

*the*  
**GOSPEL-CENTERED**  
*life*

STUDY GUIDE WITH LEADER'S NOTES | SERGE

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ROBERT H. THUNE + WILL WALKER

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“I have not seen a better resource for training people in the implications of the gospel. It communicates both to the new Christian and to the seasoned pastor, much like the gospel itself.”

**Dr. Darrin Patrick**, Founder of The Journey, St. Louis, MO; author of *Church Planter: The Man, The Message, The Mission*

“The phrase ‘gospel-centered’ has become a popular buzzword in Christianity. But just because you talk about the gospel doesn’t mean you’re being transformed by it. I’m familiar with both Serge and the authors of *The Gospel-Centered Life*, and I know they are profoundly aware, first and foremost, of their own need for gospel renewal. That’s why I’m so excited to recommend this material to pastors, leaders, and Christians everywhere who long to see gospel transformation in themselves and in their churches.”

**Daniel Montgomery**, Lead Pastor, Sojourn Church,  
Louisville, Kentucky

“I’ve used *The Gospel-Centered Life* in two different church contexts—one in an established church in a Sunday school setting, the other in a smaller, re-start church context in our small groups. The curriculum has a rare combination of being gloriously simple for leaders to use and also having thoughtful and probing content. GCL starts the right conversations, pressing people to push past surface behaviors to the internal world that Jesus so valued. In a culture (and a church) full of people who are skimming through life, GCL presses you to pay attention to the conversations in your head and the motives in your hearts, and to bring all of it under the lordship of Christ and into contact with the power of the gospel. It is easy to use and strikes the rare blend of being applicable and accessible to both the seasoned believer as well as the person considering faith for the first time. We found doing it in all our small groups created a church-wide conversation that had real impact in terms of people’s discipleship and understanding of how great the gospel truly is.”

**Alex Kirk**, Lead Pastor, Chatham Community Church,  
Chapel Hill, NC

“As we seek to make disciples of Jesus, I am continually looking for resources which rightly emphasize true heart-change over mere behavioral-modification. *The Gospel-Centered Life* is one of the most effective tools we are using in that regard.”

**Brian McCurry**, Small Groups Pastor, Fellowship Memphis,  
Memphis, TN

“We have used *The Gospel-Centered Life* on our Summer Projects, in our discipleship groups on campus, in our small groups at church, and personally among our staff. It has proven to be a very effective way to both ground new believers in an understanding of the richness of the gospel as well as highlight its implications in their lives. In short, it’s a home run.”

**Mike Jackson**, Regional Director, Campus Outreach,  
Central Illinois

“Working with young people brings many unique challenges and adventures that can only be truly impacted by the gospel of Christ. *The Gospel-Centered Life* has helped draw these issues out of our relationships in surprisingly practical ways by going deep quickly enough to grip our affections, yet broad enough to connect with all types of students.”

**Kenny Hayes**, Campus Outreach Director, Bradley University,  
Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois

# THE GOSPEL- CENTERED LIFE

Robert H. Thune and Will Walker

*Study Guide with Leader's Notes*



[www.newgrowthpress.com](http://www.newgrowthpress.com)

***The Gospel-Centered Life: Study Guide with Leader's Notes***

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# INTRODUCTION

## ABOUT SERGE

Serge never set out to write and publish curriculum. We are an international mission-sending organization that has always believed the power and motive for mission is the gospel of grace at work in the life of a believer. However, along the way, we've also discovered that it's a lot harder to do cross-cultural, team-oriented ministry than we thought. Eventually, we started writing material to keep the gospel front and center in our own lives and relationships. Before long we had pastors and ministry leaders requesting gospel-centered materials for use in their churches and ministries.

Over the years, it's been our privilege to partner with friends who share our passion for the way the gospel transforms both believers and unbelievers alike. This study is the result of one such partnership. Bob Thune and Will Walker wrote *The Gospel-Centered Life* to help their church grow in the gospel. We're partnering with them to publish it because we think it may do the same for you.

Some of the content has been adapted from earlier Serge materials. If you are familiar with *Sonship*, *Gospel Identity*, *Gospel Growth*, and *Gospel Love*, you may recognize a few key themes and concepts. If you haven't heard them presented before, Bob and Will have done a great job of articulating the gospel in simple, deep, and transformative ways here. One of the strengths of this curriculum is the way that their experience of church-planting influenced the development of *The Gospel-Centered Life*, which is just one of the reasons that we're so pleased to make it available.

As a cross-denominational, reformed, sending agency with over 200 missionaries in over 25 teams on 5 continents, Serge is always looking for people who are ready to take the next step in a missional lifestyle.



If you'd like to learn more about our teaching, healing, and equipping ministries around the world and what might be right for you, please visit us at <http://www.serge.org/mission>. If you'd like to learn more about our gospel mentoring programs and the discipleship training that we offer here in the United States, you can find those details at <http://www.serge.org/mentoring>.

## ABOUT THIS STUDY

*The Gospel-Centered Life* is a 9-lesson small group study intended to help you understand how the gospel shapes every aspect of life. Developed by experienced church-planting pastors, the material is designed to promote transformational conversations among groups of mature Christians, new Christians, and non-Christians. Each lesson is self-contained, featuring clear teaching from Scripture, and requires no extra work outside of the group setting.

### THROUGH THE COURSE WE HOPE YOU WILL:

- » Deepen your grasp of the gospel as you see your need for continual renewal.
- » Grow as you experience transformation from the inside out.
- » Be challenged to develop authentic relationships as the gospel moves you to love and serve others.

## HOW THIS STUDY IS ORGANIZED

*The Gospel-Centered Life* contains nine lessons that are grouped around three themes:

### *What is the gospel?*

#### LESSON 1: THE GOSPEL GRID

If the gospel is constantly “bearing fruit and growing” (Col. 1:6), then everything has to do with the gospel—God, humanity, salvation, wor-

ship, relationships, shopping, recreation, work, personality...everything! The objective in this lesson is to establish a framework for talking about the gospel. This framework will get worked out in greater detail over the next two sessions.

## **LESSON 2: PRETENDING & PERFORMING**

Each of us tends to “shrink the cross,” which is to say that something is lacking in our understanding, appreciation, or application of Jesus’ sacrifice for our sin. This manifests itself in two main ways: pretending and performing. Pretending minimizes sin by making ourselves out to be something we are not. Performing minimizes God’s holiness by reducing his standard to something we can meet, thereby meriting his favor. Both are rooted in an inadequate view of God’s holiness and our identity.

## **LESSON 3: BELIEVING THE GOSPEL**

We have been focusing on the ways we minimize the gospel—the negative. This lesson turns our attention to the positive: what remedies has God given in the gospel to keep us from shrinking the cross and depending on our own effort?

*What does the gospel do in us?*

## **LESSON 4: LAW & GOSPEL**

Continue to think about how the gospel interacts with our lives, but now we turn to consider the gospel’s relationship to the law. What is the law? Does God expect me to obey it? What is the purpose of the law? How does the law help me to believe the gospel? How does the gospel help me to obey the law?

## **LESSON 5: REPENTANCE**

This lesson deals with repentance. In our culture, this usually sounds like a bad thing, but repentance is the norm for gospel-centered living. Becoming more aware of God’s holiness and our sinfulness leads us to repent and believe the gospel of Jesus. Biblical repentance frees us from our own devices and makes a way for the power of the gospel to bear fruit in our lives.

### **LESSON 6: HEART IDOLATRY**

The Christian walk consists of two repeated steps: repentance and faith. Turning our attention to the topic of faith, we focus on how we grow through believing the gospel. This week's goal is to take "believing the gospel" out of the abstract and make it concrete.

*How does the gospel work through us?*

### **LESSON 7: MISSION**

The gospel is simultaneously at work in us and through us. Inwardly, our desires and motives are being changed as we repent and believe the gospel. As we experience Christ's love in this way, we are compelled to engage those around us with the same kind of redemptive love. God's grace brings renewal everywhere, in us and through us.

### **LESSON 8: FORGIVENESS**

The gospel that works in us always works through us. It shows its power in our relationships and actions. One key way this happens is when we forgive others biblically.

### **LESSON 9: CONFLICT**

Conflict is something we all experience (regularly), but often handle in very fleshly ways. The gospel gives us a pattern and a means to healthy conflict resolution.

## HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

*The Gospel-Centered Life* is designed for small group study, although it is possible to work through the study independently or in a larger group. The tone of the material assumes a small-group format, because this is the setting we've found to be the most effective.

*Each of these lessons follows a similar format including these elements...*

### **BIBLE CONVERSATION**

We want to start by talking about the Bible together. As the name suggests, this section is designed to stimulate your thinking and prepare you and your group for the ideas that will be presented in each lesson.

### **ARTICLE**

The written articles are the primary source of the teaching content for each lesson. They are short, clear teachings of the concepts being presented in the lesson. Each week, your group will take a few minutes and read the article out loud together.

### **DISCUSSION**

This section is where we communally process the concepts being taught in the article. Often the discussion will work in conjunction with the next section (exercise) to help flesh out the teaching and apply it to our lives in concrete ways.

### **EXERCISE**

Each of the exercises in this study is designed to help you make practical applications of the concepts being taught, or help you understand the content at a deeper heart level. Be sure to allow enough time for your group to adequately work through and discuss the exercises as directed.

### **WRAP-UP**

The wrap-up gives the leader the chance to answer any last minute questions, reinforce ideas, and most importantly spend a few minutes praying as a group.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

### **EXPECT TO BE CHALLENGED...**

most of us have reduced the gospel to something much less than it is. As you work through each lesson, expect your thinking about the gospel to be challenged and expanded.

### **EXPECT THE HOLY SPIRIT...**

to be the one ultimately responsible for the growth of your group, and for the change in each person's life—including your own. Relax and trust him.

### **EXPECT YOUR GROUP'S AGENDA TO INCLUDE...**

an open, give-and-take discussion of the article, the questions, and the exercises. Also expect times of prayer at each meeting.

### **EXPECT STRUGGLE...**

and don't be surprised to find that your group is a mixture of enthusiasm, hope, and honesty, along with indifference, anxiety, skepticism, guilt, and covering up. We are all people who really need Jesus every day. So expect your group to be made up of people who wrestle with sin and have problems—people just like yourself!

### **EXPECT A GROUP LEADER...**

who desires to serve you, but who also needs Jesus as much as you do. No leader should be put on a pedestal, so expect that your group leader will have the freedom to share openly about his or her own weaknesses, struggles, and sins.

# GOSPEL OVERVIEW

The study you are about to begin aims to help you live a “gospel-centered” life. The obvious question is, What exactly is “the gospel”? That’s a question we should clear up before going any further. Though many people are familiar with the word *gospel*, we’re often fuzzy about its content.

Many popular “gospel presentations” distill the gospel message down to three or four core principles. These simple summaries can be very helpful. But a richer way to understand the gospel is as a *story*—the true Story that speaks to our purest aspirations and deepest longings. This Great Story has four chapters.

## **CREATION: THE WORLD WE WERE MADE FOR**

The Story begins, not with us, but with God. Deep down, we have a sense that this is true. We sense that we are important—that there is something dignified, majestic, and eternal about humanity. But we also know that we are not ultimate. Something (or Someone) greater than us exists.

The Bible tells us that this Someone is the one infinite, eternal, and unchanging God who created all things out of nothing (Genesis 1:1–31). This one God exists in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). Because God is Triune in his being, he wasn’t motivated to create the world because he *needed* something—be it relationship, worship, or glory. Rather, he created out of the overflow of his perfection—his own love, goodness, and glory. God made human beings in his image (Genesis 1:27), which is what gives us our dignity and value. He also made us *human*, which means we are created beings, dependent on our Creator. We were made to worship, enjoy, love, and serve him, not ourselves.

In God’s original creation, everything was good. The world existed in perfect peace, stability, harmony, and wholeness.

## FALL: THE CORRUPTION OF EVERYTHING

God created us to worship, enjoy, love, and serve him. But rather than live under God's authority, humanity turned away from God in sinful rebellion (Genesis 3:1–7; Isaiah 53:6). Our defection plunged the whole world into the darkness and chaos of sin. Though vestiges of good remain, the wholeness and harmony of God's original creation is shattered.

As a result, all human beings are sinners by nature and by choice (Ephesians 2:1–3). We often excuse our sin by claiming that we're "not that bad"—after all, we can always find someone worse than we are! But this evasion only reveals our shallow and superficial view of sin. Sin is not primarily an *action*; it's a *disposition*. It's our soul's aversion to God. Sin is manifested in our pride, our selfishness, our independence, and our lack of love for God and others. Sometimes sin is very obvious and external; other times it's hidden and internal. But "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Sin brings two drastic consequences into our lives. First, *sin enslaves us* (Romans 6:17–18). When we turn *from* God, we turn *to* other things to find our life, our identity, our meaning, and our happiness. These things become substitute gods—what the Bible calls idols—and they soon enslave us, demanding our time, our energy, our loyalty, our money—everything we are and have. They begin to rule over our lives and hearts. This is why the Bible describes sin as something that "masters" us (Romans 6:14 NIV). Sin causes us to "serve created things rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25 NIV).

Second, *sin brings condemnation*. We're not just enslaved by our sin; we're *guilty* because of it. We stand condemned before the Judge of heaven and earth. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). We are under a death sentence for our cosmic treason against the holiness and justice of God. His righteous anger toward sin stands over us (Nahum 1:2; John 3:36).

## REDEMPTION: JESUS COMES TO SAVE US

Every good story has a hero. And the hero of the Gospel Story is Jesus. Humanity needs a Savior, a Redeemer, a Deliverer to free us from the

bondage and condemnation of sin and to restore the world to its original good. This Rescuer must be *truly human* in order to pay the debt we owe to God. But he can't be *merely human* because he must conquer sin. We need a Substitute—one who can live the life of obedience we've failed to live, and who can stand in our place to bear the punishment we deserve for our disobedience and sin.

This is why God sent Jesus into the world to be our substitute (1 John 4:14). The Bible teaches that Jesus was fully God—the second person of the Trinity—and also fully human. He was born to a human mother, lived a real flesh-and-blood existence, and died a brutal death on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem. Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience to God (Hebrews 4:15), making him the only person in history who did not deserve judgment. But on the cross, he took our place, dying for our sin. He received the condemnation and death we deserve so that, when we put our trust in him, we can receive the blessing and life he deserves (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Not only did Jesus die in our place, he rose from death, displaying his victory over sin, death, and hell. His resurrection is a decisive event in history; the Bible calls it the “first fruits”—the initial evidence—of the cosmic renewal God is bringing (1 Corinthians 15:20–28). One of the greatest promises in the Bible is Revelation 21:5: “Behold, I am making all things new.” All that was lost, broken, and corrupted in the fall will ultimately be put right. Redemption doesn't simply mean the salvation of individual souls; it means the restoring of the whole creation back to its original good.

### **A NEW PEOPLE: THE STORY CONTINUES**

So how do we become a part of the story? How do we experience God's salvation personally and become agents of his redemption in the world? By faith or trust (Ephesians 2:8–9). What does that mean? We trust a taxi driver when we count on him to get us to our destination. We trust a doctor when we agree with her diagnosis and entrust ourselves to her care. And we trust in Jesus Christ when we admit our sin, receive his gracious forgiveness, and rest entirely in Jesus for our acceptance



before God. Faith is like getting in the taxi. It's like going under the surgeon's knife. It's a restful, whole-hearted commitment of the self to Jesus (Psalm 31:14–15). This is what it means to believe the gospel.

When we trust in Jesus, we are released from sin's condemnation *and* from its bondage. We are free to say “no” to sin and “yes” to God. We are free to die to ourselves and live for Christ and his purposes. We are free to work for justice in the world. We are free to stop living for our own glory and start living for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). We are free to love God and others in the way we live, which is the particular focus of this study.

God has promised that Jesus will return to finally judge sin and make all things new. Until then, he is gathering to himself a people “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (Revelation 7:9 NIV). As part of that called-and-sent people, we have the privilege of joining him in his mission (Matthew 28:18–20) as individuals and as part of his spiritual family. By grace, we can enjoy God, live life for his glory, serve humanity, and make his gospel known to others through our words and actions.

This is the good news—the True Story—of the gospel.

# THE GOSPEL GRID

# *lesson* 1

## **BIG IDEA**

If the gospel is constantly “bearing fruit and growing” (Col. 1:6), then everything has to do with the gospel—God, humanity, salvation, worship, relationships, shopping, recreation, work, personality...everything! The objective in this lesson is to establish a framework for talking about the gospel. This framework will get worked out in greater detail over the next two sessions, so this lesson is designed to help us understand the concepts and begin exploring how they relate to actual life.

## **NOTES:**

# 1

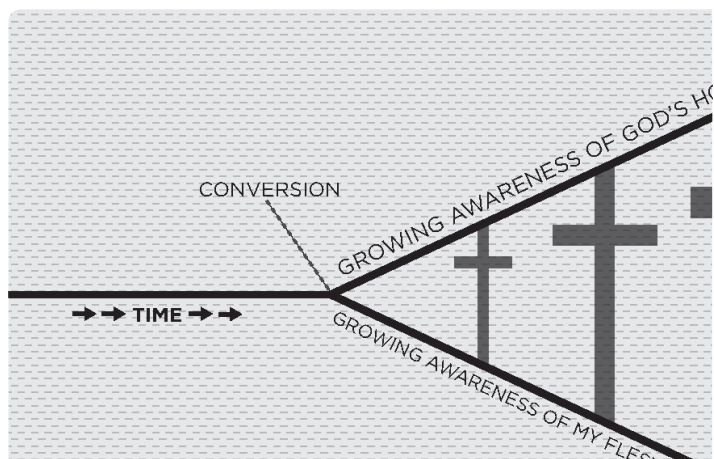
## THE GOSPEL GRID

“The gospel” is a phrase that Christians often use without fully understanding its significance. We speak the language of the gospel, but we rarely apply the gospel to every aspect of our lives. Yet this is exactly what God wants for us. The gospel is nothing less than “the power of God” (Rom. 1:16). In Colossians 1:6, the apostle Paul commends the Colossian church because the gospel has been “bearing fruit and growing... among [them] since the day [they] heard it.” The apostle Peter teaches that a lack of ongoing transformation in our lives comes from forgetting what God has done for us in the gospel (2 Peter 1:3–9). If we are to grow into maturity in Christ, we must deepen and enlarge our understanding of the gospel as God’s appointed means for personal and communal transformation.

Many Christians live with a truncated view of the gospel. We see the gospel as the “door,” the way in, the entrance point into God’s kingdom. But the gospel is so much more! It is not just the door, but the path we are to walk every day of the Christian life. It is not just the means of our salvation, but the means of our transformation. It is not simply deliverance from sin’s penalty, but release from sin’s power. The gospel is what makes us right with God (justification) and it is also what frees us to delight in God (sanctification). The gospel changes everything!

The following model has been helpful to many people in thinking about the gospel and its implications. This diagram does not say everything that could be said about the gospel, but it does serve as a helpful visual illustration of how the gospel works.

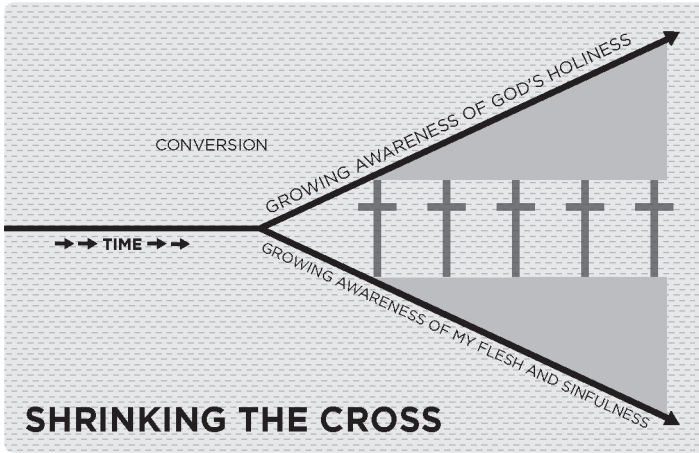
The starting point of the Christian life (conversion) comes when I first become aware of the gap between God’s holiness and my sinfulness. When I am converted, I trust and hope in Jesus, who has done what I could never do: he has bridged the gap between my sinfulness and God’s holiness. He has taken God’s holy wrath toward my sin upon himself.



At the point of conversion, however, I have a very limited view of God’s holiness and of my sin. The more I grow in my Christian life, the more I grow in my awareness of God’s holiness and of my flesh and sinfulness. As I read the Bible, experience the Holy Spirit’s conviction, and live in community with other people, the extent of God’s greatness and the extent of my sin become increasingly clear and vivid. It is not that God is becoming more holy or that I am becoming more sinful. But my *awareness* of both is growing. I am increasingly seeing God as he actually is (Isa. 55:8–9) and myself as I actually am (Jer. 17:9–10).

As my understanding of my sin and of God’s holiness grows, something else also grows: my appreciation and love for Jesus. His mediation, his sacrifice, his righteousness, and his gracious work on my behalf become increasingly sweet and powerful to me. The cross looms larger and more central in my life as I rejoice in the Savior who died upon it.

Unfortunately, sanctification (growth in holiness) doesn’t work quite as neatly as we’d like. Because of the indwelling sin that remains in me, I have an ongoing tendency to minimize the gospel or “shrink the cross.” This happens when I either (a) minimize God’s perfect holiness, thinking of him as something less than his Word declares him to be, or (b) elevate my own righteousness, thinking of myself as someone better than I actually am. The cross becomes smaller and Christ’s importance in my life is diminished.



We'll talk more about the specific ways we minimize the gospel in weeks to come. To counteract our sinful tendency to shrink the gospel, we must constantly nourish our minds on biblical truth. We need to know, see, and savor the holy, righteous character of God. And we need to identify, admit, and feel the depth of our brokenness and sinfulness. We don't need to do these things because "that's what Christians are supposed to do." Rather, we make this our aim because it is the life God wants for us—a life marked by transforming joy, hope, and love.

Growing in the gospel means seeing more of God's holiness and more of my sin. And because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, we need not fear seeing God as he really is or admitting how broken we really are. Our hope is not in our own goodness, nor in the vain expectation that God will compromise his standards and "grade on a curve." Rather, we rest in Jesus as our perfect Redeemer—the One who is "our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30).

# SIX WAYS OF MINIMIZING SIN

# 1

## DEFENDING

I find it difficult to receive feedback about weaknesses or sin. When confronted, my tendency is to explain things away, talk about my successes, or justify my decisions. As a result, people are hesitant to approach me and I rarely have conversations about difficult things in my life.

## FAKING

I strive to keep up appearances and maintain a respectable image. My behavior, to some degree, is driven by what I think others think of me. I also do not like to think reflectively about my life. As a result, not many people know the real me. (I may not even know the real me.)

## HIDING

I tend to conceal as much as I can about my life, especially the “bad stuff.” This is different from faking, in that faking is about impressing. Hiding is more about shame. I don’t think people will accept or love the real me.

## EXAGGERATING

I tend to think (and talk) more highly of myself than I ought. I make things (good and bad) out to be much bigger than they are (usually to get attention). As a result, things often get more attention than they deserve and have a way of making me stressed or anxious.

## **BLAMING**

I am quick to blame others for sin or circumstances. I have a difficult time “owning” my contributions to sin or conflict. There is an element of pride that assumes it’s not my fault and/or an element of fear of rejection if it is my fault.

## **DOWNPLAYING**

I tend to give little weight to sin or circumstances in my life, as if they are “normal” or “not that bad.” As a result, things often don’t get the attention they deserve. They have a way of mounting to the point of being overwhelming.

# JUDGING OTHERS

lesson  
**1**  
EXERCISE

One way to see the value of the Cross Chart is to apply it to a specific area where people commonly struggle. Judging others is something we all do in big and small ways. As a group, brainstorm about some of the specific ways we judge people. The questions below will help you see the connection between judging others and your view of the gospel.

1. What are the specific ways we judge others?
2. Why do we judge others? What reasons do we give for doing this?
3. How do these reasons reflect a small view of God's holiness?



4. How do these reasons reflect a small view of our own sin?

5. Think of a specific person in your life that you are often judgmental toward.

a. How would a bigger view of God's holiness affect that relationship?

b. How would a bigger view of your sin affect that relationship?