

Essential Truths III: Working With God

13

A Lifestyle Gospel

In the Biblical Studies Course so far, we have built a step-by-step understanding of the nature of the Gospel. In **Module 101** – “A Passion for God’s Word” – we established the authority of the Bible over our personal lives and paved a way for understanding what it means to study God’s Word. In **Module 102** – “The Power of the Gospel” – we explored just some of the many facets of the Gospel itself, concluding that God has forged a Gospel that comprehensively embraces our entire lives.

In **Module 103** – “How to Teach God’s Word” – we laid the groundwork for understanding one of the most important aspects of our Christian walk: how we are to take the Word of God that has revolutionized our own life and communicate it to others.

In **Modules 104-106** – “Essential Truths I, II and III” – we have been laying out clearly the most essential truths of the Word of God, not just as an intellectual exercise, but in terms of how these truths shape our lives.

It is this shaping of our lives by the Word of God that is the Word’s ultimate objective. Our study of God’s Word must never be divorced from the purpose of God in our lives – to conform us to the likeness of Christ. It is in our *lifestyle* that the reality of God’s Word is imprinted onto our lives. It is only when the *words* of the Bible are translated into the *lifestyle* of the Bible that it can be said that we are a *people* of the Bible.

- The Birthright
- Taking the Baton
- The Great Commission
- The Body of Christ
- The Ministry of Every Believer
- Joining the Work of God
- The Tree of Life
- The Ministry of Reconciliation
- Filled with the Spirit
- Ministry to the Body
- Sent into the Harvest
- Speaking the Word of God
- ▶ **A Lifestyle Gospel** ◀
- Salt of the Earth
- Enforcing the Victory
- Signs and Wonders
- A New Kind of Leadership
- Establishing a Daily Church
- Making Disciples
- The New Wine
- The Goal of Ministry

Beyond Mere Words

In **1 Thessalonians 1:5**, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his approach to preaching the Gospel. He writes:

“...because our gospel came to you *not simply with words*, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.”

Paul is adamant that the preaching of the Gospel is beyond mere words. It is, in fact, about four things:

- The *power* of the Word – “with power”
- The *anointing* of the Word – “with the Holy Spirit”
- The *passion* of the Word – “with deep conviction”
- The *lifestyle* of the Word – “how we lived among you”

The Gospel is not just about words. It is not just about activities. It is about lifestyle! Take, as an example, these three primary aspects of Christian life – prayer, witness and church fellowship.

- Prayer is not an activity; it is a lifestyle (**1 Thessalonians 5:17**)
- Witness is not an activity; it is a lifestyle (**1 Thessalonians 1:5**)
- Church is not an activity; it is a lifestyle (**Acts 2:46-47**)

When our lives match our words, the power of the Gospel is displayed to everyone. As Joe Aldrich puts it:

“Christians are to be good news before they share the good news. The words of the gospel are to be incarnated before they are verbalized.”¹

This is exactly what the process of being conformed to the image of Christ is all about. Just as Christ was the Word incarnated,* so the Holy Spirit is incarnating his Word in you.

Two Approaches to the Word of God

There are two approaches a Christian can take to the Word of God, and these two approaches ultimately define the lifestyles that we will lead. These two approaches may be called:

- Outward observance
- Inward integration

Outward observance

For many, the Christian life is little more than an outer layer that veneers their lives. The Word of God does not penetrate to the core of their being. It can be

* Incarnation refers to the one-time taking on of a physical body by the eternal Son of God, but it is also used to refer to a quality that is lived out in practical, everyday life. Thus we can speak of “love incarnate” or, in this case, the Word of God incarnate.

safely relegated to a Sunday activity, barely scratching the surface. This is a name-sake Christianity, which differs little from the namesake Judaism practiced by the Pharisees of the first century.

Inward integration

God's plan is for his Word to be integrated inwardly, not just observed outwardly. Do you remember one of the your very first memory verses in the Biblical Studies Course? Speaking of God, **Psalm 51:6** exclaims:

“Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.”

The process of change is not an outward-inward one, but an inward-outward one. Like Jesus' parable of the woman kneading yeast into the dough (**Matthew 13:33**), the truth of God's Word is kneaded into your life “until it work[s] all through the dough.”

The Doing of the Word

Hopefully you will have noticed the emphasis that the Biblical Studies Course has placed upon the *doing* of God's Word, over and above the *hearing* of God's Word. Let's take a moment to retrace our steps through a familiar, but vitally important scripture.

Read James 1:21-25

Do you notice how James links the requirement to “humbly accept the word planted in you” with the command to “get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent”? This is how God views the action of his Word. The Word of God has been crafted by God to bring about a dual action – a *de-conforming* to the pattern of this world (**Romans 12:2**) and a *re-conforming* to the pattern of God's Son (**Romans 8:29**) (note again the primary verse that describes this – **2 Peter 1:4**). When you accept the Word of God, planted in your heart, the effect will be to spur you to change your lifestyle. This is the “fruit” of the “seed” of God's Word – once planted and nurtured, it brings forth the fruit of a transformed life.

Let's take a closer look at **James 1:22-25** and note the emphasis that James puts upon the *doing* of the Word.

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. *Do* what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but *does not do* what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and *continues to do this*, not forgetting what he has heard, *but doing it* – he will be blessed in what he does.”

The religious people of Jesus' day had fallen into the trap of believing that just hearing the Word of God qualified them as a person who pleased God. This is why Paul challenged his readers in **Romans 2:13**:

“For it is not those who *hear* the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.”

Although Paul would later argue persuasively that it was in fact *impossible* to be declared righteous through the self-focused observance of the law (**Romans 3:19-20,28; 7:14; 8:3,7**), he had to correct, here at the beginning of his letter to the Romans, the all-too-common misconception that the hearing of the Word, without actually doing it, somehow wins points with God (see also **Romans 2:17-23**).

Let’s take a look at a passage lifted from the teaching of Jesus on this matter.

Read Matthew 7:16-27

In these closing remarks of what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it very clear the emphasis God places on the lifestyle produced by obedience to his Word.

- **Verses 16-20** – The fruit of an obedient lifestyle will show the condition of a person’s heart to God.
- **Verses 21-23** – The Lord’s definition of obedience is not in our use of words – “Lord, Lord!” – but in the practical doing of the will of God.
- **Verses 24-27** – The person who has a strong foundation for life is the one who “hears these words of mine and *puts them into practice*.” This is contrasted with the person who hears and *does not* put them into practice.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1

Defining the Lifestyle

So what is this lifestyle like? What picture does the Bible portray of this “lifestyle of the Word”?

By now, the answer should be obvious. Jesus is that lifestyle incarnate, the object of the conforming action of the Holy Spirit in our lives. By observing Jesus, we see the lifestyle of the Word exemplified.

Read 1 John 1:1-2

The essence of the lifestyle of the Word is that it is not simply heard. It is also seen and touched.

Let’s look at a description of Jesus, found in **John 1:14**. We are already familiar with John’s description of Jesus as “the Word [become] flesh,” but notice the end of this verse:

“...We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, *full of grace and truth*.”

The Word of God is described as “the word of grace” (**Acts 2:32**) and “the word of truth” (**Ephesians 4:15; Colossians 1:5**). And these two words also describe the lifestyle of the Word. Just as Jesus was “full of grace and truth,” so you have

been called to be “full of grace and truth.”

Full of grace

This not only describes the all-sufficiency of God’s grace flowing *into* your life, but also describes that grace flowing *out* from you to the lives of others. Like so much else in the Christian life, grace is an overflow experience. Not only do you *receive* grace from God; you also *extend* grace to others.

Read Colossians 4:6

Full of truth

This describes the integrity and authenticity of a life that is yoked with the Lord Jesus Christ. If you obey the truth of God’s Word, your life will reflect that truth in both word and deed.

Read Ephesians 4:15

God’s goal is that his Word become flesh in you. This means his Word is translated into the reality of your life, your words, your actions.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:3

The Pattern of Life

Read Philippians 3:17

The Bible provides us with a pattern of living. In **Ephesians 4:20-24**, Paul tells us that we have been “taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.” And what was it, according to Paul, that you were taught?

- Put off your old self
- Be made new in the attitude of your mind
- Put on your new self

The passage that follows – **Ephesians 4:25-5:18** – provides us with a broad charter for a lifestyle of the Word:

- **4:25** – Put off falsehood and speak truthfully
- **4:26** – Do not let the sun go down on your anger
- **4:27** – Do not steal, but be diligent in work
- **4:29** – Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but rather what is helpful for building others up
- **4:30** – Do not grieve the Holy Spirit
- **4:31** – Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice
- **4:32** – Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other

- **5:1** – Be an imitator of God and live a life of love
- **5:3** – Put off sexual immorality, impurity and greed
- **5:4** – Put away obscenity, foolish talk, coarse joking
- **5:4** – Be thankful
- **5:7** – Do not be partners with the disobedient
- **5:9** – Live as children of the light
- **5:10** – Find out what pleases the Lord
- **5:11** – Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them
- **5:15** – Be careful how you live, not as unwise but as wise
- **5:16** – Make the most of every opportunity
- **5:17** – Understand what the Lord’s will is
- **5:18** – Do not get drunk with wine
- **5:18** – Be filled with the Spirit

If you take another look over this list, you will see that it consists of things that you “put off” and things that you “put on,” corresponding to Paul’s instruction in **Ephesians 4:22-24**.

- **Ephesians 4:22** – **Put off your old self** – falsehood, anger, stealing, unwholesome talk, grieving the Holy Spirit, bitterness, rage and anger, brawling, slander, every form of malice, sexual immorality, impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish talk, coarse joking, partnering in disobedience, drunkenness – all the things that are “being corrupted by [the old self’s] deceitful desires.”
- **Ephesians 4:24** – **Put on your new self** – truthfulness, diligence, encouragement and building others up, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, love, thankfulness, living as children of the light, pleasing God, having nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, being careful how you live, being wise, making the most of every opportunity, knowing the will of God, being filled with the Spirit – all the things that are “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Read Philippians 4:9

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1

But what does this have to do with ministry, you may ask. In short, everything.

The Aroma of Christ

Read 2 Corinthians 2:15

The bottom line of all ministry is that what you have is what you give. The pattern of life that is stamped upon you through the action of God's Word is the credibility that backs all ministry. When your life is conforming to the lifestyle of God's Word, you give off the aroma of Christ himself. This will have two different reactions on two different kinds of people:

The Fragrance of Life

Read again Ephesians 5:1-2

The Old Testament talks about sacrifices that were a pleasing aroma to God (**Numbers 28:2,6**). When we offer our lives as a living sacrifice (**Romans 12:2**), our lives become a pleasing aroma to God and to others.

The Stench of Death

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18,21-29

But not all find the message of the Cross fragrant. Those who oppose the Gospel consider it to be the stench of death – a displeasing smell. In fact, the Bible talks about “the offense of the cross” (**Galatians 5:11**). This will often attract a sharp reaction from unbelievers (**2 Timothy 3:12-13; John 15:18-19; 1 John 3:13**).

As we walk with the Lord, the Holy Spirit works to conform us to the likeness of Christ (**2 Corinthians 3:18; Titus 2:11-12; 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12**). Jesus is the Gospel become flesh. In the same way, God doesn't just want you just to tell people *about* the Gospel. He wants us to be the Gospel to them, just like Jesus was.

The world is looking for the authentic Christian. But guess what! So is the Lord! As you yield to the Gospel of God's grace, God will conform you to the authentic likeness of Christ. The Gospel you have been called to embrace and to preach is a lifestyle Gospel – the lifestyle of Christ himself.

¹ Joseph Aldrich, *Life-Style Evangelism*, (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1981), p.20

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Bible are from the New International Version, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.