

Good morning. Good morning. It's a privilege to be with you. I bring you meetings from Midwestern Seminary and Liberty Baptist Church. From my Thursday morning, Pastoral Ministry class, who are very grateful for this event. They didn't have to meet this morning. It's actually midterm day, so I've given them a take home midterm. I'm already getting the emails asking for extensions. Grace for people who can't get their act together. We sometimes like to say the content is grace, but the function of this class is law.

If you have a Bible with you, if you wouldn't mind turning to 1 Corinthians 15. 1 Corinthians 15. What I'd like to do in this opening session is orient us or reorient us around the concept of gospel centrality. This opening talk is titled The What and the Why of Gospel Centrality. We'll be looking at the first four verses, 1 Corinthians 15, beginning in verse one.

"Now, I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preach to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved. If you hold fast to the word I preach to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." This is the word of the Lord.

Father, we do thank you for this word. Would you bless this time we have together? Would you bless the teaching? Would you bless the hearing that we all might have our affections for your son stirred anew in our hearts? Help us to see the glory of Jesus. It's in his name that we pray these things. Amen.

What does it mean to be gospel-centered? What does the phrase gospel centrality mean? Many today see gospel centrality as itself. Just another trend, another stage in the life cycle of the church, church growth, movements, etc. A few years ago, I remember I was doing a staff training for a church in Missouri on gospel centrality. The senior pastor took me into his office and showed me his ecclesiology, church practice, church growth section of his library. He described it as the geological strata of each era of the church. Here's what we were supposed to be doing in the '60s. Here's what we're supposed to do in the '70s, '80s, '90s, and so forth. He said, How do I know gospel-centered isn't just the next step before the next thing? Many see gospel centrality as itself, just another trend, another cool modifier to throw before every noun. We have gospel-centered youth ministry, gospel-centered music, gospel-centered church. We have our gospel-centered groups where we eat gospel-centered pizza with our gospel-centered friends. I'm guilty of this as well. Numerous books with gospel-centered or gospel-driven on them. When this happens without understanding what gospel-centered actually is, I think it is simply the preface to a gospel-centered confusion or gospel confusion. Is everything the gospel? If we plop the gospel into the adjective slot.

In his little exposition of Philippians, Don Carson writes this. He says, "In a fair bit of Western evangelicalism, there is a worrying tendency to focus on the periphery. My colleague," he says, "Dr. Paul Hiebert springs from Mennonite stock and analyzes his heritage in a fashion that he himself would acknowledge is something of a simplistic caricature, but a useful one nonetheless. He says, 'One generation of Mennonites believed the gospel and held as well that there were certain social, economic, and political entailments. The next generation assumed the gospel but identified with the entailments. The following generation then denied the gospel.' The entailments became everything. Assuming this scheme for evangelicalism," Carson writes, "one suspects that large swaths of the movement are lodged in the second step, the assumption of the gospel, with some drifting towards the third, the denial of the gospel. What is it in the Christian faith that excites you? Today, there are endless subgroups of confessing Christians who invest enormous quantities of time and energy in one issue or another. Abortion, pornography, homeschooling, women's ordination, for or against, economic justice, a certain style of worship, the defense of a particular Bible translation, All of these have full agendas of urgent peripheral demands." Carson says, "Not for a moment am I suggesting we should not think about such matters or even throw our weight behind some of them. But when such matters devour most of our time and passion, each of us must ask, in what fashion am I confessing the centrality of the gospel?"

I think we see this having played out now the last several years in many of the public conversations

about the implications of God's justice in the world. The adjectivizing of gospel becomes a first step to conflating the gospel with law. You see the precarious in the question, what is a gospel issue? Someone will say, this is a gospel issue. We certainly see it when people say things like, caring for orphans is the gospel, or social justice is the gospel. That's a conflation of gospel with law, which, by the way, Martin Luther says, is the supreme art of the devil. The gospel has become a talisman of sorts, an abstraction around which we rally our troops and denounce others. We need to recover the substance of gospel centrality. What is the why of gospel centrality? And what is the what of gospel centrality? Well, I'm going I'll give you an outline for the why, and in the midst, we'll jump in and I'll do the what.

Why gospel centrality? Number one, because we constantly need reminding. We constantly need reminding. We We need reminding, first of all, that the gospel isn't anything we do, no matter how important what we do is. The gospel is the news of what God has done in Christ. You can't do or be the gospel. If you could, you wouldn't need the gospel. The gospel is a newspaper headline. It's the announcement of what God has done in history through Christ's sinless life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection. What is the gospel? Paul answers that question in our text. Verse 3, "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures." Verse 4, "That he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures."

There's a lot more that you could say, and the New Testament does, of course, but this is the nutshell. You couldn't say any less than this, and it be the good news. We will notice, first of all, that this is Exactly that. News. It's not instructions. It's not advice. We need constant reminding because we have a tendency to forget what the gospel is.

If you ever doubt this, if you think that your people have a significant grasp on this, I would advise testing that, checking. One of the most surprising practices for us at Liberty Baptist Church, as we conduct membership interviews, is in the interview session, we will ask the prospective member, what is the gospel? These are folks We know, to the extent that a human could know, that they're genuine Christians. They're coming from a Bible teaching church, a gospel preaching church. They have all the recommendations that you would expect them to have, and yet so many have stumbled on this question, it's been somewhat distressing. Now, sometimes in our context, we have a good number of young men and women who are studying at the seminary or are very theologically minded. Sometimes they're overthinking the question. I'll have young guys who start going off on the covenantal history of this or that. I always want to ask, does that include the cross and resurrection? I'm happy to know about your grasp of redemptive historical hermeneutics. But I want to know, how did you get saved? If somebody asked you, what's the good news? Could you tell them? But oftentimes people struggle on this question because they have a gospel amnesia. We need constant reminding because we have a tendency also to forget not just what the gospel is, but what the gospel does. Paul says here, I would remind you, brothers. Let me remind you about this. In the Old Testament, why was God constantly reminding his children who he was? I'm the God of your father, Abraham, the God of your father, Isaac, God of your father, Jacob.

Did they think he might Has he been a different God? No, but he's pointing them back to his historic faithfulness. I'm the God who did that. I'm the God who saved him. We need constant reminding because we do not wake up in gospel mode. I don't know about you, but I wake up and the first thoughts in my head are about my day, how my day is going to go. I have that verbal orientation in my brain. What are the things going to happen on my day? I use my phone for my alarm, as I assume many of you do. For many years, I was in the habit as soon as I pick up my phone, I turn off the alarm and I open up my email. Open up my calendar. Open up, God forbid, social media. And already I've got different voices in my brain before God's voice. And I begin my day as if I'm the center of the universe. I know this from my commute. I don't know if you have a commute to work, but have you ever noticed, as I do, that everyone is driving too fast or too slow?

Everyone. Either too fast or too slow. Why is that? It's because you are the standard by which everyone should drive. If everyone would just drive like you, everything would run smoothly. Isn't that right? You go to the grocery store, perhaps, you get in that 12 items or less line, and there's a person in front of you who has 13 or 14 items. They want to pay with a check. I'm fuming behind them. Why?

Because this life is a movie about me, and you're a supporting character, and you're either an asset to the story of me or a liability, a challenge, an obstacle. I am the center of this universe. I need a reminder. This day is not mine. It's the day the Lord has made. It's a day for his glory. I need to be reminded that I am a great sinner who has a great savior, and he is the center of the universe, not myself. Secondly, why gospel centrality? Because we constantly need reprioritizing. We constantly need reprioritizing. We drift towards the periphery. Those things attract our attention because we see glory in them that we do not see in the gospel. We need to We remind ourselves to reprioritize where we see the glory.

Paul delivered this message, he says here, "as of first importance." It seems clear to me that he does not mean initial importance when he says first importance, but of central importance when he says first importance. Why? Because of the expansiveness that he applies to the good news. Paul does not position the gospel here as the ABC keys of Christianity. In verse one, he uses the phrase, "You received" past tense. I want to remind you this gospel, "which you received" past tense, and then in which you stand present tense, and by "which you are being saved," present, future, tense. This is a helpful reminder to us that the gospel is not just for lost people. It's not just the entry ticket into the Christian life. We don't grow beyond our need of the gospel. In the churches that I grew up in, and my father was a faithful churchman, we grew up attending faithful Bible teaching churches who believe in the true gospel. There's not a whiff of heresy in sight. And yet the gospel was for the lost. And then once you had it, the idea was move on to what we used to call deeper things.

And deeper things usually depended on the church we were in, sometimes the time, the cultural moment. So when I was a young boy, and for a good number of years, the deeper things were the finer details of eschatology, the timing of the Lord's return. It was, I think, an inordinate preoccupation, not just that the Lord is returning, but with an obsession with the timing of those things and how it all played out in current events. A couple of weeks ago, I opened up my sermon at Liberty Baptist Church with a little prop. I'm not a big fan of props, but I have this little book I wanted to use, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. Anyone remember that book? They wrote one for '89. Yeah, that's right. He wrote a follow-up, '89 Reasons When It Didn't Happen. He didn't account for year zero, apparently. He didn't carry the one or something like that. That's not even a joke. I think it was he didn't account for year zero, so he had a whole new list of reasons. Of course, the rapture didn't happen in '89 either. In case you're wondering. If you're a youngster who wasn't born, then you may be wondering.

It didn't happen. You didn't miss it. But that was a product of that time. I remember my grandmother, and that copy of the book is actually my My family's copy. I've had it ever since my grandmother gave that book to my father. Thankfully, my dad didn't buy into it, but I just was really fascinated with the whole thing. I remember it was supposed to be Rosh Hashanah, September 11th, 12th, or 13th of 1988 was when this guy had calculated the rapture would be. We had a trip to Disney World planned for later that year. My brother, who was, I think, seven years old at the time, was death I was honestly afraid Jesus would come back before he could get to Disney World. Looking back, I'm like, How badly did we pitch heaven to people that it paled in comparison to Disney World? But that was encapsulated our preoccupation for a long time. That was the deep stuff, the charts and the timing and the mathematics and the cultural event connections and all that thing. Later on, as I got a little older, sometimes the deep things were things like the Calvinism, Arminianism debate and things like that.

But it never occurred to me that the gospel was deep or even that the gospel was for me as a Christian. You have it and then you graduate from it. In this one little verse, we relearned that the good news is obviously bigger than we thought it was. In which you stand and by which you are being saved. We are learning here that the good news of Jesus Christ is the power and grounds for our justification, yes, but also for our sanctification. That it is powerful, that we won't outgrow our need for this news. Romans 1:16, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes to the Jew first and also to the Greek." In Ephesians 3:7, Paul says the gospel was given to him by God's power. In 1 Thessalonians 1:5, he says the gospel is accompanied with power. In 1 Corinthians 1:18, he says the message of the gospel is the power of God. The gospel is so powerful, so versatile, so resilient, in fact, that Paul had no trouble leaning on it for all of his journeys, for all of his sufferings, for all of his persecutions, and all of his preaching.

In 1 Corinthians 2:2, he says, "I've resolved to know nothing among you except Christ and him crucified." Paul declares, I'm not moving on from this message. I'm not departing this message. You might depart from it around me, but I am not departing from this message. And yet our flesh yearns for more. We want something else. And so we must, with laser-like focus, fix our eyes on the gracious Christ because he is the author and the perfecter of our faith. We must resolve to know nothing except for Christ and him crucified. We constantly need reprioritizing. One of these priorities ought to be, I think, having a distinct understanding of the what of gospel centrality. What do we prioritize in order to truly understand gospel centrality? I'm not usually a fan of lists within lists. I tell My students who are training to preach, don't do sublists, one A, one B, one C, it just confuses or distracts, but I'm about to do it. Don't tell them that I'm doing this. I want to give you three basic principles of what it means to be gospel-centered. Right here in the midst of this why list. I'm going to give you the what in three points as well.

These are the three principles. I rehearse this with my students, with my ministry residents, in such a way that I want them to have these memorized, not just as information, but as the functional ministry philosophy of their churches, so that if anyone ever came to them, they're going to go pastor a church somewhere and a congregation member comes and asks them, Pastor, what does it mean that we're gospel-centered? It says on our website we're a gospel-centered church. What does that actually mean? And they don't say something redundant. Well, it just means everything's about the gospel. That's usually I ask my students on the first day lecture on this subject, What does it mean to be gospel-centered? Usually, some brave soul raises their hand and says, It means to center everything around the gospel. I'm like, Well, well done. It's implied by the phrase itself. I want them to have substance to it. What does it actually mean?

It means, first of all, that the whole Bible is about Jesus. The whole Bible is about Jesus. This has huge implications, doesn't it? Not just for preaching, but discipleship, teaching, counseling. The whole Bible is about Jesus. Paul says here that this gospel is in accordance with the scriptures. This tells us, it's not the only place that we are told this, but this tells us that the gospel is not some improvisation. The Old Testament lays the groundwork for this news with Christ as its culmination. One of the practical implications of gospel centrality is that we share the hermeneutic of Jesus himself. Jesus is always putting himself at the center of everything, including the Bible. And Perhaps his first public sermon in the synagogue, unfurling that scroll, reading from Isaiah, The Lord has anointed me to preach goodness to the poor, and so forth. At the end, what does he say? "Today, this is fulfilled in your hearing." He says to the religious leaders, You diligently search the scriptures thinking that in them you will find eternal life. It is they that testify about me. Even the scriptural experts failed in their understanding understanding of the scripture because they could not see Christ as the point of all that they knew. After his resurrection on the road to Emmaus, Jesus sidles up next to those disciples as beginning with Moses and the prophets. He interpreted everything to them about himself.

Perhaps the greatest Christ-centered sermon ever preached from the Old Testament. I wish we had a transcript of that where Jesus is essentially, I think, just walking them through the scriptures. That's That's about me, that's about me, that's about me, that's about me. The closest that we may have version of that is the Book of Hebrews, where the author of Hebrews essentially working through every covenantal milestone and saying, That's about Jesus. That's about Jesus. That's about Jesus. All of God's promises are yes in him. Secondly, well, I'll say some more about that in our second session about Christ as the the scriptures. But second principle, people change by grace, not by law. People change by grace, not by law. Now, this one is still, I think, really controversial. That first point was controversial for a while. I think it's becoming more accepted, a Christ-centered reading of the scriptures, even in churches that wouldn't necessarily identify with either reform theology or gospel centrality more broadly. That's different than when I was a kid being taught the Old Testament in Sunday school class, where the patriarchs are moral exemplars, et cetera, and they are, don't get me wrong, but we never followed the road all the way to Christ as the true and better, so to speak, or seeing Jesus as the fulfillment of those Old Testament stories.

The Old Testament was there primarily for moral lessons. That, I think, thankfully, is changing. We have a whole generation of younger Christians up in churches where they don't know any different than Christ-centered preaching and teaching. However, this point is still, I think, suspect, not just in

churches, but it's just in our own hearts. People change by grace, not by law. I think verse 2's, "By which you are being saved." I don't presume Paul to be teaching here that there's a justification 1.0 or anything like that. I think he's referring to the work of progressive sanctification, that we are being conformed over time to the image of Christ. Of course, that won't be completed until the Lord returns or we see him face to face, that moment of glorification. But along the way, the Spirit who has taken up residence in us is bearing fruit in our lives. He's making us more like Jesus. I think that's what he's talking about here. But Paul is raising the question for us, how do people change? Like at the heart level, how do people change? If you're in Christian ministry, this is a question that's fundamental to your work, the business of change, life change.

What we learn, I think from the New Testament, is that the law can manage behavior modification. How do people change? We think we know how people change. You tell them. I know sometimes that doesn't work the first time you tell them, so you tell them a lot. When that doesn't work, you raise the volume, you say it louder, and maybe you bring in rewards. Hey, if you'll change, you'll get X, Y, or Z. Here are the four steps to a more to a victorious life, to a happier home, etc. When that doesn't work, we bring in consequences. Hey, if you don't change, this is what's going to happen to you. Just as we know from our own households, We can get people to change their behavior when we turn up the volume, when we repeat the command, when we bring in rewards and consequences. But that's not the real win, is it? I mean, it certainly is a win, but it's not the real win. Moms and dads, you don't just want your kids to obey the first time and follow the rules. You want them to do that, but you want them to want to do that.

You want them to have a heart to do it. How do you get that heart that wants to do it, that delights in the law? It doesn't just feel the law as a burden, but feels the law as a delight. Only the gospel has the power to do that. In Galatians 5, where Paul gives the fruit of the spirit, I find it very notable that as he preface that list, he says, The works of the flesh are evident. Then he lists sinful actions, things that we do, drunkenness, orgies, so on and so forth. These are bad things that we do. But then he says, what the fruit of the spirit isn't, and he doesn't list good things to do. He doesn't say the fruit of the spirit is go to church every Sunday, read your Bible every day, give to the poor. No, he says the fruit of the spirit is love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness. There are things not to do, but to be. And certainly the do flows from the be, but he's getting at the heart of the matter. Who we are, not just what we do, but who we are.

We change toward Christ-likeness through the power of the good news. As I said, this is controversial. It's hard to believe, but it's a reminder to us that Christianity is supernatural. We're not adherence a faith that comes about by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps or a religious technology. If you want that, you want any other religion but Christianity. Every other religion has some version of that, a law-driven It's a law-driven pragmatism. Spiritual or espiritual. It doesn't even have to be spiritual. Certainly, if you want Buddhism or Islam or anything like that, it's some law-driven mechanism. But even if you don't want something spiritual, you just want, I don't know, rock-hard abs. There's four ways to get it. If that's heaven to you, every magazine cover at the grocery store checkout has some version of heaven, and then inside is the law to achieve it. That's not what Christianity is like. Christianity is about raising the dead. You can't do it. We're finally going to shoot you straight. You can't do it, but someone has done it on your behalf. And by faith, you can receive the gift of his having completed repeated that work. Paul answers the question how people change also in 2 Corinthians 3, which if somebody were asking me, where is this gospel-centered stuff in the Bible?

I think numerous places. The first place I would take them is 1 Corinthians 15, but the second place I would take them is 2 Corinthians 3, because in that chapter, Paul is distinguishing law and gospel, and he's not denigrating the law. He's not an antinomian. Sometimes people in the gospel-centered camp who identify that way, they drift into an antinomianism because they're not really gospel-centered, they're gospel-only. Gospel centrality or gospel centrism isn't gospel-only-ism. We're putting the gospel in its proper place, and therefore we put the law in its proper place. That's what Paul does. He says, The law is glorious. How could it not be? It reflects the Holiness of God, and it's a good word from God. But, he says, the gospel exceeds it in glory, surpasses it in glory. He calls the law the Ministry of Condemnation, and he calls the gospel the Ministry of Righteous. Now, I find that really stirring because if I wasn't familiar with 2 Corinthians 3, and somebody asked me, what's the Ministry

of Righteousness? Gospel or law, I would think, well, well, righteousness, that sounds like a law word. Holiness, that's a law word. But Paul says it's the gospel that is the Ministry of Righteous.

And in verse 18 of 2 Corinthians 3, he answers the question, How do people change? At the heart level, how do people actually change? He says, It's by behold the glory of Christ with an unveiled face that we are transformed from one degree of glory into another, into the same likeness. And this comes It's by the Holy Spirit. There is some way, I mean, it's by the Holy spirit that beholding is becoming. Seeing the glory of Jesus is how we change. Supernatural. It's a supernatural thing. We think we just tell people to change, but it's holding up the glory of Christ that helps people to change.

That leads into our third point in the what, the third principle of gospel centrality. Our Our ultimate validation is not in our performance, but in Christ's performance on our behalf. I know it's wordy, so I'll repeat it. Our ultimate validation is not in our performance, but in Christ's performance on our behalf. I use the word validation there, even though what I basically mean is justification. We'll spend some time on this concept as it applies to ministry in our third session today. But I use the word validation because I think for most of us, when we hear the word justification, it simply triggers the theological doctrine in which most of us, I hope all of us know we're justified by grace alone, received through faith alone.

We have a sense of the forensic declaration that we are right with God because of Jesus. And yet we wake up in the morning, day after day, perhaps year after year, and we wonder, does God like me? I know I'm justified, but how does God feel about me today? We have a functional sense of our justification, validation in our performance that God only feels about me according to how I'm producing for him or how I'm doing in the Christian life. Certainly in church ministry, we have a sense of our own validation, what Ray Ortland calls our "felt okayness," based on how the church is going. The church is going well, I feel validated. The church isn't going well, I don't feel so good. We want to press justification out into every corner of the room I think verse 1 in which you stand is a good indicator here of where we're to find our validation. Doctrinally, I think this is really about the imputation of Christ's righteousness. That to be justified before God in Christ is not simply to have your sins forgiven. It is that. Praise God. My sins are forgiven. But you've heard maybe that to be justified is just as if I'd never sinned.

But it's also just as if I'd always obeyed. The Lord wipes that slate clean on our heart, and he doesn't leave it blank. He doesn't give us a blank slate. If we did, we'd last a millisecond. When we wipe that slate, we'd be like, Look at this clean slate. And all of a sudden, you got pride. Your slates look a little dirty compared to mine, right? No, he wipes the slate clean, and then he engraves on it the perfect righteousness of Jesus, the obedience of Christ, as if his obedience is ours, credits that to our account. This means if we stand in in this gospel, it means when you wake up in the morning, maybe this is controversial, too. I don't know. You wake up in the morning, the Lord's not looking down at you going, All right, impress me. See what you got. I'll give you my love, but let's just see how the day goes, see what measure of it you'll get. No, you wake up into the favor of God. He delights over you. Then at the end of the day, perhaps more importantly, no matter how the day is gone, and you might have really blown it.

You certainly did, even in ways that you don't even realize. But when you put your head down on that pillow at night, the Lord is not saying to you, You know what? I thought you were better than this. I thought you were an asset to the organization. You're clearly a liability to this whole thing. I've had it up to here with you. No, you can't surprise him. He knows exactly what dirt bag you were when he brought you in. There's not a thing you're going to do that he's going to go, I had no idea you were like this. No, you lay your head down into the favor of God. Not because of you, because of Jesus, because of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Your validation is not your performance. Performance, but Christ's performance on your behalf. The gospel is the grounding not just of our conversion, but our ongoing sanctification and even our glorification at the last day. Because of that, we don't see our validation in our legal performance, but in Christ's fulfillment of the legal demands for us. What is left to do then? Well, we turn from our self-righteousness to enjoy Christ's righteousness given to us.

On that note, we're going to come back to the why Now, if you're keeping track, this is the third reason why. We've completed the three points in the what. We're back to the why. Thirdly, because we constantly need repenting. We constantly need repenting. What is the place of the law? It's not at the center, but it is a worshipful response of gratitude for the center of the gospel. We acknowledge the gospel helps us to acknowledge that our central problem is not a lack of self-esteem. Our central problem is not a lack of self-fulfillment. Our central solution cannot be a program of self-help or self-actualization, which is what the law carried out in our own power essentially is. Our central problem is that we have rebelled against a Holy God. Our central problem is that we have disobeyed his righteous commands and we have attempted to overthrow his sovereign authority in our lives. Our central problem is that we have fallen short of the glory of God. Now, why? After all of this ink spilled towards the Corinthians' problems, does Paul at this point say, Now, I would remind you of the gospel that I preach to you.

It's because Paul knows that every behavior problem is fundamentally a belief problem. We disbelieve our way into sin. We have to believe our way out. The only antidote that can to generate the power to supplant the idolatry at the root of every sin is the power of God's grace in the gospel. Chasing this thought further, one resource that I would recommend to you is a little sermon essay by Thomas Chalmers. It's called the Expulsion... I'm sorry, the "Expulsive Power of a New Affection." You can read it free online, but there's also... Crossway does a nice little paperback version of it. It's short. You could read it in one sitting. "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection" by Thomas Chalmers. Paul says, "Now, I would remind you of what? Christ died for our sins." When Martin Luther nailed those 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg, and I've seen some historians say he didn't nail anything, that he mailed a letter. Have you heard that, Dr. Plummer? He mailed? I don't know if that's true, but even if it is, I'm sticking with the door. It's much more dramatic. I just can't picture Luther like...

No, you want a hammer, right? I don't know. Do you remember what the first thesis is? The first thesis that the Lord has willed that all of life would be one of repentance. The Roman church had prioritized law over grace, and they lost the plot, devolving into a false gospel of works, religion, and all that that implies, including the Satanic idea that we can manage our sin through our religious exercises. But Christ calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily. We constantly need repenting. Brother pastors, this is why if your church services are aimed at lost people, giving them four steps to applying Christianity every is a lost cause. You're giving religious busy work to the unsaved. What could that possibly do? At best, it creates a moral pagan. But that It's still Phariseeism, even if it looks cool, even if it looks relevant. The gospel is a reminder that what we essentially need is not a new religion, but a new heart. The law can reveal our sinfulness. It can convict us of our sinfulness. Sometimes it even exacerbates our sinfulness when we bristle against it. The law arouses the trespass, like a little sign next to the button that says, Please do not push this button.

What do you immediately want to do. I wonder what this button does. It can't be all that bad. The law can do all of that, but it cannot save us from our sinfulness. Only the grace of God can do that. A number of years ago, I was privileged to write in Crossways, *Knowing the Bible* series, a little Bible study on the Book of Romans. J. I. Packer was the series editor for the guide. I was somewhat skeptical about Dr. Packer's involvement in it. I thought maybe just a figurehead thing. I mean, he was elderly even then. I just didn't know how involved he was. I wrote this study, sent it in, was later published. My friend Matt Capps, who's a pastor in North Carolina, he posted on social media one day that Crossway had sent him his manuscript with J. I. Packer's edits on it. I thought, That's really cool. Then I thought, Why haven't they sent me? Maybe he wasn't involved with every study. But then I started feeling really self-conscious. Maybe he was, and it's just really He didn't like a lot of stuff. But I worked up the courage, and I messaged the editor and asked, Hey, I saw Matt got this.

Could I see my manuscript with J. I. Packer's edits on it? They overnighted it to me. FedEx. I opened it the next day in my office there at Midwestern Seminary. Started leafing through, hand shaking. Dr. Packer has a very light touch. I think they left it to the publisher's editors to really dig in and fix all the mistakes and all that thing. He was mainly just making little adjustments here. I just grew pleased. But there was nothing that I was like, Oh, that's really interesting. Until I came to page 18, and there at the bottom of the page, I was expounding on Romans 2:4 in a section of the study called Gospel Glimpses, and this is what I had written. "And With another wonderful affirmation of where the source

of power to change is found, Paul reminds us in Romans 2:4 that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance. Not his law, not his berating, not his exasperation or his scolding, his kindness." Period. End of thought. But Dr. Packer added one thin vertical pin stroke, turning my period into an exclamation point and underlining it to show the change. It's not God's kindness, yawn, that leads us to repentance.

It's God's kindness! How kind is he? Exclamation point. I started to weep there at my desk, and I'll tell you why. Because 15 or 16 years before that moment, when I was spending every night on the floor of the guest bedroom of our home in Nashville, Tennessee, and I was depressed and suicidal and utterly broken. Just at the end of myself, if you had said to me, first of all, in those days, One day, J.I. Packer is going to edit one of your books. I would have laughed at you. It would have seemed cruel to me. But in the midst of my depression, one night, the Lord reached down into that bedroom and grabbed hold of me and he whispered into my ears the sweetest reminder of the gospel that I have ever heard. It was like the lights came on and I was changed. In those days, I had a notebook full of sermon outlines on how to be a better Christian. None of them solved my problem. I was in a dark hole, and what solved it was the Lord was exceedingly kind to me. His kindness led me to repentance. If you fast forward to the I held that manuscript in my hand, I thought of all the kindness of God that had led me to that point.

Despite my sin, despite my failure, my weakness, my baggage, my struggles, my doubts, what I had left at the end of my rope was his kindness. I didn't need to just get my act together. I needed to repent and believe the gospel. It's good news. It's good news. We must center on the gospel because we must always be repenting.

Fourthly and finally, why gospel centrality because we constantly need reforming. We constantly need reforming. I have built the book *Lest We Drift* around the author of Hebrews using that language, Hebrews 2:1, "For this reason we must pay attention all the more to what we have heard so that we will not drift away from it." Nobody drifts toward the gospel. It makes too little of us and too much of God. We have to nail this thesis to the door of our own hearts. Verse 2, "Hold fast to the word that I preach to you. Unless you believed in vain." Hold fast to this word. The danger in a gospel departure is that it's a symptom of unbelief. In Galatians 2, when Paul recounts confronting Peter Peter about his hypocrisy. You remember that moment?

I picture a school cafeteria, and Peter, he's hanging out with the Gentiles until the cool kids show up. He's like, I don't know them. I don't know. That resonates with me because some of you may be too far removed from school cafeterias, but I have PTSD from school cafeterias. In any event, Paul confronts him. There's a number of things he could have said, and perhaps did that we just don't have recorded. I don't know. But Paul could have mentioned what feelings Peter was hurting. He could have mentioned the commands that he broke, hypocrisy, partiality, racism. All that's true. But the primary thing Paul saw was that Peter's conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel. Sometimes we are told that it's time to move on. It served its purpose. But some men have fought long and hard to facilitate a gospel recovery movement It didn't begin with Colin Hanson's article in Christianity Today. It began with faithful preachers, some well known, but most not, who were just taking up the mantle of the Puritans and the reformers, calling us back to make manifest in our ministry what Paul says Philippians 3: 12, I only want to lay hold of what has laid hold of me.

I got hijacked, and I'm holding on for dear life. That should be the tenor of our ministry. Or only four verses later in that same chapter in Philippians, only let us hold true to what we have already attained. Sometimes we're told that moving on from the gospel is the right next step in the gospel movement. As we cling doggedly to the theology that our fathers fought for and will pass down to us in good faith, the doctrinal dilators of the day will nag us. Whatever happened to *semper reformanda*, as if always reforming means committing to a flexible orthodoxy or a malleable gospel, a junk drawer gospel. In a New York Times article in 2011, we find this historical anecdote tied to the devastating tsunamis that happened in Japan at that time. The writer says, "The stone tablet has stood on this forested hillside since before they were born, but the villages have faithfully obeyed the stark warning carved on its weathered face. Do not build your homes below this point. Residents say this injunction from their ancestors kept their tiny village of 11 households safely out of reach of the deadly tsunami

last month that wiped out hundreds of miles of Japanese Coast and rose to record heights near here.

The waves stopped just 300 feet below stone. They knew the horrors of tsunami, so they erected that stone to warn us, said Tamashige Kumura, 64, the village leader of Anayoshi. Hundreds of so-called tsunami stones, some more than Six centuries old, dot the Coast of Japan. Silent testimony to the past destruction that these lethal waves have frequented upon this earthquake prone nation. But modern Japan, confident that advanced technology in higher sea walls would protect vulnerable areas, came to forget or ignore those ancient warnings, dooming it to repeat bitter experiences when the recent tsunami struck."

Maybe the ancestors knew what they were talking about. They learned the hard way and they erected markers. Don't build past this point. But we're arrogant. We think we know better. We're smarter, we're more enlightened. We have to accommodate more and more people. Those forefathers didn't know the cultural challenges of our day. So we ignore the markers. We must be reminded that always reforming, the hallmark of the Reformation, does not mean always morphing. It doesn't mean that the faith is ever changing. Reforming or progressing into something better. In many respects, to be always reforming is to be always returning to the gospel, understanding that our tendency is to drift away from it.

We have to keep pulling ourselves back, reforming according to the finished work of Christ. To be always reforming is to be continually slopping off the baggage of doctrinal add-ons and distractions, cutting out the ever-risings innovations, theological or otherwise. To be always reforming is to keep going back to the ancient markers in the face of constant temptation and taunting away from those who would have us play with heterodoxy ever newly. So let's keep contending, keep trusting, keep returning to the ancient marker of the cross. The church that is always reforming is always returning to the gospel, always conforming its message, its ministry, its methods to the gospel. The church understands that sinners who are won by the gospel are won to the gospel. Therefore, it is not enough for the gospel to be tucked away in the faith statement or saved for special occasions or dished out in small doses or positioned as an afterthought in a sermon. Unassumed gospel is a methodologically denied gospel. So we have to stop, of course, being the gospel. It's not enough, brothers and sisters, to be gospel-assenting. The scriptures and the spirit who breed them call us to be gospel-centered.

Hold fast to the word I preach to you unless you believed in vain. So hold fast to the good news, because only the good news is holding fast to you.

Let me pray. Father, we thank you for the gift of your word, how lost we would be without the saving power of the good news of your son's cross and resurrection. We thank you for his ongoing intercession for us, that he is our advocate. We thank you for the good news of your Holy spirit given to us, guaranteeing our everlasting life, a down payment on our resurrection to come. Father, would you bless those who are here today? Would this time be stewarded toward not just knowing more, but growing in the likeness of your son? I pray for every church represented here as well. Would you bless and flourish those churches? Would they be winning the loss? Would they be growing the found that we might all magnify your son, the end all be all? Jesus Christ, it's in his name we pray. Amen.