

THE
BOOKENDS
OF THE
CHRISTIAN LIFE



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The Bookends of the Christian Life

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INTRODUCTION

BOOKS AND BOOKENDS

Most of us have experienced the difficulty of putting books on a bookshelf without having a set of bookends to keep them in place. You know what happens. The books on the end tip over. Then the books next to those tumble over the ones already fallen. Inevitably some end up on the floor. At this point we do what we should have done in the first place. We set a couple of sturdy bookends in position to support and stabilize the books on the shelf.

Think of your life right now as a long bookshelf. The books on it represent all the things you do—both spiritual and temporal. There's a spiritual book for each activity of your Christian growth and service, perhaps with titles such as *Church Attendance*, *Bible Study*, *Daily Quiet Time*, *Sharing the Gospel*, or *Serving Others*. The temporal books might include *Job Performance*, *Educational Pursuits*, *Recreation and Leisure*, *Grocery Shopping*, *Driving the Car*, *Doing the Laundry*, *Mowing the Grass*, and *Paying the Bills*, to name a few. Our temporal books are intermingled with spiritual books on our

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bookshelf, since all our activities are to be informed and directed by the spiritual dimension, just as Paul indicated: “Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

This bookshelf of your life is a very active place. In the course of each day, as you pull one book after another off the shelf, life can get complicated. And the more committed and conscientious you are, the more frustration you might feel trying to manage all your various books simultaneously.

Without adequate bookends, even if we succeed in getting all our books to remain upright, their stability is precarious at best. If we try removing even one book, we may jostle those next to it, disturb the delicate balance, and cause books to topple and fall. Sometimes a single tilted book can knock over every other volume on the shelf in a catastrophic “domino effect.” You can see why two sturdy, reliable bookends can make all the difference.

On top of life’s complexity with its demands in both the spiritual and temporal realms, we often add a sense of guilt—guilt for what we should do but don’t and guilt for what we do but shouldn’t. Regrettably, many Christians struggle with one or more persistent sin patterns, often called *besetting sins*. They produce a sense of deep, gnawing, demoralizing guilt, which tends to hinder us from pursuing godly change. In fact, contrary to popular thinking, guilt by itself rarely, if ever, motivates a person to change. By itself, it only discourages us.

However, when rightly handled, guilt is actually good

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for us. It's like pain. Pain tells us something's wrong and alerts us to do something to address its root cause. Consider leprosy, a disease that causes the loss of the sensation of pain in the hands and feet so that its victims frequently injure themselves without realizing it. In a similar way, a person without a sense of guilt can continue on a destructive path of sin without being aware of it. Such was generally the case of the self-righteous Pharisees, the ones Jesus opposed so vehemently.¹ Truth be told, there's probably something of the Pharisee in all of us, but in some, numbness to guilt is the prevalent condition of their heart. And their resulting sense of self-righteousness is far more dangerous than a sense of guilt.

On the other hand, the guilt-laden person is painfully aware of his situation. He struggles with his persistent sins, but sooner or later he fails again. He just doesn't know what to do. He has been told to "try harder," but that hasn't worked either. So he continues a life of quiet desperation.

Both the self-righteous Pharisee in his smugness and the guilt-laden person in his desperation have one thing in common: their bookshelf of life has no bookends.

The solution for both is the same. When we become united to Christ by faith, God places a set of bookends on the bookshelf of our lives. One bookend is *the righteousness of Christ*; the other is *the power of the Holy Spirit*. Though they're provided by God, it's our responsibility to lean our books on them, relying on them to support, stabilize, and secure all our books—everything we do.

Why are these two gracious provisions from God the

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bookends of the Christian life? And how do we lean our books on them? This book will answer those questions, and these:

- How can I overcome persistent guilt?
- How can I deal with the pressure to measure up?
- Where can I find the motivation to grow?
- How can I live the Christian life with my heart and not just my head?
- How can I be sure God loves and accepts me?
- Where do I draw the line between God's grace and my works?
- Where can I find the strength to change in an authentic and lasting way?

The answers start with the first bookend. So continue with us as we explore the meaning and application of the righteousness of Christ.

CHAPTER THREE

GOSPEL ENEMY #1: SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

Being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

*For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness
to everyone who believes.*

ROMANS 10:3-4

There are many times when we fail to lean the books of our lives—our spiritual and temporal activities—on the first bookend of Christ's righteousness and instead trust in our own righteousness. Our books may start tipping over whenever we look in the mirror and wonder, "How well am I doing at personal obedience?" When we respond by resting in the assurance that we're successful enough, we harbor self-righteousness, which is Gospel Enemy #1. And when we respond with anxiety over the inadequacy of our performance, we harbor persistent guilt, Gospel Enemy #2.

Self-righteousness is an ugly word. It's associated with

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snobbery, conceit, and a holier-than-thou attitude. We find such behavior repulsive, and we should. Yet when we assess self-righteousness at this level, we're considering it merely in terms of human relationships. The self-righteousness we refer to in this book goes deeper; it's a self-righteousness *toward God*. It's as if we tell him, "I'm doing so well; surely I deserve your blessing. You owe it to me."

Most of us would not actually venture to say something as presumptuous as that to God. But we essentially make this very statement whenever we depend on our own performance to merit any or all of the following six "A"-mazing blessings of God:

- *Approval* by God—his favor;
- *Access* to his holy presence—his fellowship;
- *Acceptance* into his family—his community;
- *Admittance* into heaven—his eternal life;
- *Appropriation* of our daily provisions—his earthly sustenance;
- *Ability* to live the Christian life—his strength.

Striving to merit these blessings may seem innocuous enough, but such an approach to God is downright dangerous. Paul says this kind of self-righteousness actually *nullifies* God's grace: "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (Galatians 2:21). What's being nullified here is our ability to experience God's grace—the assurance that, based on the gospel alone, we receive all the above-mentioned blessings rather than the curse we justly deserve for our sin. Grace changes everything—now and forever! Its

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cost to God was infinite; its value to us is incalculable. So the thought that we could somehow forfeit the experience of that grace should make us shudder.

Paul implies that we nullify grace whenever we're self-righteous toward God. Who needs the cross if we can justify ourselves before God and earn his blessings by obeying the law? Do you see how this approach treats Christ as if he died for no purpose? Self-righteousness is a gospel enemy because it disregards, devalues, and discredits the gospel provision of the righteousness of Christ—the sinless life he lived for us and the sin-bearing death he died for us. Self-righteousness turns grace on its head because it views the sinner as deserving God's blessings rather than as undeserving.

Paul's letter to the Galatians displays how vital it is that we understand this. After a brief greeting, he gets right to the point:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:6–8)

The next verse is essentially a carbon copy, deliberately restated for emphasis: "I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed." If you think this is strong language, Paul later

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states, “I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!” (Galatians 5:12). Not a pretty word picture.

But this is in the Bible for a good reason. The “different gospel” Paul referred to was a doctrine of self-righteousness—a man-centered, performance-based, legalistic approach to making oneself acceptable to God by following religious rules. It was anti-gospel, a dangerous doctrine of self-justification. No wonder Paul is so adamant. Yet this approach to God is as prevalent in our day as it was in Paul’s.

Here’s a classic example. Picture yourself stopping a hundred people in the mall to ask the proverbial question, “If you died today and God asked you why he should let you into his heaven, what would you say?” You already know the prevailing answers: “Because I’m a pretty good person.” “My good deeds outweigh my bad deeds.” “I’m better than most people.” People readily acknowledge they’ve sinned. After all, “I’m only human; nobody’s perfect; everyone makes mistakes.” But look carefully. What is the *object* of their dependence? It’s their own relative righteousness (goodness), not the absolute righteousness of Christ alone. All these people are spiritually self-righteous. They see Christ’s righteousness as irrelevant, if they see it at all. And even though they may be comparatively “pretty good” people—they nullify grace.

We’ve been discussing nonbelievers, but a similar question may be asked of us: suppose you have an urgent prayer request and God were to ask, “Why should I answer your prayer?” How would you answer? Would you imme-

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diately begin adding up your recent merit and demerit points?

One of us recently had such an experience. On the heels of asking God to meet a specific need, the thought occurred, “Lord, haven’t I been serving you day and night for weeks?” Then the words from an old hymn came to mind: “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” It became a moment to repent from self-righteousness. Similarly, when we’re tempted to appeal to God by pointing out that we haven’t committed a particular kind of sin lately, we must remember: there’s no difference between trusting God for salvation and trusting him for answers to prayer; in both cases we’re dependent on Christ’s righteousness alone.

Many today are banking on the hope that a just God will consider their good deeds to have enough redeeming value to offset the guilt of their bad deeds. But people who think like this make two dangerous assumptions that are inconsistent with Scripture; they misjudge God’s justice, and they misconstrue the value of their own righteousness.

Jesus addressed these individuals in “a parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” There he described a Pharisee and a tax collector praying in the temple (Luke 18:9–14). The Pharisee was a member of the religious elite. His dependence on his own righteousness is apparent: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.”

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He assumed his standing before God was secure, based on his perceived superior obedience to the law compared to others. But instead of gaining God's approval by his wide spectrum of religious activities and moral performance, the Son of God revealed his spiritual condition: "Not justified!" The gospel did not benefit the Pharisee; for him it was not good news.

We have a friend who looked back on the days before he trusted in Christ's righteousness and remarked:

I was like a modern-day Pharisee. I went to church each week and sat there thinking how much better I was than my family members who slept in. I believed God accepted me because my sins were small compared to those of my friends. But once I understood the righteousness of Christ provided in the gospel, I realized I had been no more than a "good" unbeliever. I called myself a Christian, and sat alongside others who truly placed their faith in Christ's sacrifice and righteousness, but at best I was a nominal Christian—a Christian by name only—not by genuine faith in the gospel.

Even longstanding believers can fall into a similar trap—not with regard to our salvation but with regard to our perception of our standing with God. Unless we're vigilant about this, we're unlikely to recognize the remnants of self-righteousness in our lives. At times our approach to God becomes like preparing a résumé for a job application—we carefully include all our accomplishments, anything that might present us in a good light and make us more acceptable. Gradually, before we know it,

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our Christian life consists of continually trying to update our spiritual résumé to remind God and others of what we've done and not done. But in reality, the whole of our résumé is either sin or filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). So every time we approach God in prayer, worship, or any other spiritual discipline, we must see our résumé only as he sees it—overlaid by Christ's perfect résumé.

To do battle with Gospel Enemy #1, we must gain a practical understanding of how self-righteousness works in the lives of believers. There are two categories of self-righteous believers. The first is the self-disciplined moralistic believer who partially embraces the gospel but feels deserving of one or more of those six “A”-mazing blessings on the basis of his or her religious performance. There's a fine line between such a person and the moralistic *unbeliever*; they look so much alike, we may not be able to distinguish between the two.

For believers in this category, much of their everyday faith and confidence resides in certain aspects of their own performance—their lack of scandalous sins, regular church attendance, serving others, Scripture memorization, daily devotions, tithing, or their sacrificial giving of time, talents, and material goods. Their dependence does not rest *solely* on the two-part atoning work of Christ—his perfect obedience in their place and his perfect sacrificial death in their place. Instead, Christ's finished work of substitutionary atonement seems vaguely inadequate to them, as though it somehow lacked power and validity.

In holding this view, they unwittingly make a demean-

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ing statement about the Son of God: “Christ’s righteousness *alone* isn’t enough to make me acceptable to God—he needs *my* help in order to completely justify me.” When we put it this way, we would all agree this is prideful: God can’t possibly get *all* the glory if an essential part of my acceptance depends on me. This approach falls short of the glory of God in a subtle yet significant way.

A quote from one of our favorite books provides insight for Christians who, in practice, live as if God’s love for them ebbs and flows according to their actions:

When we have our quiet times for the day, or when we have given a tithe, we are confident of God’s love toward us. But when our days become crowded and personal devotions end up neglected, we start to avoid God, sensing that we are under his wrath and anger. We imagine that God is waiting for us to get ourselves together before we again enter his presence. Such thinking betrays our failure to grasp the security of our union [with Christ] and the depth of God’s love and consequently disrupts our communion with him.

Making God’s love contingent on our action is a sad but common misunderstanding in the church. Remember, a believer’s union is never in jeopardy. For God’s love is an eternal love that had no beginning, that shall have no ending; that cannot be heightened by any act of ours; that cannot be lessened by anything in us. While our sense of communion with God may fluctuate, his love does not grow and diminish. The wrath of God against the sin of saints was completely exhausted on the cross.¹

Do you sometimes feel as if God’s love for you ebbs and flows, depending on whether you’ve had a good quiet

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time? Do you know you're saved by grace but live as if God's day-to-day blessings are bestowed in accordance with your performance? Are you beginning to have doubts about the degree of freedom you actually have from the influence of self-righteousness?

Below is our list of probing questions designed to help you gain clarity. As you meditate on them, be brutally honest, for much is at stake. When you analyze your Christian walk:

- 1) Do you tend to live by a list of dos and don'ts?
- 2) Is it difficult for you to respect those whose standards aren't as high as yours?
- 3) Do you assume that practicing spiritual disciplines should result in God's blessing?
- 4) Do you feel you're better than most other people?
- 5) Has it been a long time since you identified a sin and repented of it?
- 6) Do you resent it when others point out your "spiritual blind spots"?
- 7) Do you readily recognize the sins of others but not your own?
- 8) Do you have the sense that God owes you a good life?
- 9) Do you get angry when difficulties and suffering come into your life?
- 10) Do you seldom think of the cross?

If you found yourself answering *yes* to at least half these questions, it's likely you're living under a stronghold of self-righteousness toward God. You need to see this for what it really is—a hideous enemy disguised as a satisfying

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glory. It will let you down and leave you hanging. Its satisfaction is as short-lived as an ice cube in the blazing sun; its glory has all the appeal of a well-dressed corpse. And at the end of the day this fact remains: no amount of personal performance will ever gain the approval of a holy God.

There's a second category of self-righteous believers. They also partially embrace the gospel, but they constantly live under a sense of guilt due to an acute awareness that the expectations they set for themselves are considerably under-fulfilled. They're displeased with themselves and assume God is also displeased. Their attitude can be deceptive: outwardly it may look like humility. But persistent guilt is a child of self-righteousness toward God. It's the belief that we should find our source of righteousness *within ourselves*, though we're painfully aware of our shortfall, as if to say, "I can do better, and I should do better"—emphasis on *I*. Like moralistic believers, these also border on unbelief. Only God knows their heart and whether they truly place their faith in the righteousness of Christ.

Most believers, including the two of us, often vacillate between these two categories. One day we feel good about our performance, and we look to God with confidence, harboring a subtle, unspoken attitude that we've earned his favor and deserve his blessing. We imagine a scene where we approach God with our list of attributes and accomplishments. Just like the Pharisee, we compare ourselves to others in an attempt to feel "justified." Although we primarily depend on the righteousness of Christ, we like to think we've added some of our own merit for good

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measure. But this is an insult to the gospel of the cross; we treat it as though our personal performance can add to its immeasurable and all-sufficient merit.

The next day we catch ourselves falling to temptation. Suddenly we are downcast and inwardly assume there is no way God is going to bless us until we straighten up. Instead of depending on the first bookend, we anxiously wait for our books to tip over and drop to the floor. This, too, is an insult to the gospel. We call it Gospel Enemy #2 because it treats Christ's death as though it were inadequate. We succumb to it when we fail to rely on the fact that the righteousness of Christ is never even slightly changed or diminished by our sin. Christ's work in the gospel is a finished work; its result is permanent. Even on our worst days we're to stand in the present reality of our justification in him.

Regardless of which of these two categories we lean toward, all of us are inclined at times to handle our books in ways that disregard the first bookend. We would even go so far as to say *every* believer has a built-in tendency to do this on a regular basis. You may find that statement alarming, but isn't it true we feel better about ourselves and our relationship to God when we're obedient compared to when we're disobedient? We must continually battle these two gospel enemies, self-righteousness and persistent guilt. They represent a form of unbelief that may not send us to hell but will rob us of fruitfulness, joy, and the assurance that God is for us and not against us, both now and forevermore.

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Both enemies surrender to the same God-given, strategic weapon—the righteousness of Christ, the first book-end. We’ll show how to apply this in chapter 5. But before we do, let’s take some time to get to know Gospel Enemy #2 in more detail.