

# Grace, Truth, Heart and Healing

By Scott Sauls

*“Beginning with Moses and the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”*

—Luke 24:27

*“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

—John 1:14

## What are We About, Anyway?

There is a very real sense in which the work of Jesus is completed. Indeed, when it comes to our standing as beloved, forgiven, treated-as-blameless children of God, “it is finished” as Jesus said. His sinless *life* satisfied God’s requirement that His favor be gained by a life of perfection. Jesus lived that life on behalf of all who make would look to Him as their trust. And, His sinner’s *death* (though He was without sin) satisfied once and for all God’s requirement that justice be satisfied toward the sins of His people. Jesus died the death we should have died, so that we would live. What a breathtaking reality in which we now live—God does not treat us as our sins deserve, because He treated *Jesus* as our sins deserve!

In another sense, there is still much work that Jesus intends to do! The very first verse of the book of Acts indicates that the work of Jesus on earth was not completed with His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. Luke writes, “In the first book (the Gospel of Luke), O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus *began* to do and teach.” *Began* to do and teach? How could there be more? That’s where we as Christ’s “ambassadors” come into the picture. *We* are now the chosen ones, called into the world as His messengers, as those who, filled with His Spirit, represent Him to the world. In short, the ministry of Jesus *continues on* through Christians.

Implied in the fact that we are His “ambassadors,” His true representatives to the world, is that we labor in every way possible to *model our ministries and our message after His*. We will be a people “full of grace and truth,” a people whose churches and ministries, *because we are acting and speaking as Jesus did*, will be attracting the types of people who were attracted to Jesus, and (without intending to do so) offending the types of people who were offended by Jesus.

This purpose of this article, then, is to flesh out some of the implications of what we need to be emphasizing in our ministries as we seek to build Gospel-driven ministry cultures and herald a Gospel-driven message, both of which will be, as Jesus was, “full of grace and truth.”

## Building an Atmosphere that is “Full of Grace”

Before we talk about building Christ-centered messages, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of an overall Christ-centered *atmosphere* of ministry. The Christ-centered message will be heard and received only to the degree that it is *embodied* in the overall culture of our ministries.

This section is the first of two dealing with what it means to cultivate the “*aroma* of Jesus” in our ministries. We will consider how specifically to encourage a Jesus-like ministry atmosphere that is “full of grace” (John 1:14), to the end that people of all stripes (whether Christian or not) know without a doubt that we (like Jesus) are *for* them not against them.

As we think about forming Christ-centered messages, we must keep in mind several key attributes of a message that is truly *Christ-centered*, whether that message is given from a pulpit, in a small group, or in a casual conversation over coffee or beer.

**First, to be “full of grace”, we must take great care to eliminate all *barriers* that stand between the *real* Jesus and people’s false impressions of Him.**

Gandhi was once asked why he had rejected Christ. His answer (this is a paraphrase), was as follows: “It is not Christ I have rejected. It is *Christians* I have rejected. I am not a Christian because I see so few of His followers acting like their Master.”

If we are serious about having Christ-centered ministries, we need to listen very carefully to statements like this one. We must examine the most common barriers that stand between the real Jesus and people’s false impressions of Him—impressions which, unfortunately, have been projected to a watching world by sincere yet misguided Christian brothers and sisters. These barriers include:

*The condemnation barrier.* Christian writer Philip Yancey often asks people on airplanes what they think about Bible-believing Christians in the Western world. The answer he gets, with very little exception, is that Christians are judgmental, intolerant, and holier-than-thou. When the September 11 terrorist attacks took place on the World Trade Center, one very well-known Christian leader confirmed this stance by saying on national television, “If you are a homosexual, a member of the ACLU, in favor of abortion, or part of the People of the American Way, then *I point my finger in your face and say YOU DID THIS. YOU made this happen.*” A Christian friend of mine who is an actor once invited a gay friend over to have dinner with him and his wife. Their guest soon realized (from the Bible on the coffee table) that they were Christians. He then asked my friend, “You are a Christian, and you actually *like me?*” This is tragic, yet all too common.

If we are serious about giving off an “aroma” that is Christ-centered, we must humbly own up to the fact that many people, especially those regarded as “sinners” by many religious communities, think Christians *dislike* them and are *against* them. Whether this is specifically true or not, it is our starting point in the minds of most non-Christian people. If we are not guilty ourselves, then we are at the very least guilty by association with our brothers and sisters who have misrepresented the biblical Jesus to our culture. Therefore we must take personal responsibility in our ministry atmosphere, in our message, and in our way of life, to reorient people’s perception of Christians, and especially of Christ Himself.

*The separation barrier.* In a day when many of Christ’s followers wish to separate themselves and their children from anyone and anything that is secular, would-be Christ-centered ambassadors must do all we can to lean against this thinking—doing everything we can to become *friends* with as many non-Christian people and non-Christian groups as we can—with no strings attached. This needs to be a central, core value of our Christian communities. It is helpful to look at the life of Jesus in this regard. Luke 15:1-2 tell us plainly that *ALL* the tax collectors and “sinners” made a habit of hanging around Jesus. They *wanted* to be near Him, and they *wanted* to hear what He had to say. Meanwhile, religious insiders were regularly accusing Jesus of being a glutton, a drunk, and a friend of sinners (Luke 7:34). We know that the allegations of sin were false—Jesus was tempted in every way but *without* sin. But He *was* unapologetically a true *friend* to the least and the lost, and to those typically marginalized by religious sub-cultures of His day. The one who “welcomed sinners and ate with them” now beckons Gospel people to do the same. This needs to become more than just part of our theology—it needs to characterize the *life* and *practice* of our ministries!

*The reputation barrier.* There is a price to pay if we get serious about creating environments that are “full of grace.” In becoming a “friend of sinners” as Jesus was, we should expect significant resistance. The simple fact is that when we start doing some of the things Jesus did, some *believers* will become *suspicious* of us. Consider Luke 7, for example, when a “sinful woman” enters the home of Simon the Pharisee. In the name of love, and in the spirit of being “full of grace,” Jesus received her very *UN-orthodox* display of worship and affection toward Him. He breaks with religious customs, allowing the woman to touch His feet (feet were considered unclean, and you couldn’t even ask a slave to touch them for this reason!). He breaks with social customs also, receiving her as his disciple. It was scandalous in Jesus’ day for a Rabbi to take a woman as a disciple, much less a woman with a questionable history. But not for Jesus. Most scandalous, however, is the way that Jesus breaks with moral customs. The woman lets down her hair (in the first century this was grounds for divorce—a woman was only to do this in the

presence of her immediate family). She touches Him with the tools of her trade. He lets her anoint Him with a prostitute's perfume and kiss her with a prostitute's lips! Of course we know the rest of the story—Jesus was discarded as a man of ill repute, as guilty by association, by religious “insiders” who failed to see the eternal value of loving the least and the lost.

But let's bring it into our day and age. This has serious ramifications for those of us who wish to represent Jesus well. The reality is that if Jesus were a 21<sup>st</sup> century American, He would not associate godliness with membership in a political party. He would not tell a lesbian she was outside of God's will without also offering her a personal, no-strings-attached friendship. He would not talk about how smoking destroys God's temple (while at the same time downing His third piece of fried chicken at the church potluck!). He would not condemn adultery as being any worse than studying the Bible for the wrong reasons! If we are accustomed to setting up our own Mishnah, our own set of “clean laws” that define one's worthiness to be received into the fellowship, we need to give serious re-evaluation to our methods and priorities!

*The pride barrier.* Becoming a “friend of sinners” begins with coming to terms with the fact that we are infinitely more like Adolph Hitler than we are like Jesus Christ. Our approach with people (whether Christian or non-Christian) must be as “fellow beggars humbly telling others where to find the bread” (Steve Brown). If we sincerely want people to see the impact of the Gospel, and if we sincerely want them to see the beauty of God's grace, then they must first see *in us* the humility of those who have been truly and deeply impacted by God's mercy and grace, and that humility must be the *real thing* and not just an act. Paul was not above humbling himself. In Romans 7 he gives us a window into his personal struggle with the sin of coveting (a sin nobody would see unless he told them!), and the ways in which the Gospel heals that sin. In 1 Timothy Paul identifies himself the chief of all sinners. If we would be Christ-centered in our ministries and our messages, we need to get over our love for reputation and image. Without realizing it, we can begin to build our identities on how good we look—the “model Christian” that all will look up to. This is a trap and will rob our ministries of power. If people in our ministries are to be changed by the grace of Jesus, they must regularly see the Gospel working effectively in *our* lives—healing us of *our* sins and deepest wounds and fears.

**Second, to be “full of grace”, we must take great care to ensure that, *relationally speaking*, our Christian communities are *sinner-safe*.**

There was a reason why *ALL* the sinners ran to Jesus on a regular basis (Luke 15:1-2). Though they knew He was *against* their sin (He never watered down the law's demands!), they wanted to be around Him because they knew precisely *why* He was against their sin—because He was *for* them! If we would be a “full of grace” people, several commitments must characterize us, our ministries, and our message:

*A commitment to respect and value all people.* People under our ministries must sense us defining them by their God-given *dignity*, not by their failures. If we are not careful, we can easily fall into the trap of diminishing the worth of a human being in this way: When we think of them, we think first of their sin and the ways they need to be “fixed” rather than thinking of them as image-bearers made for glory. The following quote from CS Lewis is extremely helpful to this perspective:

*It is maybe possible to think too much of your own potential glory hereafter. But it is impossible to think too often or too deeply about that of your neighbors. The weight of my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back. So heavy a weight it is that only humility can carry it. It's a serious thing to live in a society of immortals. To remember that millions of years from now, the dullest and most uninteresting person you meet may one day be an incredible creature, who if you saw him now you would be strongly tempted to worship... All day long we are in some degrees helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is therefore in light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the proper amount of awe and circumspection that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all*

*politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations, these are mortal, and their life is to our life as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals with whom we joke, work, marry, snub and exploit...your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses. (CS Lewis, The Weight of Glory)*

*A biblical view of sin.* Defining people by their dignity does *not* imply that we should not challenge sin! If we are really going to love people as Jesus does, we will love their welfare, which means we will deeply desire that they be obedient to God! So, the question is not, “Do we confront sin?” but rather “How do we confront sin, and with what motivation do we confront sin?” We must be on God’s agenda here—He is so vehemently opposed to sin both for His own glory and (how easily we can forget) He is so passionately *FOR* the human being! God’s desire is that we live by His design, which is *life* to us!

*A grace- and mercy-filled attitude toward those who commit sin.* Whenever we speak against sin of any kind, we must take great care to ensure that we speak against sin because we care so deeply for the one who is sinning. Otherwise, we shouldn’t say anything at all about sin. If you watch the news you are no doubt familiar with the group from Topeka, Kansas who picketed the funeral (!) of Mathew Sheppard (the young homosexual man who was beaten to death by some of his peers) with signs that said things such as “God hates fags” and “Thank God for AIDS.” This example is certainly extreme. However, we must guard zealously against the seeds in our own hearts that are prone to despise sinners rather than welcoming sinners and eating with them. We must guard our hearts from desiring a sinner’s harm instead of his/her well-being (Even the Lord takes *no pleasure* in the death of the wicked!). We do well to remember Jesus, who stood over Jerusalem (who had rejected His message and His Person) and *wept* for them. This being the case, the “feel” of sin-talk in our ministries must be such that people feel deeply exposed and *at the same time NOT REJECTED!* If we would be a “full of grace” people, then people who are driven to repentance and grief over their sin will no doubt be certain that we as leaders, and those under our leadership, *accept and love them right where they are*, wherever they are in the process toward knowing and obeying Christ. Jesus did much more than merely tolerate sinful people in His midst. He cherished them, and pursued their hearts that they might become free indeed.

**Third, to be “full of grace”, we must take great care to keep first things first.**

This essentially means two things:

*Jesus, and nothing else, is our “main thing” at all times!* Keeping first things first means that our primary emphasis, our primary “hang up,” is always the Person and work of Christ. Even Paul himself “decided to know nothing among (those under his ministry) except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). What this means is...

*Everything else takes a back seat to Jesus!* As a “full of grace” people, we will become most concerned that people “get on board” with Jesus than that they “get on board” with whatever our agenda is...whether political, ethical, or otherwise. While these things do have their place, they must always be secondary to a vision for people to meet Christ and know Him for who He really is. Consider the following quote from Rev. Timothy Keller:

*We (need to) be careful with the order in which we communicate the parts of the faith. Pushing moral behaviors before we lift up Christ is religion. The church today is calling people to God with a tone of voice that seems to confirm their worst fears. Religion has always been outside-in—“if I behave out here in all these ways, then I will have God’s blessing and love inside.” But the Gospel is inside-out—“if I know the blessing and grace of God inside, then I can behave out here in all these ways.” A woman who had been attending our church for several months came to see me. “Do you think abortion is wrong?” she asked. I said that I did. “I’m coming now to see that maybe there is something wrong with it,” she replied, “now that I have become a Christian here and have started*

*studying the faith in the classes." As we spoke, I discovered that she was an Ivy League graduate, a lawyer, a long-time Manhattan resident, and an active member of the ACLU. She volunteered that she had experienced three abortions. "I want you to know," she said, "that if I had seen any literature or reference to the 'pro-life' movement, I would not have stayed through the first service. But I did stay, and I found faith in Christ. If abortion is wrong, you should certainly speak out against it, but I'm glad about the order in which you do it." This woman had had her faith incubated into birth in our Sunday services. In worship, we center on the question "what is truth?" and the one who had the audacity to say, "I am the truth." That is the big issue for postmodern people, and it's hard to swallow. Nothing is more subversive and prophetic than to say Truth has become a real person...We, of all people, ought to understand and agree with fears about religion, for Jesus himself warned us to be wary of it, and not to mistake a call for moral virtue for the good news of God's salvation provided in Christ. (Timothy Keller, Religion-less Spirituality)*

### **To sum it all up...**

When it pertains to cultivating a "full of grace" ministry culture and message, we need to consider how we are presenting Christ to people who are either not Christian or somewhere along the journey of overcoming sin (that's all of us, isn't it?). The following chart is given as an aid for preparing our atmosphere and our messages to be in line with the Gospel of grace. Obviously, we want to lean against both the legalistic grid and the liberal grid, and saturate everything we think, say, and do from the perspective of the Gospel grid.

Different models of ministry and the “hurdles” people feel they must overcome in order to become “insiders:”

<p><b>Legalistic Ministries</b></p>	<p>Measure up to our laws! Get on board with our political agenda, our system of doctrine, our customs, our dress code, our worship style, and everything else we regard as sacred!</p>	<p>We will accept you and give you our full embrace...—IF you can get past the first hurdle! (We are tolerant of everyone except those who disagree with us on anything!)</p>	<p>Performing to gain acceptance with the group, God, and/or yourself.</p>	<p>A “truth without love” paradigm—you will either become self-righteous (because you measure up to the laws), depressed (because you don’t), or embittered (because you feel oppressed).</p>
<p><b>Liberal Ministries</b></p>	<p>Measure up to our laws! Get on board with our agenda of unqualified tolerance!</p>	<p>We will accept you and give you our full embrace...—IF you can get past the first hurdle! (We are tolerant of everyone except those who are not as tolerant as we are!)</p>	<p>Performing to gain acceptance with the group, God, and/or yourself.</p>	<p>A “love without truth” paradigm—you will become permissive (in the name of tolerance), and embittered (toward those who aren’t permissive like you are).</p>
<p><b>Gospel (Christ-centered) Ministries</b></p>	<p>See how loved you are! We accept you and give you our full embrace... because you are a person of great value... you bear the image of God and God loves you enough to die for you!</p>	<p>Process and respond to the meaning of the first “hurdle” of accepting the love of God—you are now called, as a response to God’s great love for you, to live a life of love and obedience to God’s commands (not <i>our</i> laws, but <i>God’s</i> loving, life-giving laws!).</p>	<p>Loving God and other people, because you know you are loved by God and by the group.</p>	<p>“Full of grace and truth” paradigm—you will become free in your heart (because you are fully known, fully loved, and never rejected), and deeply motivated to live by God’s design (because His design has become beautiful to you).</p>

**Building an Atmosphere that is “Full of Truth”**

This section is the second of two sections dealing with what it means to cultivate the “aroma of Jesus” in our ministries. We will consider how specifically to encourage a Jesus-like ministry atmosphere that is “full of *truth*” (John 1:14), to the end that people of all stripes (whether Christian or not) become convinced that there is *nothing* more wonderful, *nothing* more exciting, and *nothing* more life-giving than being an obedient follower of Jesus.

As we think about forming Christ-centered messages, we must keep in mind several key attributes of a message that is truly *Christ*-centered and therefore “full of truth,” we must consider several factors with regard to our use and presentation of the Law of God. As was the case with Paul, our mission and primary dream for those under our ministry is that “Christ be formed in (them)” (Galatians 4:19), meaning that their character as well as ours become conformed to His, that they become obedient to God’s commands as a way of life. But this is tricky, because true obedience that aligns with Jesus as “the truth,” is obedience from the inside-out—the kind of obedience offered not to use God and put Him in our debt, but rather to experience in greater depth the riches of His loveliness and worth. In short, we must encourage an obedience that responds to the love of Jesus. Any other kind is religion, not Christianity.

**First, it is important to discern and to reject the three primary *misuses* of the Law of God.**

Following are three “misuses” that we would do well to discern and reject:

*The liberal misuse of God’s Law.* Those who come from this perspective tend to be resistant to the actual commands of God. Instead, liberally-minded people will see God’s commands as

oppressive and will replace them with a new law—the law of tolerance. For the liberal person, the only real “absolute” is that there are no absolutes. All people should be tolerated and accepted, *except* for those who are intolerant! The problem with this approach to ministry should be obvious—to add to or to take away from the Word of God puts one in great danger (Revelation 22)!

*The conservative misuse of God’s Law.* Those who come from this perspective tend to view the commands of God primarily in terms of duty. If you keep the commands, you have done your duty. If you don’t, you will be judged and things will not go well for you. Period. God’s Law by conservatives is viewed almost exclusively in *legal* terms and little if at all in *relational* terms. For the conservative person, there is generally very little if any dancing in the heart over the *beauty* of God’s commands. In some conservative circles (says Timothy Keller), a primary sign that you are in the center of God’s will is that you are miserable! The Bible gives such a different picture, however. Psalm 1 teaches us that the Law of God is the believer’s *delight!* The writer of Psalm 119 says (you can almost hear him shouting it!), “O how I *love* Your law!” He absolutely *adores* God’s commands and in no way sees them as a “burden that must be kept” or “a duty around which I must center my life.” While the Law *is* duty, it is *so very much MORE* than duty! If we or those in our ministry are consistently *burdened* by our presentation of God’s commands, then it is likely that we are missing the heart of the Law altogether. 1 John tells us that for the rightly-motivated believer, God’s commands are *not* burdensome!

*The antinomian misuse of God’s Law.* Those who come from this perspective tend to view the commands of God as being optional. Antinomian means “against law”—the thought being that one can receive Jesus as Savior yet refuse Jesus as Lord. The problems with this are obvious from Scripture. Jesus Himself said, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I say?” James reminds us that “Faith without works is dead.” Martin Luther, the champion of grace himself, said that we are saved by faith alone, but never by a faith that *is* alone.

The following chart attempts to distinguish between the various uses (and misuses) of God’s Law. We do well to labor passionately to present the Law of God, but to do so from the Christ- and Gospel-centered approach and none other.

<b>Liberal</b>	“God’s Law is oppressive.” The Bible’s commands are primitive and un-enlightened. They take away my freedom.	“Tolerance” and “Freedom.”	Resistance to all authority except self. Disdain for anyone who challenges my personal “freedom” to think, believe, and do whatever I want.
<b>Conservative</b>	“God’s Law is legal in nature.” The Bible’s commands are everyone’s duty. If you don’t follow them, you will pay.	Treadmill-living.	Self-righteousness and condemnation of others (I think I am keeping the law and others are not), Anxiety (I have failed at the law), or Denial (I can’t deal with the fact that I have failed at the law). Lack of inner joy.
<b>Antinomian</b>	“God’s Law is irrelevant.” The Bible’s commands are fine and good. They are a good “ideal” but not necessary for me as a Christian.	Trust in the sinner’s prayer.	Self-deception (I can be a Christian without being a follower of Christ). Fleshly living (proving that I really love sin, not Jesus).
<b>Christ- and Gospel-Centered</b>	“God’s Law is relational and lovely.” The Bible’s commands are a gift, and are the key to enjoying the “abundant life” Jesus came to give! They show me what it is to be truly human!	None.	Confidence in the finished work of Jesus for my standing with God—I’m not crushed when I fail at obedience, but am driven once again into Jesus’ loving arms. Love for God’s commands because I know they are motivated by His deep passion for my well-being!

**Second, it is important to treat God’s commands as an expression of His *love*.**

Remember, God’s Law is not merely legal. While it does have a legal thrust, it is also deeply *relational*. God gives us His law in order to set us free, not to burden us. Consider the following:

*God’s commands, rightly understood, are to be adored.* The overwhelming testimony of the writers of Scripture was that the Law of God was a breathtakingly *beautiful* thing. To them, it was not oppressive and freedom-robbing, but life-giving. It was not merely “duty” but delight. It was not an option but a blessed treasure, *the only thing that made sense!*

*God’s commands are given to provide freedom.* It is crucial to understand the original meaning and context of the word *torah* (Law). For the Jew who lived in the time of Moses, this was the word used to describe a loving father’s instruction to his children. When presenting any command of God to people under our ministries, we need to start with the question, “What motivates a parent to tell his/her children to stay out of the street, or to eat vegetables, or to get 10 hours of sleep?” The answer to this question, *always and forever*, is that the parent has a deep desire for the health and well-being of the child. As such, the parent surrounds his/her children with loving, life-giving laws! This is a mere reflection of the heart of God who gives His Law from the same motivations toward His children.

*God’s commands are given to provide protection.* God’s Law communicates the Creator’s design for what it means to be truly *human*. It tells us how we can pursue our potential, how we can “be all we can be”! If you take a fish out of water, what happens? The fish becomes anxious and afraid. All sorts of immediate distortions are introduced into the fish’s existence. Only when you put the fish back in his designed habitat will the fish thrive again. Otherwise he will eventually

die. It is no different with a human being where the Law of God is concerned. The Law *is* our habitat! So, when we present the Law of God to our own hearts and to the hearts of those under our ministries, we must constantly be communicating the following things about it:

*The Law will benefit you!* Labor to show them how life “within God’s design” will enhance the quality of their lives!

*The law will protect you!* Labor to show them the inevitable distortions that will be introduced if they choose to depart from God’s design. Show them how God’s Law will “bite back” if they ignore or refuse it. As Francis Schaeffer was so well known for, learn to take people to the logical conclusion of their unbiblical worldviews and life-choices.

*The law of God is lovely!* We must bring people to the place of seeing God’s Law as the writers of Scripture saw it—as beautiful, the only thing that truly makes sense for those who wish to live life to the fullest.

**Third, it is important to emphasize obedience at the *motivational* level, not merely the *behavioral* level.**

Jesus Himself said that it is a good *root* that makes a good tree bear good fruit. The implication is that we obey God because of *the people we have become on the inside*, and for no other reason. We love (and therefore obey) God because God first loved us. It is only a clear vision of the loveliness of Jesus and the Gospel that we or the people under our ministries will obey in a way that will honor God and set the heart free. This has several implications for ministry:

*We must encourage a “WANT to” obedience rather than “HAVE to” obedience.* True obedience comes from a heart that loves and enjoys the things of God, not from a heart that is duty-bound. As leaders, we must not be satisfied with any kind of “obedience” except the kind of obedience that comes from a heart that *desires* to obey God and does so naturally, almost without even thinking about it. Think of Michael Jordan as an example. Michael is known as one of the hardest working athletes ever—he spent unparalleled amounts of time and energy honing his skills (just as we as believers must “train ourselves for godliness!”). But when Michael got to game time, basketball had become so much a part of him that he excelled *without even thinking about it*. When you *become* a certain kind of person rather than *trying to be* a certain kind of person, it completely re-orientates your motivational dynamic. One example is the “methods” we choose to get people to share their faith with non-Christians. Evangelism technique seminars can be very helpful, but the truth of the matter is that most of them lead to a very short-term commitment to share the Gospel, one that will fizzle away sooner rather than later. Why is this the case? It is because many of our “training programs” fail to address the *why* of evangelism. We focus so much on technique and “how to relate to people” that we ignore the heart! Consider the primary evangelists in the New Testament on the other hand. The Samaritan woman (John 4) went immediately into Samaria to tell as many as she could about Jesus. The Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5), when told by Jesus to go and tell his *family* what the Lord had done to heal him, instead goes into the *Decapolis* (Ten cities!) to tell as many people as he could about the healing he had received! What motivated these people to “share their faith”? It was the fact that Jesus had become so breathtakingly beautiful and irresistible to them that they absolutely *had* to tell others! I remember when Mark McGwire was about to hit his record-breaking home run for the Cardinals several years ago—when he got up to bat I just *HAD* to call my wife Patti in to watch it with me (even though she’s not a big sports fan!). The point is that when things become beautiful to us, our enjoyment of them is not complete until we have shared it. So here’s the application if teaching people to evangelize is our issue—we teach the heart first, and the behavior follows once the Gospel becomes beautiful to the heart! This is the case with any command of God as we present it. If we present the Law as primarily behavior-modification, the behavior will happen on the outside but the heart will not change, it will fizzle as soon as the guilt wears off. On the other hand, if we present the Law as a beautiful expression of God’s care for the people we teach and lead, we will begin to see people change at the motivational level, which then produces lasting fruit that is in keeping with repentance. I think it was Steve Brown who once said, “I love to sin, but the reason I choose not to is because I love Jesus more!”

*So, our “strategy” for encouraging people to obey God is to show them the beauty of Jesus on a regular basis!* When Jesus becomes truly beautiful, truly lovely to people, they cannot help but

follow Him! His commands become irresistible! We will always give our lives *effortlessly* to the things that give our lives the most meaning!

**Fourth, it is important to emphasize the many *rewards* of obedience.**

The truth of the matter is that God's commands, when followed from a Gospel-motivation, *enhance life*. Here are just a few of the ways we need to present this to be true:

*The reward of fulfillment.* As Augustine once said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God." Obedience to God's commands gets us in touch with the "true us"—with the design of our Creator which gives life! Remember Joshua's words, "Do not let this book of the Law depart from your mouth. Meditate on it day and night, and be careful to do everything that is written in it. Then you will be *prosperous and successful* (Joshua 1:8)! When we teach any command of God, we must be careful to highlight enthusiastically how that command will bring ultimate fulfillment and blessedness (happiness!) to those we teach and lead.

*The reward of inner peace.* There is no fear that God's Laws will "bite back" when we obey them! When we disobey God, it brings distortions, anxiety, and even misery to our inner lives. But when we obey and follow, there is inner peace...an integration of life! Remember the fish out of water example!

*The reward of deepened intimacy with God.* Once we belong to God through faith in Christ, our position with Him can never be threatened. Nothing in all creation (including ourselves) can separate us from His love (Romans 8)! However, our *fellowship* with God (our experience of intimacy with Him) is and will always be weakened by disobedience, and strengthened by obedience to His commands. Jesus said, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will *come to him and make our home with him*" (John 14:23).

**Fifth, it is important to emphasize the *relief* that can come from knowing we have *failed* to keep God's commands.**

It is both ironic and beautiful that both *obedience* and *disobedience* to God's commands can ultimately lead to deeper joy. The rewards of obedience are obvious (as stated above). And there are also deep rewards for those who have come to terms with the fact that they fall short of God's glory every day.

*The reward of humility before God and others.* As ironic as it may sound, there are few things more wonderful and life-giving than coming to terms with our failure to obey God's commands. As Paul says, "Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more." Knowing that we are saved by mercy and not by our best efforts is extremely liberating. What's more, it makes us tender rather than harsh, gracious rather than judgmental, humble rather than defensive. Don't we all want to be these kinds of people? I for one am absolutely convinced that the most miserable people in the Bible were those who could not bring themselves to admit their failures, because they had built such an identity in their supposed law-keeping. The Pharisees, rather than pleading for mercy and entering into the life of God's grace and forgiveness, chose instead the miserable path of performance, offering "moral and behavioral resumes" to God and other people (and to themselves—remember the Pharisee who prayed "to himself" in Luke 18, so as to feel confident in his own righteousness). This left them in the awful position of either being puffed up with pride (because they thought they were being righteous), despair (because they failed at the laws upon which they built their identities), or denial (because they couldn't handle the thought of being seen as sinful). Those whose hearts were set free, on the other hand, were those like the tax collector who prayed, "God have mercy on me, the sinner," and went home justified and healed.

*The reward of knowing that even our most lame efforts evoke the smile of God.* Isaiah reminds us that even our best efforts to obey God's commands are going to be tainted with motives that are sinful and therefore damnable—like "filthy rags" (lit., like a used menstrual cloth). Nonetheless, we have assurance that even our weakest desires and attempts to obey God's commands bring

pleasure to God's heart! Zephaniah 3:17 is breathtaking, "The Lord...will take great *delight* in you...He will *rejoice* over you with loud singing!" I'll never forget the scene in the movie *Radio*, where the football coach tries to teach the mentally handicapped man (named "Radio") how to write his name. The coach writes it down for him: R-A-D-I-O, and then says, "Now you try it." Radio then smiles, takes a pencil and paper, and proceeds to scribble a bunch of inarticulate nothingness onto the piece of paper. He looks up at the coach and smiles, and the coach, rather than showing his deep disappointment or frustration, looks at Radio and says, "YOU DID IT!" If the people under our care and our teaching are to ever be motivated to attempt obedience (even while knowing their very best efforts will still fall short), we need to regularly pour grace all over even their weakest attempts to follow Jesus. This is how the Gospel is applied to the Law.

*The reward of having a BIG Jesus instead of a little Jesus.* Another thing that our failure to keep the Law of God does for us is that it enlarges our sense of Jesus, who He is, how much we need Him, and how willing and eager He is to meet our deepest need! The paradox of the gospel is that the more we see our sin, the more large and significant it becomes to our senses, our picture of Jesus and His infinite grace and mercy grows as well. Take a look at Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 1:15-17 to see the truth of this!

### Targeting the Heart with Grace and Truth

We need to pay close attention at all times to the *motivational* dynamics of the Christian life—the primary reasons (from a human perspective) why people do not see Jesus as precious, and therefore do not see the appeal of following Him with their whole hearts, are in fact *motivational* reasons. Specifically, the "sin beneath the sin" of all sins is *idolatry*—the elevation of a created thing to a place where it becomes one's functional "Lord" and "Savior", the ultimate object of worship and service (see Romans 1). Therefore, the key to persuading people to trust and follow Jesus (grace and truth!) rests in convincing their hearts that *Jesus is more precious and lovely than the idols* that their hearts are prone to worship and serve. Remember, it is the *gospel* (the fantastically GREAT news of Jesus) that alone is the power of God for salvation—it is the only power for true, heart-level transformation.

*For every one look you take at your sin, take ten looks at Jesus.*  
- Robert Murray McCheyne

*The reason I preach the Gospel to you every single week is precisely because you forget the Gospel every single week!*  
- Martin Luther

*The first and greatest commandment is that you "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind."*  
- Jesus

**First, we must remain in tune with the primary reason the Gospel message does not "take" with many—*idolatry* is that reason.**

John Calvin once said that the human heart is an idol factory! Human hearts are constantly prone to set up "false gods" to whom we give our allegiance, our ultimate affections, and our whole hearts.

*A working definition of idolatry.* An idol is any person, or idea, any created thing that captures the loyalties and/or the ultimate affections of our hearts more than God Himself. An idol is anything that becomes more precious to us than Him.

*An idol is anything which occupies God's place—it is anything upon which you will base your life. It is what you look to for your sense of meaning, happiness, and validation. When something becomes your idol, you will give it your unquestioned loyalty. You will let it run your life, determine your choices, and govern the use of your money and time. You will give yourself to it effortlessly.*

- Timothy Keller

*We need to assume that everyone is religious by nature.* Every human being, whether Christian, religious, agnostic, or atheist, will worship something or someone. One of our primary tasks as those in ministry is to understand what it is that is capturing the ultimate affections of people's hearts. Ecclesiastes reminds us that God has put eternity into the heart of man (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We were created to be in relationship with God. He designed us to love, honor, adore, and obey Him. If we don't do this, *by necessity* we will *have* to "love, honor, adore, and obey" something or someone else! Our idols are our "rather-thans" that capture and sabotage our hearts' affections that belong first to God.

**Second, we must learn to *discern* and *diagnose* the particular idols that exist in our own hearts and in the hearts of those we lead.**

How do we do this? There are several diagnostic questions that we need to ask as we minister to people, and especially as we seek to prepare Christ-centered messages (thanks to David Powlison for introducing these and several other excellent "diagnostic" questions in his article, *Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*):

*First, what do people under my ministry feel they cannot survive or function without?* In other words, what do they feel they have to have in order to enjoy life, or to be acceptable as a person? What are the things that they are terrified of losing?

*Second, where do people under my ministry spend their time and money with the least amount of effort?* We always, without exception, will give our time and resources effortlessly to the things that give our lives the most meaning.

*Third, what do people under my ministry tend to think and talk about the most?* Another way to frame this question is to ask, "Where do their thoughts go when they are driving alone in the car, when they first wake in the morning?" What does this say about where the utmost treasures of their hearts are residing?

*Fourth, which biblical commands are the people under my ministry most hesitant to obey?* This is always going to be the most revealing question about the nature of a person's particular idols. Whenever we choose to disobey a command of God—*any* command of God—at that moment in time our hearts are treasuring something or someone more than Him.

*Fifth, when do people under my ministry become most angry?* What kinds of people, things, or circumstances irritate them the most, and what is it about these people, things, or circumstances that give them such power over their hearts? What, if it happened, would tempt them to become angry with God? (Remember Job's wife, who told her husband to "curse God and die")

*Sixth, how would people under my ministry fill in the blank? "I cannot be happy unless \_\_\_\_\_."* Whatever is on the other side of the "unless" is the idol.

Once we discern the idols, we must labor to make them the centerpiece of our application!

**Third, we must learn to wisely and patiently direct ourselves and those we lead to *dismantle* idols of the heart and replace them with *Jesus*.**

Dismantling and replacing idols requires that we labor in our study and meditation to understand the multitude of ways that Jesus "fills the hole in the human heart" in a much more adequate, life-giving way than any Jesus-substitute that a person may be prone to "worship and serve."

Basically every idol (and every sin) traces back to a *self-salvation* strategy, which replaces something only Jesus can ultimately provide adequately, with a *counterfeit*. Some examples include (thanks to Timothy Keller for inspiring these insights):

*The certainty idol.* Those who “worship and serve” the certainty idol are “nervous types” who are controlled by worry. They simply cannot handle when things are up in the air or seem to be at risk. They (we!) always carry anxiety about losing their health, their money, the spot-free condition of their home, or any other thing that gives them the illusion that they are in control of their universe. To address the certainty idol, we must do so with both “grace” and “truth:”

*Truth:* You will never feel secure (be “saved” from insecurity) by putting your hope in things that are uncertain. If you continue to put your hope in your health, your bank account, the well-being of your children, your GPA, you will remain an anxious person. You will either be horrified of losing control, or will fall into despair when you do lose control.

*Grace:* Jesus is the sovereign King of the universe. He knows your needs. He works all things (good and bad) for your good. Trust Him!

*The success idol.* Those who “worship and serve” the success idol are generally “achiever types” who don’t mind things being “up in the air” (unlike the certainty idol) as long as they win. They cannot deal with failure and are driven by the fear of it. They (we!) are enslaved by their ability (or lack thereof) to “measure up” to peers, to gain the leverage they desire—whether it be on the athletic field, in the classroom, at the office, or any other place. To address the success idol, again we must do so with both “grace” and “truth:”

*Truth:* Enough success will never be enough for you. (When Rockefeller was asked “How much is enough” he said, “One more dollar!”). You will be like Harold Abrams in *Chariots of Fire*, who ran, ran, and ran, but eventually realized he had no idea what he was running for.

*Grace:* Jesus has *already* lived the ultimately “successful” life *on your behalf!* You can now rest in the record He has provided for you in His life of perfect obedience. Your reputation is secure. You will win the ultimate prize because of what Jesus has accomplished in your place!

*The relationship idol.* Those who “worship and serve” the relationship idol are controlled by an inordinate longing for affection and/or approval. They (we!) don’t mind things being up in the air (unlike the certainty idol), and they don’t mind losing (unlike the success idol), as long as somebody is saying “I love you” to them.

*Truth:* Even your best relationships will be spoiled if you put them in front of your relationship with Jesus! You will become obsessive, with a false security that the love / approval of others will “save” you. Or you will become anxious and depressed when criticized.

*Grace:* Jesus is the lover of your soul. He delights in you and rejoices over you always! He is the one place where you are relationally secure at *all times!*

In summary, with respect to idols of the heart, the bottom line consists of the following:

*We need to master the art of identifying of the heart.* We especially need to do so with the people among whom we serve in ministry. Our messages should always be addressing the “idols of the day” with the *grace* and *truth* of Jesus (as exemplified above). We need to ask the “diagnostic questions” mentioned earlier in this section—both of ourselves and those under our ministry. Then, we need to target our teaching toward the healing of these idols.

*We need to master the art of exposing idols of the heart.* We need to develop a pattern of leading people to acknowledge their own idols, and to *admit* humbly that the things they love too much will ultimately wound them, and may even devastate them. In the most gracious manner possible, we need to convince our hearers that the things their hearts are tempted to “over desire” can never bring them the wholeness, happiness, or fulfillment (salvation!) they desire.

*We need to master the art of replacing idols of the heart.* We need to develop ways, sensitive to our listeners, which help them to re-direct their deepest *loves*. We need to masterfully communicate in such a way that people begin to see clearly that Jesus will fill their hearts in much more adequate and enduring ways than any Jesus-counterfeit ever will.