

# **"Why Moralism Is Not the Gospel — And Why So Many Christians Think It Is"**

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One of the most amazing statements by the Apostle Paul is his indictment of the Galatian Christians for abandoning the Gospel. "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel," Paul declared. As he stated so emphatically, the Galatians had failed in the crucial test of discerning the authentic Gospel from its counterfeits.

His words could not be more clear: "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you have received, he is to be accursed!" [Gal. 1:6-7]

This warning from the Apostle Paul, expressed in the language of the Apostle's shock and grief, is addressed not only to the church in Galatia, but to every congregation in every age. In our own day — and in our own churches — we desperately need to hear and to heed this warning. In our own time, we face false gospels no less subversive and seductive than those encountered and embraced by the Galatians.

In our own context, one of the most seductive false gospels is moralism. This false gospel can take many forms and can emerge from any number of political and cultural impulses. Nevertheless, the basic structure of moralism comes down to this — the belief that the Gospel can be reduced to improvements in behavior.

Sadly, this false gospel is particularly attractive to those who believe themselves to be evangelicals motivated by a biblical impulse. Far too many believers and their churches succumb to the logic of moralism and reduce the Gospel to a message of moral improvement. In other words, we communicate to lost persons the message that what God desires for them and demands of them is to get their lives straight.

In one sense, we are born to be moralists. Created in God's image, we have been given the moral capacity of conscience. From our earliest days our conscience cries out to us the knowledge of our guilt, shortcomings, and misbehaviors. In other words, our conscience communicates our sinfulness.

Add to this the fact that the process of parenting and child rearing tends to inculcate moralism from our earliest years. Very quickly we learn that our parents are concerned with our behavior. Well behaved children are rewarded with parental approval, while misbehavior brings parental sanction. This message is reinforced by other authorities in young lives and pervades the culture at large.

Writing about his own childhood in rural Georgia, the novelist Ferrol Sams described the deeply-ingrained tradition of being "raised right." As he explained, the child who is "raised right" pleases his parents and other adults by adhering to moral conventions and social etiquette. A young person who is "raised right" emerges as an adult who obeys the laws, respects his neighbors, gives at least lip service to religious expectations, and stays away from scandal. The point is clear — this is what parents expect, the culture affirms, and many churches celebrate. But our communities are filled with people who have been "raised right" but are headed for hell.

The seduction of moralism is the essence of its power. We are so easily seduced into believing that we actually *can* gain all the approval we need by our behavior. Of course, in order to participate in this seduction, we must negotiate a moral code that defines acceptable behavior with innumerable

loopholes. Most moralists would not claim to be without sin, but merely beyond scandal. That is considered sufficient.

Moralists can be categorized as both liberal and conservative. In each case, a specific set of moral concerns frames the moral expectation. As a generalization, it is often true that liberals focus on a set of moral expectations related to social ethics while conservatives tend to focus on personal ethics. The essence of moralism is apparent in both — the belief that we can achieve righteousness by means of proper behavior.

The theological temptation of moralism is one many Christians and churches find it difficult to resist. The danger is that the church will communicate by both direct and indirect means that what God expects of fallen humanity is moral improvement. In so doing, the church subverts the Gospel and communicates a false gospel to a fallen world.

Christ's Church has no option but to teach the Word of God, and the Bible faithfully reveals the law of God and a comprehensive moral code. Christians understand that God has revealed Himself throughout creation in such a way that He has gifted all humanity with the restraining power of the law. Furthermore, He has spoken to us in His word with the gift of specific commands and comprehensive moral instruction. The faithful Church of the Lord Jesus Christ must contend for the righteousness of these commands and the grace given to us in the knowledge of what is good and what is evil. We also have a responsibility to bear witness of this knowledge of good and evil to our neighbors. The restraining power of the law is essential to human community and to civilization.

Just as parents rightly teach their children to obey moral instruction, the church also bears responsibility to teach its own the moral commands of God and to bear witness to the larger society of what God has declared to be right and good for His human creatures.

But these impulses, right and necessary as they are, are not the Gospel. Indeed, one of the most insidious false gospels is a moralism that promises

the favor of God and the satisfaction of God's righteousness to sinners if they will only behave and commit themselves to moral improvement.

The moralist impulse in the church reduces the Bible to a codebook for human behavior and substitutes moral instruction for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Far too many evangelical pulpits are given over to moralistic messages rather than the preaching of the Gospel.

The corrective to moralism comes directly from the Apostle Paul when he insists that "a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus." Salvation comes to those who are "justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified." [Gal. 2:16]

We sin against Christ and we misrepresent the Gospel when we suggest to sinners that what God demands of them is moral improvement in accordance with the Law. Moralism makes sense to sinners, for it is but an expansion of what we have been taught from our earliest days. But moralism is not the Gospel, and it will not save.

The only gospel that saves is the Gospel of Christ. As Paul reminded the Galatians, "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons." [Gal. 4:4-5]

We are justified by faith *alone*, saved by grace *alone*, and redeemed from our sin by Christ *alone*. Moralism produces sinners who are (potentially) better behaved. The Gospel of Christ transforms sinners into the adopted sons and daughters of God.

The Church must never evade, accommodate, revise, or hide the law of God. Indeed, it is the Law that shows us our sin and makes clear our inadequacy and our total lack of righteousness. The Law cannot impart life but, as Paul insists, it “has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.” [Gal. 3:24]

The deadly danger of moralism has been a constant temptation to the church and an ever-convenient substitute for the Gospel. Clearly, millions of our neighbors believe that moralism *is* our message. Nothing less than the boldest preaching of the Gospel will suffice to correct this impression and to lead sinners to salvation in Christ.

Hell will be highly populated with those who were “raised right.” The citizens of heaven will be those who, by the sheer grace and mercy of God, are there solely because of the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Moralism is *not* the gospel.