

# THE GOSPEL PROJECT<sup>®</sup> FOR STUDENTS

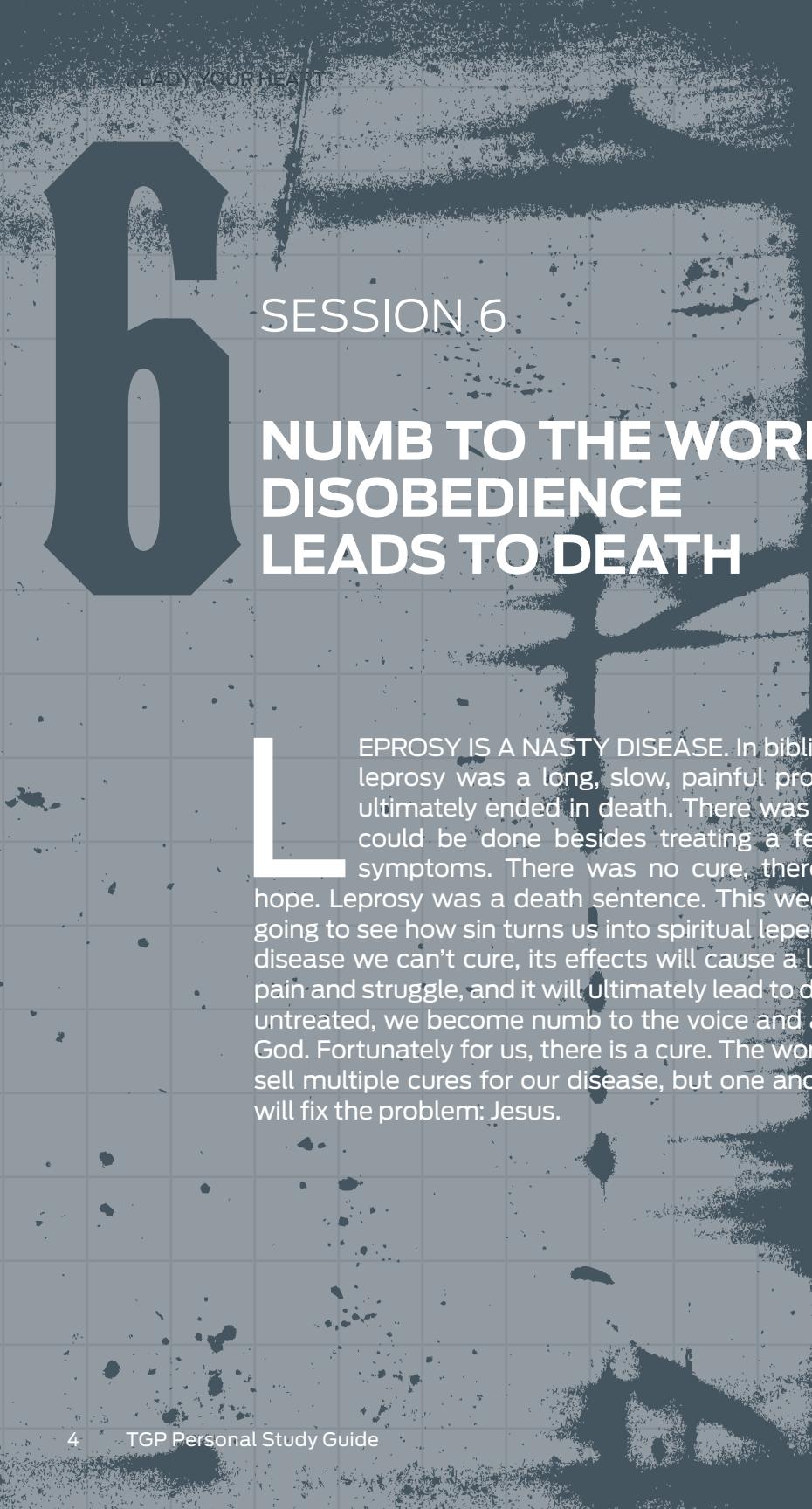


FALL 2012: Personal Study Guide

**Ed Stetzer** General Editor

**Trevin Wax** Managing Editor

LifeWay | Students



## SESSION 6

## NUMB TO THE WORD: DISOBEDIENCE LEADS TO DEATH

**L**EPROSY IS A NASTY DISEASE. In biblical times, leprosy was a long, slow, painful process that ultimately ended in death. There was little that could be done besides treating a few of the symptoms. There was no cure, there was no hope. Leprosy was a death sentence. This week we are going to see how sin turns us into spiritual lepers. Sin is a disease we can't cure, its effects will cause a lifetime of pain and struggle, and it will ultimately lead to death. Left untreated, we become numb to the voice and actions of God. Fortunately for us, there is a cure. The world tries to sell multiple cures for our disease, but one and only one will fix the problem: Jesus.



## DEATH SENTENCE

**Rom. 6:23** *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Eph. 2:1-2 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins<sup>2</sup> in which you previously walked according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler who exercises authority over the lower heavens, the spirit now working in the disobedient.*

EVERYONE LIKES FLOWERS. They're great for impressing a date or for sitting on a bookshelf... at least for a while. But over the course of a few days, even the most beautiful flowers start to wither. The reason behind that withering is simple:

Flowers in a vase are dead.

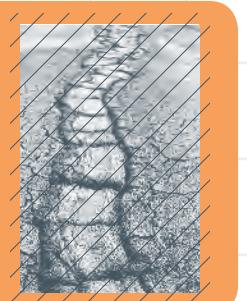
Sure, they look good for a while. They have the appearance of life. But in the end, they are cut off at the stem, and without that link to the root, they are dead. Sure, they might show signs of life for a while, but that beauty is a lie. A wonderful lie, but a lie all the same.

This is an important spiritual truth for us to recognize. Too many people are flowers, not in a garden, but sitting in a vase. They may look pretty, even enhancing the beauty of the room they're sitting in, but that beauty is a lie. Though they have signs of life, they're actually spiritually dead; apart from Christ, all of us are cut off from the source of life. And it's just a matter of time until we start to show the signs of that death rather than life.

Verses like Ephesians 2:1-2 might sound at best pessimistic, and at worst mean, but these are words of love from the Lord. God loves us enough to tell us the truth about ourselves. He's not content to have us acting like we're alive; He wants us to be alive. The only way that life happens is through a living and vital connection to the vine of God in Christ.

### PAUSE AND REFLECT

- ▷ Why is Ephesians 2:1-2 rooted in the love of God?
- ▷ What does it mean to be spiritually alive?
- ▷ Be honest with yourself, are you a flower in a garden or a vase?





## PRIDE

**Is. 64:6** All of us have become like something unclean, and all our righteous acts are like a polluted garment; all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities carry us away like the wind.

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT about what makes Christianity unique as a religion? You might think about stuff like the virgin birth, miracles, or the prophecies of the Old Testament, but think about this, too:

Christianity is the only religion that tells people how bad they are.

According to Emil Brunner, the Swiss theologian: "All other religions spare us the ultimate humiliation of being stripped naked and being declared bankrupt before God." That's pretty strong language.

And yet it points to the humiliating nature of Christianity. Other world religions don't treat humanity with such pessimism. In all other schools of thought, we have something to bring to the table. We can strive toward God and meet Him, and in a sense, be congratulated when we do.

Not Christianity.

In Christianity, we bring nothing to the table. In fact, the only thing we bring to the table with God is the sin we need to be rescued from. Perhaps that's why, if we look back into history, Christianity has been called the religion of women and slaves. In cultures of the past, neither of those two groups had many rights, so it wasn't a far stretch for them to admit their abject need of God's complete and total intervention on their behalf.

The bottom line is this: The one character flaw that has, and will continue to, keep most people from Christ is not greed. It's not lust. It's not lying or stealing or killing. It's pride. That's the only thing there is no room for at the foot of the cross.

### PAUSE AND REFLECT

- ▷ Why does pride, above all things, keep people from Jesus?
- ▷ Are you taking pride in your spiritual achievements today?



## TRANSPLANT

**Rom. 3:10-12** as it is written: There is no one righteous, not even one.

<sup>11</sup> There is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.

<sup>12</sup> All have turned away; all alike have become useless. There is no one who does what is good, not even one.

CHANGE IS A NATURAL PART of life. You change classes. You change favorite songs. You change your underwear (hopefully). But the real discouraging news from the Bible is that there is one key thing that you cannot change:

You can't change your heart.

Think about it in terms of love. How would you tell someone how to love? Tricky question, right? You can tell someone how to behave, how to study, or how to set up a DVR, but how to love? That's much harder, and maybe even impossible. Love is a deep, heartfelt emotion that is backed up by choice and action. But because it's a condition, you can't make yourself do it. This is where the gospel starts to connect with us.

Jesus told us that the greatest commandment is to love God. And the second commandment is like it: to love other people. Here's the thing, though – because we can't change our hearts, we can't actually keep these two commandments Jesus gave us.

Jesus knows this, and that's why He doesn't tell us to change. He does the changing for us.

When you believe the gospel, you get a new heart, complete with new desires and affections. Now, you actually can love God, not because you made yourself do so, but because Jesus gave you the kind of heart that can.

### PAUSE AND REFLECT

- ▷ Is it encouraging or discouraging to you that you can't change your heart?
- ▷ How does knowing that you can't change the heart change the way you talk about the gospel to others?



## What exactly does sin affect?

Leprosy is a disease that adversely affects the nervous system. It gradually numbs a person's extremities to the point at which pain is no longer felt. It also causes the body to be covered in sores and open wounds. Over time, lepers literally destroy their own bodies through their actions. Why? Because they can't feel anything. They don't sense that anything is wrong until it's too late. Sin causes us to live life as a spiritual leper. Today, we're going to learn more about our condition and what we can to cure our disease.

## Slow Death.

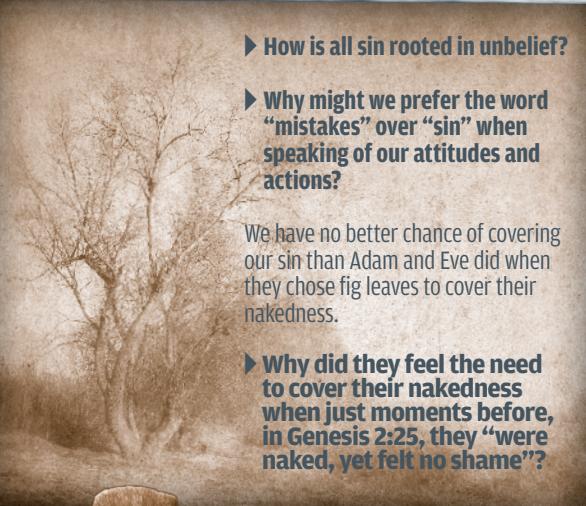
When our response to God's Word is disobedience, or sin, our relationship with Him is damaged from our side. We become numb to His working and words. This spiritual numbness causes us to suppress the truth made available to us in general revelation (through creation) and also the truth made available to us in special revelation (God's direct Word to us).

- ▶ Can you think of actions in your life that reflect a suppression of God's Word?
- ▶ What sins have we in the church made "respectable"? How does this suppress God's Word?

**The result of our disobedience is death. Our suppression of God's revelation shows that we don't value God's Word as we should. Because we don't recognize the value of God and His Word, we exchange the truth of God for a lie.**

- ▶ What are some lies that our world believes in contrast to the truth of God revealed through creation?
- ▶ What are some lies that we in the church believe in contrast to the truth of God revealed in His Word?

"The power of all temptation is the prospect that it will make me happier. No one sins out of a sense of duty...The Word helps me stop trusting in the potential of sin to make me happy. Instead the Word entices me to trust in God's promises."<sup>2</sup>  
—John Piper



▶ How is all sin rooted in unbelief?

▶ Why might we prefer the word "mistakes" over "sin" when speaking of our attitudes and actions?

We have no better chance of covering our sin than Adam and Eve did when they chose fig leaves to cover their nakedness.

▶ Why did they feel the need to cover their nakedness when just moments before, in Genesis 2:25, they "were naked, yet felt no shame"?



## Our best efforts are in vain.

Scripture doesn't teach us merely that we feel unworthy but that we are unworthy. And when we trace the signs of our brokenness and pain, we find the root cause of sin, and at the bottom of sin is unbelief.

### ▶ What is the difference between shame and guilt?

Isaiah 64 makes it clear that no one will be saved because of personal effort. Rather than just sweep our sin under the rug and ignore it, God has dealt with it by sending His Son to bear its burden.

- ▶ Is it possible to run from God while trying to earn His favor? How can our "best efforts" get in the way of true salvation?
- ▶ How does our inability to save ourselves provide a platform for God to display His glory? How does "boasting in the gospel" influence the way we think about evangelism and missions?

## Our best desires are insufficient.

In Romans 3, Paul quotes a number of Old Testament texts to drive home the point that "there is no one righteous...there is no one who seeks God." None of us really pursues God on our own. The bottom line is this: If a person is seeking God, it is because the Spirit is at work.

- ▶ What are some signs in a person's life that indicate God's work in preparing their heart for salvation?

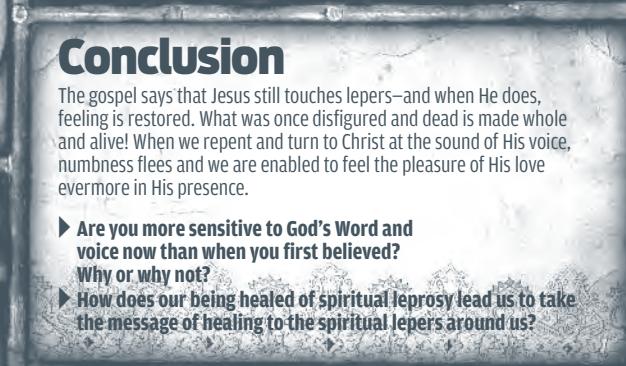
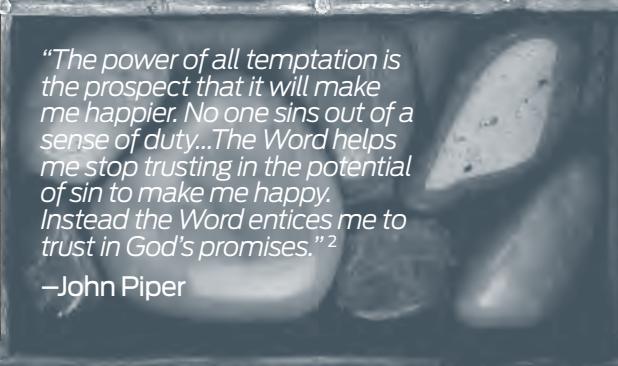
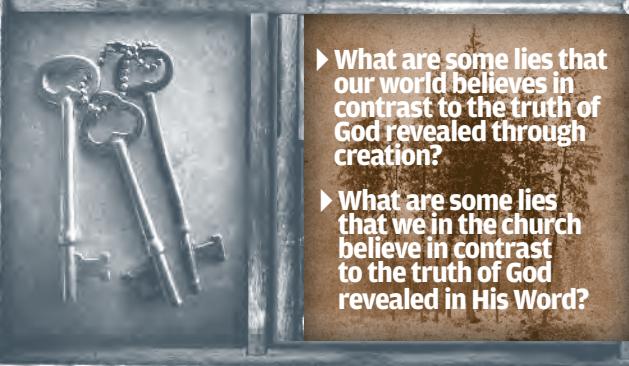
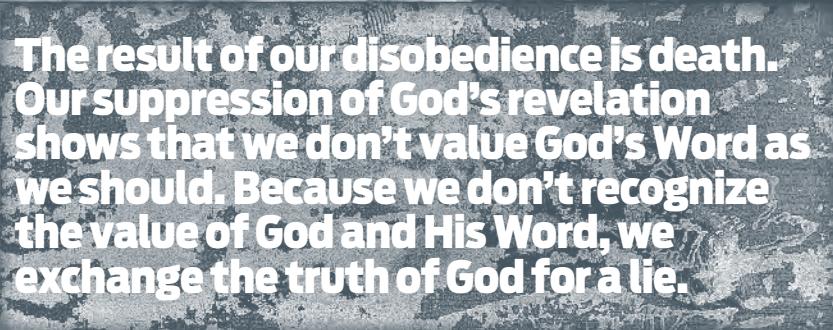
Before the fall, man and woman were created to reflect God's glory and they were capable of doing that. After the fall, sin deteriorated everything. While we are still created in God's image, we can't accurately reflect His glory because of sin's presence. Even our best intentions to change are tainted with sin.

- ▶ If sin has left a permanent mark on us, how can we enter God's holy presence?
- ▶ How often do you notice you have the desire to do something but your actions never play it out? Why?

## Conclusion

The gospel says that Jesus still touches lepers—and when He does, feeling is restored. What was once disfigured and dead is made whole and alive! When we repent and turn to Christ at the sound of His voice, numbness flees and we are enabled to feel the pleasure of His love evermore in His presence.

- ▶ Are you more sensitive to God's Word and voice now than when you first believed? Why or why not?
- ▶ How does our being healed of spiritual leprosy lead us to take the message of healing to the spiritual lepers around us?



## NUMB TO THE WORD: DISOBEDIENCE LEADS TO DEATH

### 1. SLOW DEATH

In Ephesians 2:1-2, we learn that we are spiritually dead. What does it look like for us to be dead in our trespasses and sins and to walk according to the ways of this world? The apostle Paul shines further light on this “spiritual deadness” in Romans 1–2. There he shows that we suppress the truth made available to us in general revelation (through creation) and also the truth made available to us in special revelation (God’s direct Word to us).

So first, we suppress the truth of general revelation. In His goodness, God has shown Himself to us in creation. But rather than glorify God or show gratitude, mankind has suppressed and disobeyed this God-speech and turned to idolatry. Second, we suppress the truth of special revelation, meaning we disregard God’s direct Word to us. Our suppression of God’s revelation shows that we don’t value God’s Word as we should. Because we don’t recognize the value of God and His Word, we exchange the truth of God for a lie. And this disobedience results in death. We rebel against God as our Master only to find we are now enslaved by another master—the Evil One. Our spiritual deadness is a slow death.

If God’s standard is perfect righteousness (and it is), and we are filled with all unrighteousness (and we are), then God’s Word says that we deserve death. As we read above in Romans 6:23, Paul speaks of the wages earned by the sinner as being “death”—not just physical death, though that is certainly on the horizon. The death that Paul speaks of is the same death that God warned Adam about in Genesis 2:17—“you will certainly die.” This is worse than physical death, which separates us from God’s world. Paul is speaking here also of spiritual death, which separates us eternally from God Himself. Sin earns death.

### 2. OUR BEST EFFORTS ARE IN VAIN (ISA. 64:6).

Scripture doesn’t teach us that we merely *feel* unworthy, but that we *are* unworthy. And when we trace the signs of our brokenness and pain, we find the root cause of sin, and at the bottom of sin is disbelief. Each time we knowingly (or unknowingly) transgress God’s righteous standard, we are doing so because we believe something (or someone) more than we believe God. We’re not just making mistakes. We are all filled with all unrighteousness, so that even the good things we do are tainted by unrighteous motives. No amount of cheerleading our own “worthiness” will make us truly worthy of God’s love.

In Genesis 3, we read that after Adam and Eve sinned, they immediately made coverings for themselves in the form of fig leaves. This was a vain attempt to fix themselves. Why did they feel the need to cover their nakedness when just moments before, in Genesis 2:25, they “were naked, yet felt no shame”? The implicit reasoning is that once they suppressed the truth of God (“you will certainly die”) and believed the lie of the serpent (“you will not die”), their eyes were opened and now they felt guilt and shame. The feeling of guilt is a gift from God, much like nerve endings are to the human body. Guilt helps us avoid those things that are destructive in our lives. It is an internal working of the Spirit prompting the conscience when we abandon the righteous standard of God.

Shame is the emotional or physical response to guilt. When improperly handled, guilt and shame drive us deeper into sin by causing us to hide in the bushes, much like Adam and Eve. When the first man and woman covered themselves with fig leaves, it was because they recognized that they no longer met God’s righteous standard. Fig leaves wither, thus making their efforts in vain. Had God not graciously replaced the leaves with skins, Adam and Eve would have been forced to cover themselves over and over in one act of vanity after another.

Rather than just sweep our sin under the rug and ignore it, God has dealt with it by sending His Son to bear its burden. Jesus is the righteousness of God, and those who put their trust in Him have the burden of their sin completely removed and receive the blessing of His righteous standing before the Father as their own.

### 3. OUR BEST DESIRES ARE INSUFFICIENT (ROM. 3:10-12).

In Romans 3, Paul quotes a number of Old Testament texts to drive home the point that “there is no one righteous...there is no one who seeks God” (Pss. 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Eccl. 7:20; Pss. 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; Isa. 59:7-8; Ps. 36:1). None of us really pursues God on our own. The bottom line is this: If a person is seeking God, it is because the Spirit is at work.

In Genesis 1–2, God created man and woman in His own image, and the result was nothing short of glorious. “Glory” carries the connotation of “weightiness.” There was a glory to the man and woman in relation to the rest of creation because they reflected God’s own glory. They had the distinct privilege of being God’s steward over all that He had made. And man was up to the task. Why? Because he was living in perfect harmony with God.

But then the man and woman fell from that glory. Their ability to accurately reflect God’s glory was lost. They were still in His image, but that image was fractured. All creation suffered as a result. Mankind had “fallen short of the glory of God.” No longer was there perfect harmony between God and man and no matter what man did, man couldn’t restore harmony. Our best efforts and desires were eternally damaged by sin. Thankfully God hasn’t left us without hope. While our efforts and desires are in vain, His and only His efforts and desires are sufficient.

### CONCLUSION

We were created to relate to God and to one another. God has spoken clearly, telling us how to live, but all too often we ignore Him. After a while, our hearts are so hard and calloused that they no longer feel conviction. When this happens, we’ve become spiritual lepers! Like those in Jesus’ day, lepers have a tendency of gathering together in shared misery.

The gospel says that Jesus still touches lepers—and when He does, feeling is restored. What was once disfigured and dead is made whole and alive. When we repent and turn to Christ at the sound of His voice, numbness flees and we are enabled to feel the pleasure of His love evermore in His presence. You need no longer bear the internal pain of being “unclean.” You’ve been made clean and now are free to gather with others who’ve been made clean in a new colony called the “church”—the people tasked with spreading the message of hope and salvation to a world of spiritual lepers.

Charles Spurgeon famously said that evangelism is nothing more than one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. Applying Spurgeon’s insight to leprosy, we might say God’s mission goes forth when His people, whom He has healed of spiritual leprosy, go out and tell other spiritual lepers about the Savior who is willing to stretch out His hand and heal them too.