ll know what I mean – **THIS IS GOOD NEWS!**

Pleading His righteousness will not and cannot fail you, no more than God Himself could fail. Look unto Him, a just God and a Savior, and be saved.⁵ It is guaranteed by none other than the true and living God. Count on it and I’ll see you in heaven!

¹ Isa 55:1

² Isa 55:3

³ Isa 55:6

⁴ Jn 16:8

⁵ Isa 45:21-22

About the author:

Randy Wages was born in December, 1953, and reared in the college town of Athens, Georgia. Like most of us he, along with his two brothers, was raised in religion and attended church from his youth up. His parents were very loving and good providers. They taught him well the moral principles and values of responsibility, ethics, and hard work. Randy did not, however, come to hear and believe the true and glorious Gospel of God's free and sovereign grace in Christ Jesus until 1985 after he and his wife, Susan, had moved to Albany, Georgia. This is when he was confronted with the vital truths of how a holy God could be both a just God and a Savior based on the perfect righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Since that time Randy has been an avid student of the Bible.

In 1977 Randy graduated with honors from Georgia Institute of Technology where he received a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering. He subsequently co-founded and successfully operated an engineering and technical services firm headquartered in Albany with branch offices in six other cities. God has enabled Randy to use his skills as a successful engineer, businessman, and communicator in the ministry of the Gospel and in writing this book. Randy is a deacon at Eager Avenue Grace Church where he frequently teaches and preaches. He and Susan, his wife of over thirty-nine years, have been blessed with three daughters and a growing number of grandchildren. Randy and Susan currently reside in Albany, Georgia.

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