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HOW THE GOSPEL FREES US FROM PSYCHOLOGICAL OPPRESSION

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Christianity is often pejoratively referred to as “dirty rotten sinner” religion. Our detractors will often say something like this: “Christians tend to be so guilt-ridden. They feel that they have to go through life degrading themselves in order to win God’s approval. I find that very depressing. Instead, I want a spirituality that’s positive, freeing, and one that will make me feel good about myself.”

This type of reaction is very understandable. We all want to be happy, and it might seem that the gospel is a one-way street into a medieval village where the Inquisition is diabolically entrenched, seeking to wipe away every smile. While it’s a hard sell merely to *claim* that the gospel will set us free from so many of life’s torments, a story might prove helpful.

For the first few years that I was teaching Bible and theology at the New York School of the Bible, I was assailed by such intense feelings of unworthiness, shame, and self-contempt that they co-opted my thought life. Driven by such powerful feelings, my self-doubts seemed to speak with unassailable authority: “You teach? What type of Christian are you anyway? You think you really have faith? Look how selfish and self-absorbed you are. How are you going to help anyone? What a charlatan, posing in the front of the class as some type of authority! What do you think their reaction would be if they really knew you?”

Devastated by these indictments, I wanted to disappear and to have the buildings of New York City implode over my head and swallow me up without a sign. Many times I thought of calling my school to say, “Find yourself someone else. I’m not your man.” But gradually, the gospel began to take root.

Good Christian. In my longstanding pre-Christian struggle to attain some sense of significance and value, I’d ward off the shame and self-contempt through positive affirmations: “I’m a good person; no, I’m a vastly superior person. I’m _____, _____, _____, and more. I’m a once-in-a-lifetime person!” There was no end to the superlatives. In fact, I was always inventing new ones—whatever I needed to tell myself to keep the shame at bay. However, these never sufficed, and so I always needed to up the superlatives in order to overcome the ubiquitous feelings of shame.

As a Christian, I learned that it was wrong to engage in such self-stroking. But I had to do something about the poisonous arrows of my own demons. I needed to prove myself, and now I had a new vehicle with which to do it. I would excel at spirituality! I would prove, at least to myself, that I was *worthy* of God’s grace.

I reassured myself that I was more deserving of salvation than others. I was more spiritual; I had chosen God because I wasn’t as carnal as most of the human race. I had the keenness of mind to recognize the surpassing value of the things of God, and I had a great destiny, not just in heaven, like all the other Christians, but I would also lead the way here.

God loves us too much, however, to allow us to continue in our delusions. He closed my hand to all my dreams of spiritual accomplishment. Even more difficult to endure, I began to see my own poverty

of spirit, my utter unworthiness. My levees were overwhelmed, and the demons of shame and self-contempt came roaring back. I feverishly sought to rebuild the levees with good works—anything that would tell me, “You’re OK!”

However, in my torment, I began to read the Bible with new tear-filled eyes, hoping to find a God tucked within its pages who would be far more merciful than I had ever dared to hope for. Jesus told a parable about two men who entered the temple to pray. One was a self-assured Pharisee, the other a broken sinner who lacked the confidence even to look up to heaven (Luke 18:9–14). I had become that broken sinner, now defenseless against the internal raging. I had been stripped of confidence and any sense that there was something about me that would merit even a glance from a holy God.

Paradoxically, this was the beginning of psychological freedom. I had been stripped bare of all my defenses, and for the first time in my life, I gradually found that I didn’t need them. I could finally let go of my miserable fig leaves, because I was beginning to know a God who wanted to clothe me with His forgiveness, His righteousness, and His sanctification (1 Cor. 1:29–30). I was beginning to learn that I was complete in Him (Col. 2:9–10), not because of who I am, but because of who He is.

It took me a while to learn these lessons. The Bible was my thought life foundation, but it seemed to say such contradictory things. On the one hand, it assured me that salvation, along with everything else I needed, was absolutely free. But then I observed that other verses seemed to say that God’s “gifts” also required some labor on my part. These “contradictions” first needed to be resolved before I could decisively confront my demons.

However slowly, that day did come. Now, when demons accuse me of my failures and unworthiness, I’m ready for them: “Satan, you’re right! I am totally unworthy to serve God, let alone to teach. I don’t deserve the slightest thing from Him. But I have an incredible God who is everything to me—my righteousness, my sanctification, and whatever else I need. He loves me with an undying love and will never leave me. It is He who has given me the privilege to serve Him by teaching. I’m so glad that I’ve been reminded of my unworthiness, because this just prompts me to be grateful, and makes me want to sing His praises.”

Understanding the truths of Scripture becomes a wellspring of peace (Col. 2:1–4). I’m now rid of some baggage that had been too heavy to bear. As Jesus said, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31–32 NKJV). The truth has set me free—free from the need to defend myself, free from struggling to prove myself, free from shame and self-contempt, and free from the fear of failure. Well, not absolutely free, but free enough.

This freedom would never have come without seeing the depths of my unworthiness. Had I not come to this crushing point, I would never have discovered true grace, and without receiving this incredible grace, I never would have found the confidence to lay aside all the inner struggles and finally to accept the fact that I’m an utter sinner saved by grace. Not everyone’s experience is as intense as mine was, but we all have a conscience that tells us things we don’t want to hear, and we all have attempted to beat it down one way or another (Rom. 1:18–21). We all yearn to prove ourselves and, to accomplish this, we resort to self-deception.

This isn’t merely a biblical point of view; this is the prevailing view of psychology. Shelley Taylor writes, “As we have seen, people are positively biased in their assessments of themselves and of their ability to control what goes on around them, as well as in their views of the future. The widespread existence of these biases and the ease with which they can be documented suggests that they are normal.”¹

While for the successful and admired, these biases are easy to maintain, for the depressed, they require more effort than can be sustained. Ironically, the more successful we are at maintaining our comforting self-delusions, the more we sacrifice mental flexibility, freedom, and joy. As paradoxical as it might seem, the road to freedom compels us on a humbling journey through the “valley of the shadow of death” (Ps. 23:4 NKJV), where our old armor and defenses are stripped away so that we can be re clothed in splendor. No wonder Jesus tells us, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14 NKJV).

Blessed Assurance. How then do we come to this place of assurance of God's grace in the face of our spiritual brokenness? It's not possible on our own. Jesus had taught emphatically against the idea of self-salvation (Matt. 19:26; John 3:3; 6:44). He made it equally clear, however, that spiritual growth is also impossible without His involvement (John 15:4-5). Knowing this, we have to trust Him to perform for us the humanly impossible and to cry out for His intervention.

Spiritual desperation is a lens that brings grace into focus. It's this mourning that sharpens our eyes to the reality of grace (Matt. 5:3-4; Ps. 25:8-9; 14-15). But what if we don't see our neediness? We have to embrace the prayer of David: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23-24 NIV).

Trust Him in this. He has promised to reveal to us our spiritual deficiencies as He also did for the churches of the book of Revelation (chaps. 2-3). As Paul proclaimed: "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained" (Phil. 3:14-16 NIV).

The more we grow into the assurance of the gift of His acceptance, the more we will grow into self-acceptance. With self-acceptance, we can begin to be transparent about our failures and inadequacies and even to laugh at ourselves. I used to think that in order to show Christ off to the world, I had to exhibit Christ-like perfection. Well, I've learned instead that I'm far from perfect, but I have a Savior who is perfect. I'm inadequate, but He is fully adequate. This has given me not only a freedom to be me, but also a lowliness and a confidence to draw other broken people to the One who can make all the difference. —*Daniel Mann*

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NOTES

- 1 Shelley E. Taylor, *Positive Illusions* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 46.