

Bootstrap Christianity: Denying the Power of the Gospel

by Bob Nyberg

Introduction

The phrase “*pull yourself up by your bootstraps*” is commonly used today to promote the ideal of self-reliance—the notion that an individual can improve their situation through sheer effort and determination. However, the idiom’s origins are rooted not in inspiration but in irony. In the early 19th century, “pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps” referred to an impossible task, akin to defying gravity. One of the earliest recorded uses appears in an 1834 edition of *The Working-man’s Advocate*, where it sarcastically suggested that someone might soon demonstrate “that a man may pull himself up by his own bootstraps, and fly to the moon.” At that time, the phrase was a critique of unrealistic expectations, not a call to personal responsibility. Bootstraps were literal loops on boots used to help pull them on, and the idea of lifting oneself by them was physically absurd. Over time, particularly in the American context, the phrase underwent a dramatic shift in meaning. By the 20th century, it had come to embody the values of individualism and meritocracy, frequently invoked in political and cultural discourse to encourage personal initiative and self-made success. This evolution reflects a broader cultural transformation in how effort and achievement are understood.

Sadly, there are many today who have substituted “*Bootstrap Christianity*” for “the power of the gospel.” What do I mean?

The Power of the Gospel: God’s Means of Salvation

The apostle Paul declares in Romans 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” This foundational truth tells us that God’s power to save is unleashed through the proclamation and reception of the gospel. It is not by means of keeping the law of Moses, by moral striving, or by human performance. Salvation comes by grace through faith, apart from works (Eph. 2:8–9).

The word power (δύναμις – dynamis) refers to divine, life-giving, saving power. That power is located in the gospel—and more specifically, in the message of Christ crucified and risen, offered freely to those who believe. There is no mention of needing to clean up your life, commit to obedience, forsake all sin, or pledge loyalty—just simple faith in Christ and His finished work.

So, if you change the gospel—if you add to it—you are not just making a theological error. You are denying the very power of God to save.

The gospel’s power is not in its complexity but in its simple message of God’s amazing grace: that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again, so that anyone who believes in His person and work receives forgiveness and eternal life.

The gospel does not require a long list of actions or a deep personal transformation prior to faith. It simply requires belief in the finished work of Christ. The moment someone trusts in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior, they receive the full benefits of God’s salvation. This is the simple, yet powerful message Paul preached throughout his ministry.

A Distortion of the Gospel: Man’s Requirements for Salvation

Yet in many theological systems today, this simplicity is denied. When theologians and preachers add to the simple condition of belief—by requiring surrender, obedience, perseverance, or behavioral change as prerequisites or co-conditions for salvation—they introduce a false gospel.

This is precisely what Paul warned about in Galatians 1:6–9. These added conditions do not enhance the gospel; they nullify it.

The following quote is attributed to A.W. Pink: “There is a deadly and damnable heresy being widely propagated today to the effect that, if a sinner truly accepts Christ as his personal Saviour ... he cannot perish. That is a satanic lie... *Something more than believing in Christ is necessary to ensure the soul’s reaching heaven* [emphasis added].”¹

This statement directly contradicts John 3:16, where Jesus says, “Whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” In Christ’s own words, “something more”—as Pink claims—is not added to the concept of believing. The idea that belief is insufficient not only undermines the sufficiency of Christ’s work but also calls into question the integrity of the Lord’s own words. If eternal life isn’t secured by simple faith, then it is no longer a gift (Rom. 6:23), but a reward based on performance or perseverance.

John Piper claimed: “Saving faith is no simple thing. It has many dimensions. ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus’ is a massive command. It contains a hundred other things. Unless we see this, the array of conditions for salvation in the New Testament will be utterly perplexing.”²

This redefinition of faith adds layers that Scripture does not. Piper essentially *frontloads the gospel* with works by packing repentance, submission, and obedience into the very definition of “believe.” Yet in Acts 16:31, Paul and Silas didn’t say, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus and bring a hundred other things with it*”; they said simply, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.*” To say that belief implicitly includes “*a hundred other things*” turns faith into a vague, catch-all virtue, rather than the simple act of trust as presented in God’s Word (cf. Rom. 4:4–5, where belief is contrasted with works).

Michael Horton wrote: “The New Testament lays before us a vast array of conditions for *final salvation* [emphasis added]. Not only initial repentance and faith, but perseverance in both...”³

Horton here redefines salvation not as a one-time gift received through faith, but as a process with “conditions”—a term the Bible never uses for salvation apart from faith (Rom. 5:1, Eph. 2:8–9). While perseverance may be a mark of maturity or discipleship, making it a *condition* for final salvation transforms grace into a performance-based system. It subtly shifts the believer’s focus from Christ’s finished work to our continued striving.

R.C. Sproul wrote: “There are all sorts of conditions that must be met for someone to be saved. Chief among them is that we must have faith in Christ. The Reformed view does, in a narrow sense, see obedience as a ‘condition’ (but never the ground) of justification.”⁴

Sproul tries to soften the blow by distinguishing between “ground” and “condition,” but he still makes obedience a prerequisite. This contradicts Galatians 2:16, which says, “A person is not

¹ A.W. Pink, as quoted by Iain H. Murray in *The Life of Arthur W. Pink* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1982), pp. 248-249.

² John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1986), 65.

³ Michael S. Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 182.

⁴ R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 155–156.

justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” If obedience is a condition, then it necessarily becomes a part of what justifies us, no matter how narrowly it’s defined. Sproul’s theology, like much of Reformed theology, blurs the line between justification and sanctification—which leads people to look inward for assurance rather than to Christ alone.

In contrast to all four of these theologians, Scripture is unambiguous:

- Romans 3:28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.
- Ephesians 2:8–9 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one may boast.
- Galatians 3:2 Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by hearing with faith?
- Titus 3:5 “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy...

Each of these theologians—though influential—undermine the gospel’s *power* by subtly (or not-so-subtly) shifting the focus away from Christ’s finished work and onto the sinner’s ongoing performance.

When A.W. Pink stated, “Something more than believing in Christ is necessary to ensure the soul’s reaching heaven,” he was contradicting the clear teaching of Scripture. When John Piper said that “‘Believe on the Lord Jesus’ is a massive command... [that] contains a hundred other things,” he redefined faith into something unrecognizable. When Michael Horton and R.C. Sproul spoke of conditions beyond faith for final salvation, they subtly shifted the basis of assurance from Christ’s work to human effort.

Result: The Message Loses Its Saving Power

A gospel message that is frontloaded with demands or backloaded with perseverance as a condition for final salvation is not the gospel of grace. It’s a different gospel that cannot save because it shifts the trust from Christ’s work to man’s effort.

Paul wrote to Timothy saying, “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away (2 Tim. 3:1–5)!”

The term “last days” can refer to different things depending on the context. In the context of 2 Timothy 3:1, Paul is warning Timothy of what will occur *in the church age*, especially as it progresses. “The last days” refers to the general course of the present age, especially as apostasy increases within professing Christendom. Notice his admonition: “Avoid such men as these (2 Tim. 3:5).”

Who were these men that Paul warned Timothy about? The list describes moral and spiritual corruption among those who have “a form of godliness.” That phrase is key—it suggests people with *religious appearance*, not outright atheists or pagans. This likely refers to people who professed to be Christ followers or individuals associated with the church.

What does it mean to have “a form of godliness but deny its power?” No doubt it refers to refusing or rejecting the true source and effect of godliness, which is the transforming power of the gospel of grace.

The gospel is the power of God to salvation—both in justification and sanctification. Those who propose that simple faith is insufficient for salvation reject the power of the gospel by trusting in self-effort. Although they claim to teach faith alone, they end up promoting legalism, ritualism, or moralism as the means of salvation.

“Having a form of godliness but denying its power” results in rejecting the very thing (the gospel) that gives life and power to genuine godliness. Only by believing can a lost sinner be justified. And only a justified sinner has the resources to live the Christian life. To have a form of godliness but deny its power is the ultimate contradiction—giving lip service to a gospel free from works while rejecting the very thing that can produce authentic godliness.

People may profess to teach faith alone, but if their message adds works to faith, they are in effect rejecting the saving power of the gospel.

These folks might say all the right things externally—“Jesus,” “grace,” “faith”—but underneath, they may promote:

- Lordship Salvation (faith + submission).
- Sacramental Systems (faith + baptism/church membership).
- Behavioral Benchmarks (faith + fruit as proof of salvation).

These systems often dress themselves up as “godly,” but they deny the power of the gospel because they substitute human effort for God’s grace.

Paul scolded the Galatians, writing: “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel... which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ (Gal. 1:6–7).”

Then he asked a haunting question: “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh (Gal. 3:3)?”

Is it possible that those who deny the power of godliness (2 Tim. 3:5) do so by preaching a gospel that tells people they must do something more than simply believe in order to be saved? Yes, absolutely. That is one of the most dangerous and common forms of this denial in the church today. It’s not just moral corruption or licentiousness Paul is warning about—it is spiritual corruption disguised as godliness, which turns the gospel into a merit-based system.

This is the heart of *Bootstrap Christianity*: “God helps those who help themselves.” “If you’re not living it, you never really believed it.” “You must make Jesus Lord of your life in order to be saved.” These ideas might sound spiritual, but they gut the gospel of its power and replace grace with self-effort—pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.

A Consequence of the Distortion: Man’s Method for Sanctification

Even if a person happens to believe in Christ despite hearing a garbled gospel presentation, they are likely to carry forward that same corrupted framework into the Christian life. The same legalistic teachers who say that obedience is a condition for salvation also teach that sanctification is achieved through effort, resolve, discipline, or surrender—in other words, by pulling oneself up by one’s spiritual bootstraps.

Result: The Christian Ends Up Relying on Human Strength

This results in spiritual frustration and often burnout. Instead of walking by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16) and resting in the finished work of Christ, believers are pressured to prove their salvation through

constant self-evaluation, performance, and emotional experiences. Ironically, what began by grace through faith (justification) is now attempted to be finished by human effort (sanctification).

Theologians and systems that frontload the gospel with conditions other than faith deny the power of God to justify the sinner. And by placing the burden of sanctification on the believer's own shoulders, they also deny the power of God to transform the saint. This is "Bootstrap Christianity": the belief that we must contribute something, whether at the start, in the middle, or at the end of the salvation journey. It's a mindset that elevates human effort while sidelining God's power found in the gospel of grace.

Conclusion

Bootstrap Christianity reminds me of an old joke I heard growing up in a Scandinavian community on the Oregon coast. Ole had just purchased a brand-new chainsaw that was advertised to cut two cords of wood per day. A few days later, frustrated, he returned to the hardware store. "This saw is defective," he complained. "I worked as hard as I could, but I could only cut one cord in a day!"

The salesman, puzzled, took the chainsaw, pulled the cord, and the engine roared to life. Startled, Ole jumped back and exclaimed, "What's that noise?!"

The punchline is simple, but the point is profound: Ole had been trying to do all the work on his own, never realizing that the saw had a power source that would make the work not only possible but effective.

In the same way, when people deny or neglect the power of the gospel—the finished work of Jesus Christ and the enabling of the Holy Spirit—they are left to rely solely on their own efforts. They may labor hard, sincerely, and even with great determination, but it will never produce what only God's power can accomplish. As Paul wrote in Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." The gospel doesn't assist us in saving ourselves—it saves.

Trying to live the Christian life apart from that power is like trying to cut wood with a chainsaw that is not running. It may be sincere effort—but it's the wrong method. We're called not to perform but to believe, not to strive but to trust in the One who has already done the work.

The only cure for Bootstrap Christianity is to return to the clarity and simplicity of the gospel Paul preached: salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The gospel is not a call to self-improvement—it is a declaration of what Christ has accomplished. Any message that shifts the focus from Christ's finished work to the believer's ongoing effort robs the gospel of its power and leaves people either unsaved or unempowered.

Yes, it is the gospel itself that is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." We must never be ashamed of its simplicity—or its sufficiency.