



CHAPTER 1

The Missing Gospel

Is the gospel really missing? If so, where did it go?

Most Christians have the facts straight: Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a perfect life, died on the cross in our place, and was raised from the dead. All those who place their faith in Him will be forgiven and have everlasting life. So, the gospel is not missing.

Not so fast.

I mentioned in the introduction that there is a difference in knowing that honey is sweet and having that sweetness burst alive in your mouth. Being able to articulate the gospel with accuracy is one thing; having its truth captivate your soul is quite another.

The gospel is not just supposed to be our ticket into heaven; it is to be an entirely new basis for how we relate to God, ourselves, and others. It is to be the source from which everything else flows.

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Let me lay all my cards on the table: I believe evangelicalism, as a whole, desperately needs a recovery of the gospel as the center of Christianity. Even in conservative denomina-

tions like my own (the Southern Baptist Convention), the gospel has been eclipsed by any number of secondary stimuli for growth.

I don't mean that we have corrupted the gospel—no, we've still got those facts right. But the goal of the gospel is not just that we pass some kind of test by accurately recounting the importance of Jesus. The goal of the gospel is to produce a type of people consumed with passion for God and love for others. We certainly don't seem to have *that* right.

A Christianity that does not have as its primary focus the deepening of passions for God is a false Christianity, no matter how zealously it seeks conversions or how forcefully it advocates righteous behavior. Being converted to Jesus is not just about learning to obey some rules. Being converted to Jesus is learning to so adore God that we would gladly renounce everything we have to follow Him.

In graduate school my roommate kept a dog named Max in our house. Because poor Max was crippled in his back legs, his life consisted of lying on our doorstep and staring up at us when we walked by. I remember looking at him one day and thinking, "Based on how most people see Christianity, Max would make a fine Christian: he doesn't drink; he doesn't smoke; he doesn't cuss; he doesn't get angry; we've had him

neutered so his thought-life is under control.”

Jesus’ disciples are not supposed to be merely compliant, neutered dogs. Jesus’ followers are to be *alive* with a love for God. When you love God and love others, Jesus said, all the rest of the Christian life falls naturally into place (Matt. 22:37–39).

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How Do We Learn to Love God?

How, then, do we learn to *love* God? That’s the dilemma of the “great commandment”: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37). But how can true love be *commanded*?

Being commanded to love someone you have no natural affection for becomes wearisome. True love grows as a response to loveliness. The first time I saw my wife, I felt the beginnings of love for her. The more I’ve gotten to know her over the years, and the more I’ve seen of her beauty, the more I’ve grown to love her. My love is a response.

Love for God is commanded in Scripture, but the command can only truly be fulfilled as our eyes are opened to see God’s beauty revealed in the gospel. The Spirit of God uses the beauty of the gospel to awaken in our hearts a desire for God. “We love Him,” the apostle John would say, “because

He first loved us” (1 John 4:19 NKJV). Love for God grows out of an experience of the love of God.

When we focus primarily on behavior change, we are ignoring the real issue: a heart that doesn’t want to love

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God. That’s certainly not to say that we should only obey God when we feel like it; only that preaching Christianity primarily as a set of new behaviors will

create people who act right without ever loving the right.¹ This creates hypocrites, weary and resentful of God.

What Is “Real” Spiritual Growth?

In the last message Jesus gave to His disciples, He told them that the way to fruitfulness and joy—the “secret” to the Christian life—was to *abide* in Him. They wouldn’t produce “abundant fruit” by reading books, intensifying their self-discipline, memorizing Scripture, or getting in accountability groups. Those things all have their place, but real fruit comes only from one place: abiding in Jesus.

“Abiding in Jesus” may sound like spiritual mumbo jumbo to you. It always did to me. I assumed that when you were “abiding in Jesus” you’d walk around with an ethereal glow in your eye and inexplicably wake up at 4 a.m. strumming passion tunes on the golden harp you keep beside your bed. But the word *abide* is much more straightforward than that. The Greek word *meno* means literally “to make your home in.” When we “make our home in” His love—feeling it, saturating

ourselves with it, reflecting on it, standing in awe of it—spiritual fruit begins to spring up naturally from us like roses on a rosebush.

Spiritual “fruit,” you see, is produced in the same way physical “fruit” is. When a man and woman conceive physical “fruit” (i.e., a child), they are usually not thinking about the mechanics of making that child. Rather, they get caught up in a moment of loving intimacy with one another, and the *fruit* of that loving intimacy is a child.

In the same way, spiritual fruit isn’t made by focusing on the commands of spiritual growth.

You can’t just grit your teeth and say, “I will have more loving feelings toward God! I will be more patient! I will have self-control!” I’ll explain later the role for denial of the flesh and self-disciplines, but true spiritual *fruit* comes from getting swept up in intimate, loving encounters with Jesus Christ. His love is the soil in which all the fruits of the Spirit grow. When our roots abide *there*, then joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control grow naturally in our hearts.

So if you want to see spiritual fruit in your life, don’t focus primarily on the fruits. Focus on Jesus’ acceptance of you, given to you as a gift. Focusing on spiritual fruit will usually produce only frustration and despair, not fruitfulness.

Have you ever looked at your life and thought, “Why am I still so impatient? How could I really be saved and still have such a problem with self-control?” I certainly have. If

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anything, the more I've walked with Jesus the more aware I've become of my sinfulness. Jesus, however, did not tell me to "abide" in my fruitfulness. He told me to abide in Him—in His acceptance of me, given to me freely as a gift.

Abiding in Jesus means understanding that His acceptance of us is the same regardless of the amount of spiritual fruit we have produced. Ironically, it is only when we understand that His love is not conditioned on our spiritual fruitfulness that we gain the power to become truly fruitful. Only those who abide in Him produce much fruit. In other words, those

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people who get better are those who understand that God's approval of them is not dependent on their getting better.

So what I really want to help you do in this book is abide in Jesus. The by-product of abiding in

Jesus is that you will become more patient in your marriage; you will develop self-discipline; you will become generous. Abiding in Jesus will produce *all* of the fruits of the Spirit in you—but not by having you concentrate particularly on any of those things. You concentrate on Jesus. You rest in His love and acceptance, given to you not because of what you have earned, but because of what He has earned for you.

Without Love, It's Ultimately Worthless

My senior year of high school, I started a relationship with an incredible girl for whom I *should* have been head over heels. “On paper” she was perfect. The problem was that when we were together there was just no *magic*, if you know what I mean. I couldn’t find a reason to *quit* dating her, however, so we kept on dating, even after I left for college 1,200 miles away.

I returned home for the first time over Christmas break, and we agreed to see each other the day before Christmas. All was well and good until the afternoon before I went to her house, when I had an alarming thought: *Was I supposed to get her a Christmas present?* It was, after all, the day before Christmas. If she got me a Christmas present and I didn’t get her one, then I would look like a total sleezeball.

Just to be safe, I stopped at the mall on my way to see her. I went into a sporting goods shop, the natural place you look for romantic gifts, and there I saw it—the absolutely perfect gift: an Adidas snow-skiing neck-warmer. It was \$7. I wrapped up the woolen masterpiece and put it under the seat in my car and drove the forty-five minutes over to her house. She came to the door, and after a few pleasantries, she said, “I bought you a Christmas present.” I said, proudly, “I got you one too!” She said, “Here is yours!” and gave me a *beautifully* wrapped box from under the tree. I opened it and took out; to my horror, it was obviously a very expensive shirt.

She looked at me expectantly and said, “Where’s my gift?”

I said, “Uhhh . . . I left it at home!” (Thinking that was safe . . . I could go home later, buy a new gift, and mail it to her. And I got to keep the neck-warmer. Win-Win.) But then

she said, “Well, we don’t have anything to do tonight. Maybe we could go back to your house and get it. I’d like to see your parents, anyway.”

I’m sure that during the forty-five-minute drive home I seemed a little distant. It’s because I was plotting. Praying. Vowing. When we walked in the house, I pulled my mom aside and said, “Hey—is there anything you were planning to give my sister that she doesn’t know about yet?” My mom said, “Why?” I said, “No further questions, please.” My mom went and got a gift intended for my sister (another pretty expensive sweater) and we put my date’s name on it instead. I took it in to my “girlfriend” and said, confidently, “Here’s your gift. I thought this would be perfect for you.”

I’ve often wondered in the years since then what would have happened that night had I come clean and told her the truth that my gift to her was only done to save face. No doubt, she would have refused it flatly. No girl wants to be loved only out of obligation.

Somehow we think God is different, as if He is pleased when we serve Him because we’re required to. He’s not.

God desires a people who desire Him, who serve Him because they love Him. He “seeks those,” Jesus said, “who worship Him in Spirit and in truth.”

In fact, Paul says whatever we do for God that is not fueled by love for God is ultimately worthless to Him:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove

mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1–3)

Let's face it: Paul's list here is impressive by anyone's standard. "Speaking with the tongues of men and angels" has to put you in the top 1 percent of spiritually gifted people. "Understanding all mysteries and all knowledge" means that you've got even the finer points of Christian doctrine down pat. "Faith to remove mountains" means you can flat get stuff done in prayer. And "*giving away even your body to be burned*"? Wow. Obedience doesn't get any more "radical" than that. When the offering plate goes by, you pull out a match and light yourself on fire for God. That's Varsity.

Yet, Paul says, spiritual giftedness, doctrinal mastery, audacious faith, and radical obedience *do not equal* the only thing that actually *matters* to God—love for Him. Without love even the most radical devotion to God is of no value to Him.

Let me make sure that sinks in . . . You can gain all the spiritual gifts in the world. You can take the most radical steps of obedience. You can share every meal with the homeless in your city. You can memorize the book of Leviticus. You can pray each morning for four hours like Martin Luther. But if what you do does

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not flow out of a heart of love—a heart that does those things because it genuinely *desires* to do them—it is ultimately *worthless* to God.

The point is that to produce *real* love in your heart for God takes something beyond spiritual gifts, greater doctrinal knowledge, audacious faith, and even radical obedience. Something entirely different. Radically different.

That's where the gospel comes in. The gospel, and the gospel alone, has the power to produce love for God in the heart. Paul calls the gospel "God's power for salvation" (Rom. 1:16). There are only two things that Paul ever refers to as "the power of God." One is the gospel; the other is Christ Himself. As the story of the gospel is proclaimed, the Spirit Himself makes the heart come alive to see the glory and beauty of God revealed in it. Just as Jesus' command to the lame man to "get up and walk" had *in itself* the power to obey the command, so the story of Jesus' death and resurrection has *in itself* the power to make dead hearts new. As the gospel is believed, through the power of the spirit, our selfish, hardened hearts burst alive with righteous and godly passions.² As we behold the glory of God in the face of Christ, Paul says, we are transformed into glory (2 Cor. 3:18–4:14).

Religion, then, can tell you what to do—namely, to "love God with all your heart, soul and mind" and "to love your neighbor as yourself"; but the gospel alone gives you the power to do it.

The gospel produces not just obedience, you see, but a new kind of obedience³—an obedience that is powered by desire. An obedience that is both pleasing to God *and* delightful to you.

Now, one clarification: I'm not saying here that every sacrifice we're asked to make for God will be in and of itself *desirable*. The cross was not in and of itself desirable to Jesus. Hebrews 12:2, in fact, says that Jesus had to *endure* its pain, which means He had to submit His desires to God's will. But even the crucifying of His flesh was shrouded in joy for Him. The joy of what He was obtaining—the pleasure of God and eternity with us—was greater than the pain.

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That's how God wants our obedience to be as well. When we pick up our cross to follow Him, He wants even the pain of the cross to be shrouded in joy over what we are obtaining.

That kind of joy in Jesus cannot be produced in us by simple resolutions to obey. That kind of joy comes only from being saturated in the gospel.

Thus, if you are not where you should be spiritually, the answer is not simply to get busier for Jesus. It is not just to get more radical in your devotion to God. It's not only to seek greater spiritual gifts or even to learn more about the Bible. It is to make your home in God's love given to you as a gift in Christ.

That's what I mean when I say the gospel is missing. We have substituted all kinds of cosmetic changes for true heart change. We encourage people to pursue new and better spiritual gifts. We tell them to recover ancient devotional techniques. We try to beef them up on a particular doctrinal system, as if more correct facts will do the trick in itself.

We tell them to show audacious, mountain-moving faith in prayer. We tell them to get radically committed to the Great Commission. These things all have their place, but all we are doing is piling superficial changes onto a heart that doesn't really love God. *None* of those things can produce love for God. Only the gospel can. Without that, ultimately our changes are worthless.

I am a lazy yardman. To my wife's chagrin, I don't (willingly) plant flowers.⁴ I don't fertilize. I pay someone else to cut the grass. All I care about, as it relates to the yard, is that I don't get complaint letters from my neighbors and I can see the tops of my kids' heads when they go outside. My wife, on the other hand, loves a plush, bright, neatly manicured lawn. One day she complained that our flower beds had too many weeds in them, and that I needed to do something about it. Now, there are two ways to kill weeds. You can get on your knees and spend several hours pulling them up by the roots. This is the correct way. Or, you can napalm them with weed killer. This is the lazy way. My way. So, multiple times each summer I blasted our flower beds with weed killer . . . and all our weeds died, just like the advertisement promised. And so did quite a few rose bushes that were caught in the line of fire. Beautiful, green vines with budding scarlet flowers were turned into tumbleweeds.

My wife, of course, complained about that too. In a Spirit-filled way, of course. So, let's say that to make her happy I had gone down to the florist and bought several dozen roses, brought them home, and began to staple them to the dead branches of the rosebushes. Would I have fixed anything? For a while, the dead rosebushes may have given the appearance of

being alive, at least from a distance. But they would not really be alive, and I would not really be out of the doghouse.

Paul Tripp has said that most of the strategies for Christian growth amount merely to “rose-stapling techniques.” Give away more money. Be more serious about your sin. Be more disciplined in your life. Read your Bible and have accountability partners. Go to a small group.

Spiritual disciplines have their place (we’ll get to that later). But nothing can take the place of organic change in the heart.

Only in the gospel, you see, is the power to obey the first commandment. Only in the truths of the gospel can a heart turned in on itself burst alive in love for God.

For many evangelicals the gospel has functioned solely as the entry rite into Christianity; it is the prayer we pray to begin our relationship with Jesus; the diving board off of which we jump into the pool of Christianity. After we get into the pool, we get into the real stuff of Christianity: mastering good principles for our marriage; learning rules and regulations of how to behave; and figuring out if Kirk Cameron will be left behind.

The gospel, however, is not just the diving board off of which we jump into the pool of Christianity; it is the pool itself. It is not only the way we begin in Christ; it is the way we grow in Christ. As Tim Keller says, the gospel is not just the ABCs of Christianity, it is the A–Z; it is not the first step in a stairway of truths, it is more like the hub of God’s wheel of truth.⁵ All other Christian virtues flow out of it.

That’s why growth in Christ is never going beyond the gospel, but going deeper into the gospel. The purest waters

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from the spring of life are found by digging deeper, not wider, into the gospel well.

My prayer is that this book will call us to a deeper understanding of the gospel as the true center of

Christianity. I hope it helps you see that the gospel shouldn't just be a ticket to heaven but the core of our entire lives. When you have made your home in the gospel. You will be radically generous. You will show audacious faith. These things are not added after the gospel, they flow from the gospel.

The apostle Peter says that the angels still “long to look into” the things of the gospel, because it dazzles their minds (1 Pet. 1:12). The angels have seen God face-to-face, and yet they still can't get enough of the gospel! Do we think we are really ready to move on to something else?

Whatever spiritual dysfunction you have in your life, the cure is the gospel. Do we want to be filled with passion for God? We should drink from the gospel. Do we want to get control of our bodies? We must be captivated by the gospel. Do we want to be content with what we have? We need to feast on the gospel. Do we want to learn to love our spouse? We

have to be overwhelmed by the gospel.

Martin Luther said in his *Lectures on Romans* that true spiritual progress was “always to begin

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again.” He said we must daily “embrace the love and kindness of God . . . and daily exercise our faith therein; entertaining no doubt of God’s love and kindness.”⁶

Always “begin again” with the gospel. Abide in it; swim in it; make your home in it. See more and more of your life through it. Be absolutely convinced at every moment of every day of the goodness of God in your life. That’s the only way you’ll ever *really* grow.

The gospel has done its work in us when we crave God more than we crave everything else in life—more than money, romance, family, health, fame—and when seeing His kingdom advance in the lives of others gives us more joy than anything we could own. When we see Jesus as greater than anything the world can offer, we’ll gladly let everything else go to possess Him. When we love others like He loves us, we’ll willingly yield our possessions to see His kingdom come into their lives.

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Obedience that does not flow from love ends up being drudgery—both to us, and to God. The gospel turns that drudgery into delight. It changes us from being slaves who *have* to obey God to sons and daughters who *want* to obey God. Again, God is not just after obedience; He’s after a whole new kind of obedience—an obedience that is filled with desire.

Dwelling on the riches of the gospel has forever changed my life. It has transformed our church. I believe with my whole heart it can change you too. But the humbling thing for

me is that I can't really *teach* any of this to you. These things are spiritually revealed and spiritually discerned. They require the gift of heavenly eyes. I couldn't even teach it to myself

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when it was right in front of my face, so what would make me think I could illuminate your heart?

And what makes *you* think you can develop a passion for God by reading

a book? So why not stop right now and plead with God to open the eyes of your heart? You might use the words of Paul in his prayer for the Ephesians,

[I pray] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened . . . [and I pray that you] may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph. 1:17–18; 3:18–20)