

THE GOSPEL
By Paul Penno Jr.
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Have you heard the story of “The Crazy Man Who Was Smart”? A humble, poor farmer, Ali came home from his hot sweaty work one evening with a strange glint in his eyes. His wife had cooked him a delicious supper but he wouldn’t taste it. He grabbed up all his clothes, shoes, everything, took them down to the Thrift Shop to sell them. His wife exclaimed, “Ali, are you crazy?” Next he grabbed all her clothes, even the occasional new dress he had been able to buy for her, her shoes, the lot, and took them downtown to sell. She told the kids, “Hide your toys and clothes; papa is on a rampage!” But it was too late, he grabbed their things too, and sold them. Then he sold his faithful donkey, his means of livelihood, and his cart. His wife called his relatives, “Can’t you do something with Ali? He’s ruining us!” Next he brought a strange man to the house, and bargained with him, selling him every stick of furniture they owned, until the house was totally emptied of every possession, his wife crying in despair, the neighbors and relatives staring in wonderment. Then Ali went away. When he came back, he had a look on his face as though he had conquered the world. Waving a sheet of paper in the air, he cried out, “I bought it! It’s ours!” “You bought what?” his wife asked. “The land!” “What land?” “The land where I plow, where we have our little garden, the land I have been renting!” Then he told her, the children, and the relatives, how he had

been plowing the afternoon before when his plow struck something wooden deep down under the surface. Seeing no one around watching, he knelt down and scraped away the dirt, uncovering a chest full of gold and silver, pearls, and precious stones. This was rather common in the Middle east when there were no banks where a rich person could safely deposit his wealth; and if he went to war or died on a trip somewhere, the box would be lost to anyone's knowledge until someone like Ali finds it. But in order to own the box, Ali must buy the land. The story is in Matthew 13:44. What is the treasure? a love for the Bible. It will give you more joy now and forever than going to Disneyland every day.

Does God have “handicapped” “parking spaces” for a certain class of people who think they cannot overcome sin? Does He have a double standard for His everlasting kingdom? Can some “saints” plead that their evil temper is so deeply rooted in their genes that they cannot overcome? Or their desire? or their love of money? or their habitual lying? On and on.

A false gospel which Paul calls “another gospel . . . than that which we have preached unto you” (Gal 1:7, 8) says “YES!” You can cling to your besetting sins—you’ll have a special “handicap” section in His kingdom. To change the metaphor, the idea is you’ll be given a white robe of righteousness that only legally “covers” your filthy robes underneath that you keep on wearing. In contrast, the true gospel says you give up every stitch of those filthy robes so that the white robe of Christ’s righteousness is

not only LEGALLY “imputed” to you but is also EXPERIENTIALLY “imparted” to you; it no longer hides cherished character deformity underneath. We find the idea surfacing all through Scripture: “to him that overcometh . . . even as I also overcame” (Rev. 3:21); “these . . . have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14); “they overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb” (12:11); Christ as High Priest “is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him” (Heb. 7:25); “the God of peace . . . make you perfect in every good work to do His will” (13:21); “be ye therefore perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). An impossible standard? If all we have is that counterfeit “other gospel” Paul warns against, the “gospel” of “Babylon [that] is fallen”—yes; but thank God for the Good News of the true “gospel [which] is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom 1:16). The problem is our spiritual pride that insists on remaining “handicapped” when healing is not only offered us but is given us “in Christ.” Let’s humble our proud hearts and learn to “hunger and thirst after righteousness” [by faith—the only kind there is!] (Mt. 5:6).

None of us is wise enough to know which “propensities” are the most difficult to overcome. Paul says his real problem is the “sin that dwelleth in me,” “the evil which I would not” but which “I do. . . . When I would do good, evil is present with me” (Rom. 7:17-21). If all were to be honest, we would admit that we have this problem, for the “sin that

dwelleth in me” shows a different face for each of us.

A “cherished sin” is one which we choose to hold on to. It begins in the mind. Fantasizing opens the door to it, and we welcome and revel in it. You say you hate pornography, but it keeps coming back. If your “hatred” is motivated by that genuine “faith which worketh by love [*agape*]” (Gal. 5:6), it will prompt you to strike back, “Get thee behind me, Satan” (Matt. 16:23). Real faith is the kind that “works.”

A “besetting sin” is one that dogs our footsteps even after we think we’re converted. It tries to drag us back into the abyss of guilt. The dictionary defines “beset” as “to attack from all sides; harass or besiege; to surround or hem in.” It’s not the sin you cherish; it’s the one outside your will that tries to hang on like a leech. Another name for it is “sinful propensity.” It’s the clamor of our sinful flesh banging on the heart’s door again. “I thought I had expelled you; how come you’re here again?” If you open the door even a crack, you invite it to enter and become a “cherished sin.”

That “crack” is what worries you. You have responded, fantasized, maybe only for a few seconds, before you slammed the door against the temptation. Now what? You have guilt.

You’ve prayed simply, “God, be merciful to me a sinner,” and thanked Him profoundly that your probation hasn’t closed. You’ve confessed your sin, and He is faithful and just to forgive you, just as far as you have confessed. But if you haven’t known how deep it is, you haven’t known how to “confess”

it truly. The root of your sin is deeper than you had thought.

Inordinate desires are a foretaste of the pains of hell itself. It's the pigsty where the prodigal son wallowed in self-loathing (Luke 15:15, 16). When you realize where you are, you cry out with David, "Save me from the lowest hell," "Deliver me out of the mire" (Psalm 86:13; 69:14). Then and there you find the Saviour!

The real problem is not particularized "sins," but the sin of sins—taking part at Calvary. You begin to realize that the sin of somebody else (bad as it may be!) would be your sin, but for the grace of a Saviour. And before heaven's sensitive x-ray vision of your heart-baggage, you see at last that the sin of Calvary is in your heart. The sin of the world is your sin (that's the case of all of us). By nature you are innately no better than anyone else; you share the world's guilt. You are a part of a lost human family that desperately needs to be saved. But the Good News gets on stage now—you have a Saviour, and you can begin to share with Him a repentance for the sins of the world.

Sin can never be truly forgiven in an experiential way until "we confess our sins" (1 John 1:9). But if we have never learned what our sin really is, how can we truly "confess" it? Multitudes stumble along never knowing true forgiveness. They have to rack their brains to think of something bad enough to "confess." So, ugly realities keep popping up and they find besetting sin continually transmuted into cherished sin. A thousand temptations do not equal

even one sin unless we cherish them. Having a sinful nature is not sin; yielding to it is.

We cannot cherish one sin if the heart appreciates the length, and breadth, and depth, and height of the love that led the Son of God to go to hell to find us there. That is what "believing" is defined to be in John 3:16. Say "No!" to temptation, a thousand times a day if necessary. Let the Good News set you free in glorious liberty. Christ "was in all points tempted like as [you] are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15), and even though you are tempted you too may overcome "even as [He] also overcame" (Rev. 3:21). And that's today; you don't need to wait until your deathbed. Like Christ, you will learn instantaneously to tell the devil, "Get thee behind me!"

Yes, you do have something to do—"resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). But you say, "That's my problem—I don't have the strength to resist!" Then read the first part of the same verse: "Submit yourselves therefore to God." Come to the Saviour, singing:

"Just as I am, without one plea

But that Thy blood was shed for me," and you will find that "it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). That is freedom. It's a miracle, but it's true. But please don't expect that you'll never be tempted again. It's your privilege always to exercise the power of choice.

"Many are inquiring, 'How am I to make the surrender of myself to God?' You desire to give yourself to Him, but you are weak in moral power, in slavery to doubt, and controlled by the habits of

your life of sin. Your promises and resolutions are like ropes of sand. You cannot control your thoughts, your impulses, your affections. The knowledge of your broken promises and forfeited pledges weakens your confidence in your own sincerity, and causes you to feel that God cannot accept you; but you need not despair. What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can choose to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. Thus your whole nature will be brought under the control of the Spirit of Christ; your affections will be centered upon Him, your thoughts will be in harmony with Him.” *Steps to Christ*, p. 47).

Can a two-year old child survive an attack by a lion? A newspaper clipping tells the story of how toddler Jason Cowden, 2, was attacked by a mountain lion in the Black Hills of South Dakota. When a man has a fight with a lion, the lion usually wins. And a 2-year old child couldn't stand much of a chance fighting with a lion. But this toddler had help: grandmother and grandfather got a knife and somehow grandpa managed to stab and kill the lion. Little Jason was mauled, he has scars, but last reports said he recovered nicely. Peter says that “your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet 5:8).

Most of us believe in defeatism—if you get in a fight with the devil, since he is so much stronger than you, you just have to lose. But No! you have help! You can't lose this battle with the devil UNLESS YOU WANT TO. James says, “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” James 4:7. The only prerequisite: “Submit yourselves therefore to God.” Same verse. You have a Saviour. Let Him deliver you out of the mouth of the lion. If you have scars, don't worry about them; getting delivered is enough reason for songs of praise. The scars may help you not to forget.

Why are intense desires so deep, so apparently ineradicable? Why is the world so obsessed with these? Does the pure true Gospel of the message of the three angels of Revelation 14 have the power to deliver from these special sins?

In Romans 13:10 we read that *agape* is the fulfilling of the law, that is, true love that comes alone from Jesus. Nobody is born with *agape*; it must be learned, received, from Him. No one of us is any better than anybody else so far as our nature is concerned. What somebody else does we could do, but for the grace of Christ. Unlawful desires are like taking that first drink or that first cigarette or drug fix; you get addicted easily; then you think you can't help yourself.

But if *agape* is the fulfilling of the law, then disobedience must logically be the opposite of *agape*. And there is the problem! Violation of the last six commandments means a total lack of genuine love in the heart. But the smooth talkers put on a show, and say “I love you.” Many a naive

girl has been sadly deceived because she doesn't know what love is, doesn't know about the wide prevalence of the counterfeit. It's impossible to commit sins of passion, if one has that love in the heart; totally impossible.

Therefore it follows that the only effective solution to the problems of addiction is the proclamation of the pure, true gospel of Jesus. It's simple and clear, but it has often been adulterated with false doctrine borrowed from paganism, through Babylon the Great. That means there is nothing that can compare in importance with learning what is that authentic "everlasting gospel." It's the pearl of great price-worth selling all you have in order to get it.

Everywhere parents who tell sadly that one or more of their children are no longer in the church. They were raised in the church, went to sabbath school, even church school, Christian academies, etc., but now have drifted out into the world. And these parents invariably tell they are trusting to that promise in Isaiah 49:25 that says, "I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children." Precious promise; but is there something we can do to cooperate with the Lord in this wonderful work of reclaiming lost children? The father of the prodigal son was a wonderful man, but still his son rebelled.

So we are not assured of 100% success, necessarily. Even Jesus lost one of His 12 disciples, and actually almost lost Peter, and the others forsook Him and fled. But there is a reason why we lose so many people, and the problem can be corrected.

The problem is the same one that ancient Israel had continually: the effects of the old covenant. The old covenant was the promise of the people to do everything just right when they promised in Exodus 19:8, "All that the Lord hath spoken, we will do." For generations, we have always assured our children, "Yes, the Lord will bless you; He will do this or that for you, provided you do your part!" Thus the basic idea that gets across to them is that the Lord is like a policeman or a CHP officer; He won't bother you if you keep out of trouble. It's up to you to initiate a relationship with the Lord, and to maintain it; and if you don't, then He backs off and leaves you to yourself. The emphasis is on what YOU do to save yourself, not on what HE has done and is doing to save you. What is the inevitable result? Dependence on self, and that leads to alienation from Christ. And then—wandering away. Let's hope it's not too late to proclaim the New Covenant to the children who have lost their way, but in the meantime let's give the New Covenant to the children of today! They must know that Christ is their Saviour 100%; nothing but that Good News will reconcile their alienated hearts to Him.

Paul says clearly that "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Romans 5:20). If that's true, then it follows logically that it is not necessary that we lose so many young people! They could be scared with terrible warnings; but today's kids are used to being scared, whether it's scary rides at Disneyworld or dinosaur movies or cheap videos. To them, it's fun to be scared, to have your hair stand on end.

But there's something that doesn't come through at Disneyland or on the videos—"ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Such "grace" is almost totally unknown in the world these kids are growing up in.

Dr. Laura Schlessinger is stirring America with her call to "get real," be moral, be honest, stop this "me-first" philosophy, get your moral act together, "grow up" ethically, be sensible. All that is OK; but can it be an effective bulwark against the moral rot that is permeating modern society? At best, it is preaching of the law. And the law is good. But face it: there's no power in the law to change human hearts! Not until that "grace" is revealed in a Saviour who didn't try to climb up the ladder, but climbed down the ladder to find us in the lowest hell, only then can sinful human hearts be changed.

Have you ever been angry with God? For any reason? You prayed for something that you felt you needed, maybe healing, maybe happiness in marriage, maybe for a child, maybe for an honest job—and your prayer wasn't answered. Seemed like Heaven was closed to you. This is a common problem many people have; and some just turn their backs on the Lord. "If He doesn't care enough for me to help me, I'm through with Him!" But that's not the solution! Let's try to help a wee bit:

(1) God never promised He would be your lowly servant, to come and go at your request.

(2) He never promised that His children would be exempt from suffering, disappointment, pain. If He

did "exempt" them, people would profess to follow Him who only wanted material benefit. Heaven would get crammed with hypocrites.

(3) Though He hasn't promised you "exemption" from what all human beings have to endure, He has unequivocally promised to give you grace (an inner peace) to endure your pain, sorrow, disappointment, in a way that honors your Saviour.

(4) That endurance (Rom. 5:1-5) immediately admits you to the privileged inner circle of those who are "partakers of the sufferings of Christ" (1 Pet. 4:13).

(5) Bearing your suffering (whatever kind) in that spirit then qualifies you to be a member of the Lord's University Teaching Staff where you are given the joyous labor of helping someone else in his/her suffering. I'm serious! A Christian psychiatrist said that a humble laymember who has genuine faith and sanctified understanding, can help a needy person as much as psychiatrists can. See Exodus 19:4, 5; if Israel had been willing to believe the New Covenant, they would have become a "kingdom of priests," psychiatrists).

I wonder if you are like I am? When I was a child I was taught a little prayer to say at night before I went to sleep: "Now I lay me down to sleep; /I pray the Lord my soul to keep. /If I should die before I wake, /I pray the Lord my soul to take." Then as I grew up, I would pray each night before getting into bed, "Lord, please forgive all my sins, Amen." And I thought that little prayer took care not only of sins I remembered, but automatically cleared my record

in God's computer of all sins that I didn't know about.

Now comes the problem of how to understand what Isaiah says in chapter 43:25, that the Lord blots out our transgressions, and 44:22, "I have blotted out [past tense] as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and as a cloud, thy sins." If the Lord has already blotted out our sins, how can we understand what Peter says in Acts 3:19 that our sins will not be blotted out until "the times of refreshing" shall come just before the return of Christ? Clearly, there has to be a judgment before Jesus returns; then it is that the sins of God's people, forgiven all along in the past, will be finally "blotted out."

Well, maybe my computer can help us understand. When I want to blot out a document, I send it to the trash can down in the lower right hand corner of my screen. And the cute little trash can starts to bulge with the contents of my discarded document. But there comes a time when I really must empty that trash can. So I press a button that commands the computer, "Empty the trash can." But, wait! Something happens! A little message flashes: "Are you really SURE you want to trash all those documents? If you want to take something back, to retrieve something out of the trash can, here's your last chance! I've kept all those things under the table out of sight," says my computer to me, "until you make that final, solid, irrevocable decision. Now, what is your final decision?" Then, when I click on YES, they are gone forever, and no one, not even the FBI, could resurrect them.

Can I say that when I first sent that document to the trash, I was "forgiven," and the document was gone, no longer on my desktop or in my file; it was forgotten. But the record was still there just in case later on I decide to go back to my old ways and retrieve it. So when we confess our sins, they are indeed forgiven; but we sinful humans can sometimes go back to our old ways like the dog that Peter says returns to his vomit. And the Lord doesn't want to take anybody to heaven who secretly is sorry that he ever repented and he really wants to go back to the devil. So, as we near the coming of Christ, there has to be a final investigation: "Are you REALLY sure you want your sins FOREVER forgiven? Are you REALLY sure you don't want to go back to your old selfish, lustful, worldly ways, ever?" Well, I hope you're ready to click YES on that.

If a ship sinks into the depths of the sea, is it gone forever? Many like to quote Micah 7:19 that says that when we confess our sins, the Lord promises to cast them into the depths of the sea. They ask, "Then why have an investigative judgment?"

But we have a problem here. Back in Micah's day, if a ship sank into the ocean, it was goodbye forever. But now, no longer. It's great business, diving into wrecks on the ocean floor. Even the Titanic has been disturbed in its resting place in the North Atlantic where it has lain since that April night in 1912.

No, casting our sins in the depths of the ocean might not be the end of them. That's not good enough, now. The depths of the ocean are not an

eternal resting place, even now. And when God recreates the earth anew, He will also clean up the oceans. Heaven won't be what we want if the eternal ocean floor is forever littered with wrecks that remind us of this earth's sinful, cruel past, any more than if ugly wrecked cars and burned out buildings will still cover the surface of the earth made new. Some day the hidden secrets of every "shipwreck" will be revealed. So, sins that are hidden, even from our knowledge, must be revealed. And for those who are ready for Jesus to return, that means that it must all come out in the open beforehand in a judgment before He returns. But that's not Bad News; it's Good News . . . because the deeper is the knowledge of your sins, the deeper is your heart appreciation of His grace. And no one can be happy when Jesus returns unless he/she has learned that lesson!