

THE GOOD NEWS

of the

THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

*For it is by grace
you have been saved,
through faith—
and this is not from
yourselves,
it is the gift of God—
not by works,
so that no one
can boast.*

Ephesians 2:8-9

(TNIV)

Many people are concerned about being a “good Christian.” Is this you? Be careful! This perspective may carry a subtle lie called the “theology of glory.” Read on and find freedom from being anxious about your sin.

What I’m talking about is different from the common misconception that “good people go to heaven” and “bad people go to hell.”¹ Christians believe that being with Jesus for eternity is not based on whether we’re good or bad—but only because of God’s amazing grace! While many Christians know that they are “saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ not by works,” they don’t live like it. Many act like the goal of Christianity is to be righteous. It really isn’t. This is part of the subtle lie. This would be like marrying someone for their money instead of for the relationship!² The goal of Christianity is the life-giving relationship with the Triune God.³ Only Jesus’ work can make us righteous before God, and we live into the relationship through trusting God’s promises—through faith—that Jesus made us righteous in God’s eyes.

The “theology of glory” focuses on what we do. It makes us “navel gazers”—or bent inward on ourselves. We tend to have a spiritual meter that we use to judge ourselves. Did we do the right things today? Did we *not* do the wrong things? Do we have a *good* prayer life? Did we *not* have evil or lustful thoughts? I don’t know about you, but jealousy often gets me. If I’m honest, I really am selfish—my nature is captive to selfishness.⁴ Sometimes, I’ve hurt the ones I love the most. I’m messed up deep on the inside, even if most of the time I look really good on the outside!

The Good News is that nothing you do bad can make God love you less! Yup, even anything you do good can’t make God love you more! **God loves you! Period!** Why? Because God created you! Your God’s beloved child! Your worth doesn’t come from what you do, or what you look like (whew!), or what you own. It comes from the fundamental truth that you are created by God and loved by God. Start by repeating this promise of God’s love reflected in Psalm 139:13-14. (And if you don’t believe God’s promise, are you saying that God is a liar!?!)

Now, getting back to selfishness. If you accept the reality that you—and me—are wired for selfishness or other “bad” stuff (sin—if you like), that’s good news!ⁱ Really, because now you can know the truth that will set you free!ⁱⁱ (continued)

¹ This is really the worldview called Pelagianism. It’s not Christian. Google it out if you want to know more.

² This is the insightful analogy used by Philip Cary.

³ Ok, this is the beginning, because this relationship with God gets lived out by loving others. Don’t get too caught up with the Triune part now, but the one Triune God is the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

⁴ This is also called “in bondage to sin.” I’m beginning with selfishness, because I clearly see that in me, but there is more that gets lumped into “sin.”

“What a tremendous relief to discover that we don’t need to prove ourselves to God.”

~ Desmond Tutu

“Religions of glory have as their first and foremost goal the encouragement of good human performance... Therefore ‘the theology of the cross is an offensive theology... [because] it attacks what we usually consider the best in our religion,’ human performance of pious deeds.”

~ Robert Kolb

The “theology of the cross” puts Jesus in the center—*not me*.⁵

Now I don’t have to worry about my status before God—or be tormented wondering if God thinks I was good or bad, because I already know that I’m a sinner. I’ve come to accept this reality of my human condition.

As we trust that Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected to break the power of sin, death and the devil,⁶ then we can be free from trying to prove ourselves before God. This is awesome news!

Here’s a little clue to help us recognize if we’re thinking in the theology of glory or theology of the cross. Look at the subject of the sentence that has you and God in it. Is it yourself? If so, it is the theology of glory. Or is the **subject** Jesus? If so, then it is the theology of the cross. Check out these examples. The subject is in **bold**. The direct object is in *italics*.

Theology of glory	I accepted <i>Jesus</i> into my heart. I decided to follow <i>Jesus</i> .
Theology of the cross	Jesus died on the cross for <i>my</i> sins. Christ died for <i>us</i> .

Wow! This challenges a lot of the way we talk about faith. Think through many of the praise songs you might have sung in church. The theology of glory is prevalent. Now, I’m not saying these folks aren’t Christians. No way! I’m yearning and praying that they may be FREE from an inward-bent focus, which often is trapped in self-condemnation—and often condemnation of others—because the focus is on doing good and not doing bad. (We’ll talk more about “works” later.) Sometimes, there is also a labeling of others according to sin, or at least “good Christian” and “bad Christians.” Remember, because of Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection, we aren’t *defined* by our sin, because we are *all* sinners!ⁱⁱⁱ

So then, how are we defined? What’s our identity? Well, first, don’t look at yourself, because you’ll always see a sinner or someone who comes up short, at best, and sometimes a total jerk. It’s not easy, but you need to focus on how God sees you. We’ve already identified that we are God’s beloved children. But second, Martin Luther said it well, “We are fully sinners AND fully saints,” with saint here defined as one who trusts the promise of being saved by grace through faith.^{iv} Because of God’s promises, by faith I know that I am reconciled with my Creator and assured that I’ll be spending eternity with Jesus.^v

So what’s the role of our “works?” The Bible actually has a lot to say about our behavior. For example, the Apostle Paul says in Galatians 6:9-10 that we should do good. The important issue is to remember that God doesn’t need our good works (nothing we do can make us righteous in God’s eyes), but the broken and hurting world does! Just don’t be deluded or fooled into thinking that your good deeds make you a “good Christian.” Think about this carefully: the nature of mature faith is doing good works. So, just as the nature of lightning is to seek the ground, the nature of faith is such that God’s love flows in us to overflowing to others in order to make a difference (be a blessing) to the world. “Baloney!” you say. “Then how come so many Christians are jerks?” Read on! Let me tell you about the Holy Spirit.

⁵ This is called “dying to self.”

⁶ This will be fulfilled when Christ returns bringing the resurrection of the dead.

*“According to Paul,
God is at work through
the Spirit to create
communities that
prefigure and embody
the reconciliation and
healing of the world.
The fruit of God’s love
is the formation of
communities that
confess, worship, and
pray together in a way
that glorifies God
(see, e.g., Rom. 15:7-13).”*

Richard B. Hays,
*A Moral Vision of the New
Testament: A Contemporary
Introduction to New Testament
Ethics* (San Francisco: Harpers,
1996) 32-33.

The Work of the Spirit transforms us to be like Jesus Christ.

First, I confess, I’m a jerk. Remember, I’m a sinner. So in reality, I flip the criticism on its head. My sin demonstrates that the theology of the cross represents the most accurate description of our human condition. (This is a big part of my confidence in Christianity; it is reasonable and much more reasonable than the world religions in which salvation comes through human effort.) We don’t find our hope in Christians, because we will always mess up in life. Our confidence is in Christ alone.

But God didn’t abandon us in our sinful selfishness. The Holy Spirit transforms us to be more and more like Jesus, bit by bit, as we allow the Spirit to work in our lives. We do have a role. We cooperate with the Spirit. This is called sanctification. I’m going to over-simplify this for now, to give a beginning understanding, but there’s more to know. This chart is a start.^{vi}

Justification	Sanctification
<p>Jesus’s work makes us righteous through faith alone. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. Ephesians 2:8-9 (TNIV)</p>	<p>The work of the Holy Spirit transforms us to be more like Christ. We stop rebelling from God (putting ourselves first) and cooperate with the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Galatians 5:22-23 (TNIV)</p>

This transformation happens as we “walk by the Spirit,” as Paul talks about in Galatians 5. First, this happens through the power of the Word of God. Hearing the word is God’s power for those whom God saves through it. Luther believed that when God speaks, reality results. The truth really can set us free! (See John 10:31-32.)

Secondly, this happens in Christian community. “Lone Ranger” faith seems easier at times instead of the messiness of loving people who sometimes are difficult to love, but this is where the Holy Spirit works. We actually miss out of God’s special gifts that only come through community.

So, the key is “walk by” or cooperate with the Spirit! But how do we do that? For me, I create “space” in my life where I know the Spirit can work—especially where I can hear God’s transforming Word. Then I create space which focuses on loving others. Remember that God doesn’t need my works but the world does! This is a life-long journey of walking by the Spirit, and not every day shows the fruit of the Spirit. You may want to talk with a pastor or spiritual director about developing spiritual practices which can nurture creating space for God and others.

If you’re frustrated that you’re not seeing growth, beware of the theology of glory’s subtle lie! Just keep hearing the transforming Good News of God’s Word and trust God’s promises! **“For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”** (Philippians 2:13, ESV).

People draw up job
descriptions for God
and become angry or
disappointed with him
when he does not prove
himself equal to
their tasks.
~Robert Kolb

Angry with God?

Perhaps you are a person who isn't disturbed by your sense of failure or sin, like I am. There are some who are rather angry with God, because the way that they think life was meant to be isn't being experienced in their life. Is this more like you? This is another aspect of the theology of glory, but I'll refer you to an article by Robert Kolb. He deals with this and more on the theology of the cross.

Visit http://pastormatrichard.webs.com/LQ_16-4_04_Kolb.pdf

With blessings,
Beth

(7/23/2014)

For more information on the theology of the cross:

Cary, Phillip. *Good News for Anxious Christians: 10 Practical Things You Don't Have to Do*. Brazos Press, 2010.

Forde, Gerhard O. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997.

McGrath, Alister E. *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1991.

Kolb, Robert. "Luther on the Theology of the Cross" in *The Lutheran Quarterly*, XVI, 2002 (443-446).
http://pastormatrichard.webs.com/LQ_16-4_04_Kolb.pdf

The bottom of this page identifies issues to discuss with a few more words than my shorter footnotes.

ⁱ This acceptance of our human condition, or "self-acceptance," is way better than the "self-esteem" taught in our schools. Self-esteem is based on comparison. There is something that I can feel good about myself because of X, which is a comparison, because this attribute isn't common, so I'm special in this way. This is really shallow when compared to the unconditional love from the Creator of the universe--and it won't sustain you when that attribute is gone or is bested by others. Enough for now, but this is a huge issue. I know. I have a middle-school daughter!

ⁱⁱ Yup, I'm a selfish sinner, whether I'm taking outright to try to put me on top, or whether I'm always giving and self-sacrificing, because underneath it all, I'm trying to earn someone's love or respect. If I check my motives, I'm still trying to work things for my best interest.

ⁱⁱⁱ I believe that the church is at its worst when it tries to define people by sin. They miss the point. Note, there is a double standard for those within the church and those outside. We are to hold accountable and restore one another in love for those within the church but not judge those outside the church. See Richard B. Hays, *A Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harpers, 1996) 32-33. Yet, be on guard of "gospel shaming" found in some theology of glory churches today. Fortunately, there is overwhelming evidence of the grace and love shared in the church. I know; I've received it.

^{iv} Many Protestant Christians say that "a saint is a forgiven sinner." I don't have space to go into the theology, but there's more here. If we look at the "once for all" passages, we see that Christ's death and resurrection was effective to forgive sin—the one "Christ event" is effective for all sin. Christ isn't re-sacrificed each time I ask for forgiveness. Each time I confess my sins, I claim the promise of forgiveness through Jesus' atoning sacrifice and resurrection.

^v But it isn't just about eternity in a renewed heaven AND a renewed earth! (Be careful about talking about "going to heaven when I die." But that's another issue.) Being reconciled in Christ is for life *now*, as we are a part of God's mission of healing and wholeness to a broken and hurting world through the body of Christ (the Church).

^{vi} The justification and sanctification is not really two separate things, as you can't have the second without the first. So, this is an oversimplification that would irritate some theologians, but I think it is a helpful beginning. If you have chance, look at the New Bible Dictionary article on Sanctification in the New Testament (in the library or in Logos software).