

CORRECTING EXCUSES WITH THE GOSPEL

Correcting Excuses with the Gospel

Well we finished the book of Ephesians last week. And here's what's coming: not next week but the week after this coming week, we will be starting a series entitled: The Hope. And this is looking at the various aspects of Hope that Jesus offers us and this study will kind of serve us as a sort of runway that prepares our hearts for Christmas. Nate and I will be team teaching this and so with Nate's OT background and the whole Spirit of this series leading up to Christmas, I'm really excited.

But in the meantime (this week and next week) we are going to do two topical messages that, although not intentionally so, are in a way kind of encore to the book of Ephesians. *Last week's overview of Ephesians was just a reminder of the greatness of God's love for us and reminder of what it can*

do for us. It's quite an inspiring perspective. Thinking of God as this infernal nuclear core and how much we are changed by just drifting into a millionth billionth part of his love. That is truly amazing and very motivating for me.

But what we are going to do this week and next week is work it into the boots. We want to back out and take some of these massive theological truths and try to work them deep into our common experiences.

And the format today is really, I want to talk about an experience that Lisa and I had this week that I am guessing most of you can relate to. That experience has some failure and some success and so I want to set the stage for it and then talk about how the gospel helps us in our weakness.

So I want to get right to it. The title of today's message is quite simply, "How the Gospel Corrects our Excuses" How does the gospel help us be honest people? Honest with ourselves and honest with one another.

HOW THE GOSPEL CORRECTS OUR EXCUSES

1. *Why We Make Excuses*
2. How the Gospel Allows Us To Bear the Truth
3. How the Gospel Allows Us to Change for Real

Why We Make Excuses

The psychology of excuses is very instructive. What is an excuse? Here's a definition to get us thinking:

Excuse: An attempt to lessen the blame by pointing to a fault or offense; seeking to defend or justify.

An attempt to lessen the blame. What does that mean? What does that imply just happened? Something just happened and a blaming finger is being pointed? What just happened? Failure. So built into the definition of an excuse is the idea of failure...

- you didn't make it to your son's softball game,
- you didn't get the project done on time,
- you didn't clean the house like you said you would.
- you didn't finished that chemistry assignment,
- you were not kind with your words to your brother or mother or sister or daughter,
- you failed to remember your sons birthday party,
- you once again failed to come home when you said you would.

Why? Why did you fail? Why didn't you do what you promised. At this point you have two options:

You can tell the truth.

"I was lazy" or "I just have a hard time caring."

You can do that, or you toss an excuse out there.

- I was so tired today.
- I wasn't feeling well.
- I had a bad headache.
- I've been so stressed out with this project at work."

And of course those things are usually true in part; that's after all what makes them believable. *In all likelihood the real reason you disappointed was a mix of reasons.* You really did have a headache. That was true. But that was not the full reason. You're not entirely sure you could not have done it; maybe the headache would have stopped you but you didn't really try either. You did waste a solid half hour on Facebook. So rather than going into all the detail of that belabored self-evaluation you just blame the whole thing on the *horrible* headache adding the word horrible to make yourself feel better.

Now what's going on here? Believe it or not, all excuses begin with an intrinsic understanding of a moral law that exists beyond us.

Turn in your Bibles to Romans chapter 7. Now Paul in Romans 7 is talking about the law. He's talking about this law of God which just exists out there. This is in fact where excuses start.

The best excuse makers are the ones who have a strong sense of the moral law of God. They understand the Law of God; it resonates with them. The strongest excuses come from those who understand the real evil of the heart.

The best excuse makers are those who make mental judgments against their kids or roommates or friends or family members that they are:

1. so undisciplined, that
2. they procrastinate,
3. that they are so unkind with their words,
4. that they are so frivolous with their money,
5. that they are just seeking attention,
6. that they are just thinking about themselves,
7. that they are self-centered.
3. Oh they are so self-righteous.
9. She doesn't have an ounce of spirituality in her.
0. She is such a shallow person.
1. He is so proud of his musical ability.
2. Man if he was only aware of how much he wears his pride on his sleeve.
3. He thinks he's such a big shot with all his money and power.
4. He thinks he's so successful.
5. He loves to just parade around his accomplishments."

And on and on our list of accusations fly. On and on they go. Now let me ask you, "Are your observations accurate?" Almost certainly. What you are doing is concurring with the law of God. *These people are breaking the law of God*

But unbeknown to us we are disturbing something that ought to have just layed dormant. This kind of digging will unearth something very unpleasant, something very unpredicted, something very unexpected and unforeseen.

Because all you have to do is live for 24 hours on planet earth and you will have failed to practice the kind of behaviour that you expect from other people. All you have to do is get into one conflict and the words that naturally and

without a single ounce of effort flow from your mouth turn out to be the very words you have condemned in others. *All you have to do is listen to the conversation of you heart for five minutes and you will hear the attitudes you condemn in others. You'll see the same pride. You see the same ugly unforgiving spirit. It's all their right out in the open.*

This sense of inconsistency is exactly what Romans 7 is all about. So Paul is talking about the law and the fact that the more we look into the righteous standard of God and the more we look at ourselves, the more we see that we don't live up to it. He's even wondering, perhaps the law is the thing that is bad since the closer I look, the more miserable I become.

Romans 7:7-8, "What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." 8 But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead."

You see the closer to God we get, the more condemned we

become. The more we look at true righteousness, the more we see how unrighteous we really are.

"9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me."

Now for many of us, this is too overwhelming. *It's too painful to admit this kind of weakness, this kind of moral death.* And so we make excuses both to ourselves and to others. Here's how that normally plays out.

If someone happens to get wind of this discrepancy, if someone heard you say, "Man, I hate it when guys don't own up to their mistakes." *Later on that day you make an obvious mistake in front of the eyes of all those who heard you so confidently condemn cowardice in others.* What happens then? Well, the laws of justice demand, those who have heard you hurl those words at others, focus their eyes on you. Their judgmental eyes turn on you and burn into your

soul and call you out on your double standard. They see the inconsistency and they freak out. Your doing the same thing! Your no different than the one you have condemned.

Now of course to really own up to this is too much to ask. It's one thing to admit your a liar. But it's another thing all together to confess your a liar after having harshly condemned liars 20 minutes previous." So out come the excuses.

- Ahh, you I know it looks like I lied here, but in reality I was covering for a friend of mine.
- I know it looks like I lied, but I have such a terrible memory and it's very hard for me to keep the details straight.
- I know it looks like I lied but if you knew the pressure I was under and the no-win situation I was in and the lack of sleep I've gotten and the unreasonableness of my wife you wouldn't wonder at it in the slightest. You'd understand completely.

But the laws of justice are not limited to other people pointing out the double standard. Yes, we make excuses to others. *But we make excuses to ourselves just as much, perhaps even more so.* When we do something that violates the standard we set for others, we hear that voice in the back of our head, "You hypocrite." You hear that voice, "How can you condemn with such passion other people and not lift a finger against yourself?"

- We all like to think of ourself as above the pettiness you

- condemn in others, but then you find yourself being petty.
- We all like to think of ourself as mature and dignified and spiritually advanced beyond that childish bickering. But then you walk home and you engage your spouse in childish bickering.
 - We all like to think of ourself as having blossomed into adulthood but your attitudes are no different than the two year old who pouts, "I didn't get what I wanted."

And so we make excuses to ourselves.

You want to know where this slips out? The excuses we make to others slip out in our own volunteered self-validating claims we make to others.

This is the guy who starts a sentence with, "I'm the kind of guy that likes to do what is right." Why does he say that? Because he knows it's not true.

It can go the other way just as easy, "I know everyone says I'm the worst mom in the world; do you think I'm a bad mom?" That question is a stiff arm. It's not really asking. You're fishing for the answer you really want to hear which is, "No you're a great mom."

We are terrified of the truth.

And the more we look into the law of God, the more reasonable and rational this conclusion becomes. We are as bad as we think. We are worse.

Romans 7:11, "For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me."

That is all true....UNLESS You can find an excuse. What does an excuse do? An excuse lets you off the hook. It's a way of stiff arming the truth.

- Oh, I wouldn't have been childish, but here's a reason why my childishness was justifiable.
- I wouldn't have been petty, but here's a reason my pettiness is reasonable. And you dig deep to find that dignified tone.
You look for the authoritative voice that dispells all doubt.

So we create all sorts of excuses for us that put us in a different category from all the people we condemn.

- That time you were so unfair to the children was when you were very tired.
- That slightly shady business about the money—the one you have almost forgotten—came when you were very hard-up.

So all our excuses start with an understanding of a moral law that exists in the universe. Our excuses are rooted in a sense that Romans 7 is true. After all, if we do not believe in the law as described in Romans 7, why should we be so anxious to make excuses for not having behaved as we ought to have?

C.S. Lewis talks about this in his introduction to the moral law. He basically says, Listen to people arguing. What do you hear? You hear them appealing to a moral standard.

If you hear a guy say, "That's my seat, I was there first." You hear him make an excuse, "Oh I didn't know...even though he did"

Now the man being accused could say, "I don't give a rip about your standards. Why are you trying to force your morals on me? I believe it's right for me to take other peoples seats and be a selfish as possible. Your morality doesn't apply to me." He could say that, but he doesn't.

Almost always he tries to explain that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard you are pointing out, or perhaps he will admit the inconsistency but let you know how in his case, this standard does not apply.

Okay, clear enough? You now understand why you make excuses. *So no more excuses that you never understood why you make excuses.* Now what to do about it. What does the gospel say about all this? How is Romans 7 going to help

us bear up under this harsh reality?

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Now this is a really, really important point to get right. Some people can absolutely bear the reality of who they are without the gospel, at least in a sense and to a point.

Jean-Paul Sarte was a French philosopher and is interesting to quote at this point. Jean-Paul Sarte believed absolutely that a creator did not exist. And as such he believed in the absolute responsibility of men to own up to their actions. Their future was determined by their own willing it into existence. He famously wrote, "We are left alone, without excuse." In other words, don't blame God, he's not there. If you don't like your circumstances, that's your fault. He said in his book *Existentialism Is a Humanism*,

“For many have but one resource to sustain them in their misery, and that is to think, “Circumstances have been against me, I was worthy to be something much better than I have been. I admit I have never had a great love or a great friendship; but that is because I never met a man or a woman who were worthy of it; if I have not written any very good books, it is because I had not the leisure to do so; or, if I have had no children to whom I could devote myself it is because I did not find the man I could have lived with. So there remains within me a wide range of abilities, inclinations and potentialities, unused but perfectly viable, which endow me with a worthiness that could never be inferred from the mere history of my actions.”

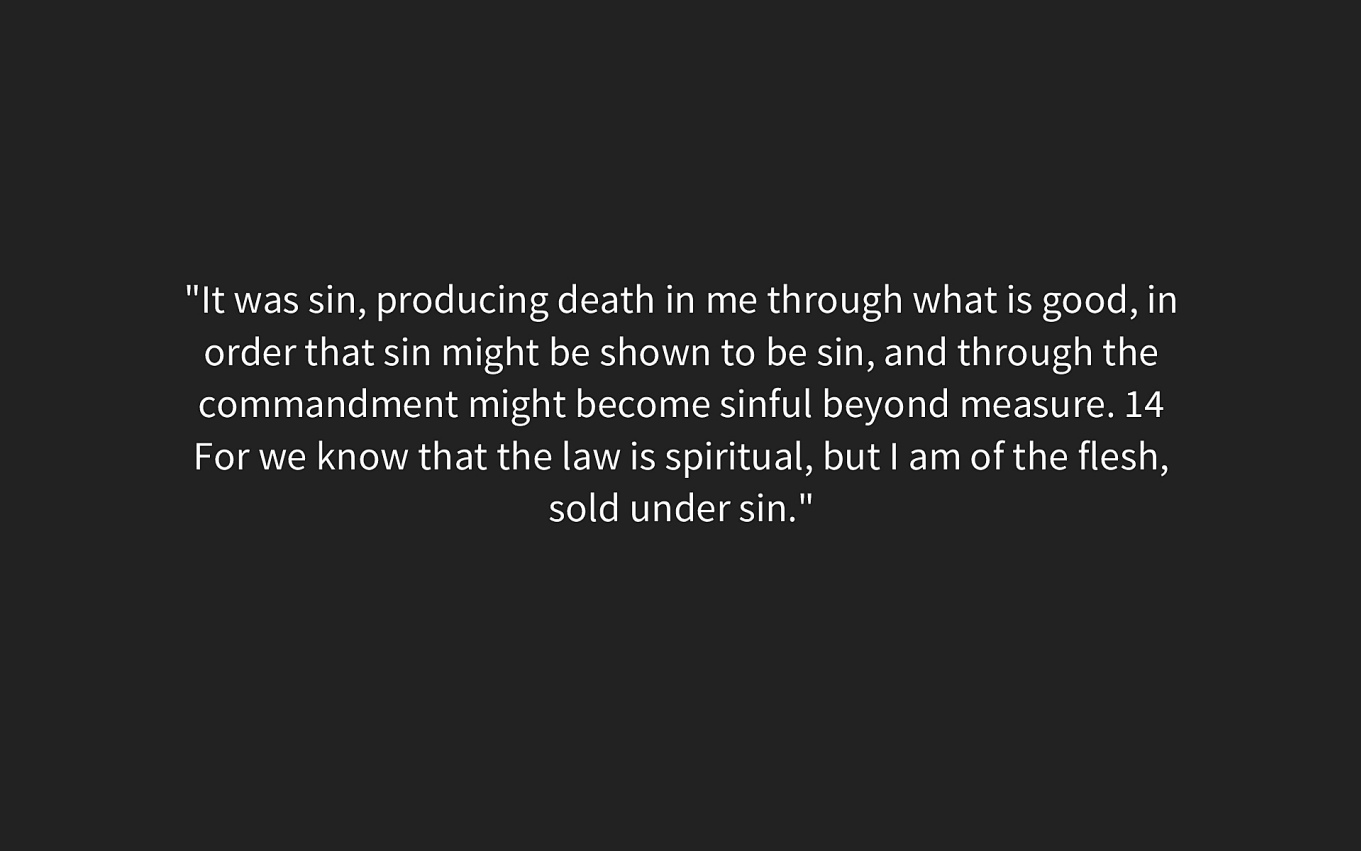
I mean, that appeals to me....at least to my flesh. To me it sounds almost Christian. Yeah, let's own up to our problems rather than keep printing excuse after lamesauce excuse. Jean-Paul Sarte is saying, "Listen, dude, there's no excuse for your circumstances other than your own lame excuses."

There are literally ten thousand versions of this floating around out there.

So what's the problem? The problem, is while these high achievers may be more honest than the creative, prolific excuse maker. They still can't be honest enough. They can't be honest enough to say, "This hypocrisy problem is beyond my own ability." *They can't be honest enough to say, "No matter how much I try, I am always going to be evil. I am always going to be wicked in my heart. I am always going to*

be self-absorbed no matter how much I try to do something different." *It's hard sometimes to own up to reality.* And the hardest realities to own up to are the ones you know you can't fix.

The reality is they haven't gone far enough. They haven't really opened up themselves to the truth. They haven't been truthful enough to say what Paul concludes in verse 13:



"It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. 14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin."

That is so strong. You **ARE** a sinner, sold like a slave to the Tyrant sin. You have no will of your own. This is in fact horribly depressing. How can we bear it. How can we bear not to make an excuse?

This quote (which I know I've mentioned before) has become somewhat of a bedrock stone in my thinking, this quote

begins like this:

"The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe..."

Think about that phrase "Dared Believe." *That phrase contains the idea that there is something either so terrible, or so amazing that you are afraid of entertaining it seriously.* The implications are so extreme that you dare not even pretend it's real because until you're certain, the emotional whip lash would be too stressful. It would lay you out panting in exhaustion to seriously consider it and then turn out to have it not be true.

Well the gospel says you are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever DARED to believe. Whatever you think might be worse case, the gospel reveals that you exceed even that. You thought you understood the law and then you read it closer and you realized how miserably short

you really fall. And there are no excuses that work to explain it away. To even consider this kind of failure is traumatizing. It's horribly depressing.

Romans 7:15-19, "For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. 17 So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."

This is what arrests and halts those who pride themselves in their self-effort. You are awesome compared to some, but it all depends on what your standard is. Read Romans 7. *You haven't yet dared to consider who you really are.* All you've said is your better than your neighbor Tom (which even that is based on your selective biased standard, filtering the good and ignoring the bad). You can't bear to really examine, to really get to the core...You wouldn't dare it.

Have you had one of those moments where you flirted with examining this reality? Have you had those lightbulb moments of terror where you realize, "I was blaming it my

spouse or my mom or dad or my unfair situation. *I thought she was being so unfair.* And then God turns on the lightbulb and all of the sudden you reel in horror. Are you serious. That is so ugly. *How could I have missed who I really am?* And I know when I have those moments of insight, those gracious insights, it scares me."

Yes, you are everything you feared and more, much more. *It's so deep, it's so ingrained, it's so horribly woven into your flesh, you can't hope to possibly extract a hundredth part of it in your lifetime.* You can't even begin to hope.

All the excuses you launder up to heaven are just aversion tactics. They are hollow words that don't correspond to reality.

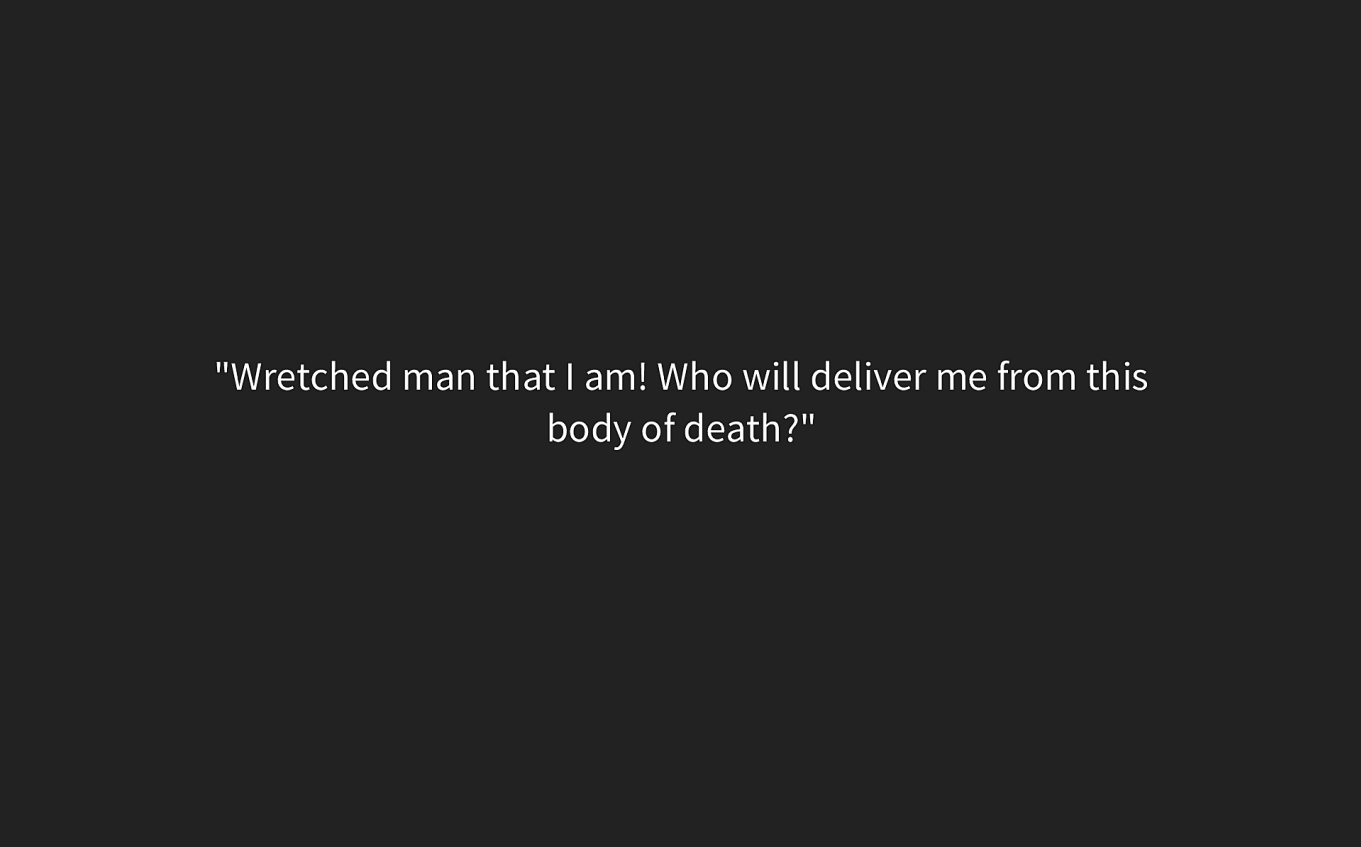
- You weren't too tired
- Your kids weren't so unbearable that you had to lash out with your words and Jesus would have done the same thing.
- Your blood sugar wasn't so low that you had to pretend you didn't hear
- You weren't so stressed out that that pornography made sense, that that impulse purchase that wasn't submitted to the Lord, that the stingy attitude was justified.

No Romans 7 says, dare to believe, that standard you impose on others, that standard you know is out there, that standard you know comes from the divine, it's all true. You have utterly failed. *Your string of failures makes you destined for the trash compactor.* It's hard to bear the fact

that this is us.

>Romans 7:20-21,"20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 23 but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members."

And Paul ends Romans chapter 7 with this hanging question,



"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

That is the question. This is where honest self-evaluation, honest excuseless introspection leaves us. Can self effort save me from this body of death? No. It's not enough. Will excuses save me from this body of death? No. It's just denial. Something outside of me must save me.

So what can save us? Here's the beauty of the gospel. Here's how the book of Ephesians, Romans, the gospel corrects our excuses. *It says, you are all that you feared and worse.* You are much more self-centered than you even realized. Nobody but Christians can bear up under this. Why, because a Christian is redeemed.

"The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope. -Tim Keller *Meaning of Marriage*"

Do you see this? Simultaneously there is something else that is true. "You are more loved and accepted than you ever dared hoped"

Look at the glory of Romans chapter 1

Romans 8:1-4, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

It's the fact that that you are loved that enables you to consider what your condition truly was.

In the same way that the gospel challenges, dares you to stare wide-eyed into the terror of your heart, to turn the lights on in the evil closets of your heart, it dares you to stare at the love of Christ. *It's too wonderful. It's so incredible it's hard to believe.* We are scared at even considering it for fear that it might not be true!

You don't dare let yourself consider what it would be like to inherit 15 million dollars. You don't seriously entertain the idea of an exotic vacation to some tropical paradise. *It would be such a welcome escape in so many ways all of which you think would be amazing.* And it's too emotionally challenging to fantasize about that and then snap back to the

cage you live in.

And in a similar way, we dare not even hope that it really could be that all our sin is nailed to the cross, that all of our evil is consumed, that all of our failings when you strip away all the excuses just expose us as truly valueless individuals. *There is nothing worth redeeming, are in fact, actually redeemed.* You now actually have infinite value. That the righteousness of Christ is given to you.

Could it really be that I am not only redeemed but held by the power of Christ, and that nothing could separate me from the love of Christ.

But when that truth sinks in, when that new identity is owned, it allows you, perhaps for the first time, to change. Let's walk that through. How does that really work?

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Now all of this was to get us to grumpy attitudes. I love trying to apply high and loft theology to sharing cookies and forgiveness and dealing with grumpy attitudes.

Romans 8:1-4, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

Let me show you an example of how this worked itself out in my life this week. So Lisa and I had a great Monday. We came home and were playful toward one another, we communicated well. We had a great evening.

Tuesday, I left before everyone got up so we really had no communication. There were some attitudes flying around the house that made things frustrating. And so I came home hoping for another happy evening with my family. But that's not what greeted me when I got home.

Lisa was unhappy. She was frustrated. And I didn't respond well.

- I very helpfully saw it as an opportunity to point out the grumpiness (I thought perhaps she was unaware of her grumpiness and that by simply pointing it out she might be corrected)
- And if that wasn't enough, I did it in front of the kids making her feel disrespected

And so she graciously said, "Jason your not being helpful or loving." Now I had a thousand reasons why that did not apply. 10,000 excuses come boiling to the surface of my tongue the second I hear that.

- Unloving? Whose unloving? implying that loving behavior is only required when I receive love
- And even if I was unloving did I not have a hard day?
Seriously, you haven't even asked one question about what

my day was like. I bet if you tried to live one day in my shoes you'd be ten times grumpier than I am.

Now here's the reality. She had not responded well to the trials that God allowed for her to experience that day. *And I had not responded well to my unmet expectations regarding what my home would be like when I walked in the door.* I wanted happiness and a place of refuge and instead I found relational work to do.

And when our two worlds collided, both of us were tempted to make excuses for our behavior and simultaneously demand that the other person own up to their faults without excuses.

Now Ephesians has something to say about that very moment. *Romans 7 and 8 have something to say about that very moment.* God wants to take the gospel and insert it smack dab right there in the center of that very common, very normal situation. First of all the gospel wants to get rid of the excuses.

If my identity is wrapped up in my performance, in my own perception of what I need to do in order to be considered moral, well then, I must continue to defend myself and make excuses. I must make excuses. The truth is too unbearable.

But what if we both could rejoice in Romans 8:1, "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!"

What this allows a person to do is say, "You know what, I am unloving. I was tired which is true. I wasn't dependent on Jesus like I needed to be which is true. I have no need to defend myself. Why? Because there is no condemnation for my sin. *Let's look to the cross for forgiveness and toward empowering grace for the solution.* There's no need to dwell on it in the same sense that there's no point in dwelling on closed court cases from the 1900's. It's over and done. There is no condemnation for my failure.

Why should a free man, a man who has served his time, fear a patrol car passing by? That patrol car is there to defend him. He is free from the law.

In Christ we are free from the law. "In order that the requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

So what that allows us to do is look at one another and simultaneously laugh and mourn. *We laugh in joy that we are not under condemnation. Are you serious? No condemnation. There is an exhilaration in considering the absurdity of it all* But we also mourn and take seriously the fact that we hurt one another because we feel the inconsistency.

But the gospel also allowed both of us to receive the confession. In so many marriages that I see, there is so much fear in confessing who we really are, certainly because

of pride and the inability to bear the truth, but ALSO because they are scared what the other person will do with that information. You confessed you are prideful. Ha, let me hold that over your head for the rest of your life.

Ah, you confessed your pride again. You did it in 2004, 2008 and now again in 2015. Look at little you have changed you loser. Look at what I have to put up with. You admit it yourself.

No the gospel says, "I am redeemed. There is no condemnation for me. But there is also no condemnation for you. We are both forgiven. "

And the end of the story is that Lisa and I were able to work through two conflicts in the week treating one another as forgiven people and knowing that we ourselves are forgiven people. The flesh did it's thing. But the cross freed us from excuse making because it first freed us from the condemnation.

How cool is it to look into the sin of your spouse and smile. They are forgiven just like I am forgiven. *How awesome is that. I want your good just like Christ wants my good.* My love for you is not contingent on your performance, it's based on the righteousness of Jesus Christ given to both of us.

Communion Transition.

"The cross solved our problem by revealing our real problem, our universal pattern of scapegoating and sacrificing others. The cross exposes forever the scene of our crime. We are responsible for all the evil we have ever committed."

But because we know it doesn't end there, because we also know that we are loved beyond description it allows you to absorb it all. It allows you to hear it in full strength.

"I am unloving. I am selfish. I am everything you said and more." That is all true. We are able to say that because our identity is in Christ. Our righteousness is a righteousness that is not our own. We don't feel a need to create an identity based on performance; our identity is in Christ. And so the excuses don't feel necessary.

- Why do I always need to say, "That's not fair. Do I really want fair? That's silly. I want unfair. I want Christ's righteousness."
- Why do I feel the need to point out who started it? Do I want that standard used against me. God, between you and me, whoever started it is the one who gets condemned.

- Why I am just lying by saying, "I didn't mean it." I did mean it. I really did mean it; that's why I said it. I'm totally just trying to change history based on your reaction, based on the fact that you don't like what I really did mean.
- Why did I say, "I didn't know." I did know. I absolutely knew. That's why I said with such passion that I didn't know; that's why I added those extra details and changed that one adjective so that it would make it sound extra convincing that I didn't know. But those edits are just witnesses to my knowing all along.
- Why did I say, "I was going to do it later. I had zero intension of ever doing it; I certainly was not going to do it now and my resolution to never do it only increases with time, not decreases. I most certainly had no intension of ever doing it "later."

No the reality is I did all those things. Wretched man that I am. And we hide beneath the shadow of the cross. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!

Enough with excuses. All these excuses are just attempts to get others to believe that there is the great amoral reason, outside of me and my control that is preventing me from doing right. In my flesh, I never do what is right. We've said it. Now let's run to the Spirit!

Let's run to the grace that is made possible by Jesus Christ!

