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The Ultimate Water Station!

If you believe what you like in the gospel, and reject what you don't like,
it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself.

~St. Augustine

The man who does not glory in the gospel can surely know little
of the plague of sin that is within him.

~J.C. Ryle

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life
and have it abundantly.

John 10:10

FIVE

The Ultimate Water Station!

If you have ever run in a road race, you are familiar with the water stations that are strategically located along the race path. Without this water to replenish what is lost during the race, dehydration would set in and shut down your system, ending your race long before you crossed the finish line. When I was younger and lighter, I frequently competed in 10 K races and Triathlons, and I can testify to the value of water stations! Early in my racing career, I thought water stations were for the inexperienced and less conditioned athletes. In a word, I thought they were designed for “beginners.” I was convinced it would slow me down if I paused long enough to reach out for a quick drink. How wrong I was! I learned the hard way that it was actually the inexperienced beginners who bypassed a few sips of water on the way to the finish line.

What water is to a distance runner, the Gospel is to every Christian in the race of life. That is why we must preach the Gospel to ourselves—not only daily, but moment by moment. You see, it is the mundane moments of decision packed into daily living that ultimately shape our lives. We have a tendency to think it is the major decisions of life that matter most. As important as they are, the smaller, seemingly insignificant moments capture our hearts, shape our lives, and ultimately determine our destiny. I have heard my beloved pastor warn that adultery at age 40 begins with wandering eyes at age 20. That’s exactly it.

We hear a lot of talk about “the Gospel” these days. Sadly, many use this phrase without ever really understanding what it means and its profound implications in the lives of those who have been saved by it. I was one of those unfortunate souls for the first 10 years of my Christian life. Saved in 1995, it wasn’t until I was given the book *The Pursuit of Holiness*, by Jerry Bridges, in 2005 that I began to see just how small my view and vision was of the Gospel and my victory in Jesus. I saw the Gospel as simply the “door” leading into the Christian life. I had no idea it was also the “floor” upon which we were to walk, moment by moment, every day of our lives. As Jerry Bridges rightly observes, “The Gospel is not just for beginners.” It actually a vitally important water station for the experienced Christian runner.

So how are we to understand the Gospel as both as the “door” (eternal life) and the “floor” (everyday life) of our Christian walk? Here is our working definition of the term Gospel, from old English roots meaning “good news.”

**Jesus Christ died for our sins and through faith alone in Christ alone,
we are reconciled to God to live in communion with Him for all eternity.**

Without a doubt, the Gospel is the singularly most important event in human history. In Christ alone, the very Son of God, we have redemption from the wrath of God’s judgment upon sinners. In the cross-work of Christ we see God’s unimaginable love and sacrifice delivered to sinners through His inexpressible gift. Here is what the Bible tells us about the Gospel in a vivid passage from the pen of the apostle Paul.

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

GRACE FOR YOUR RACE

Before we explore the “door” and the “floor” of Christianity, let’s take a look at **grace**, the glue that holds it all together. Since all of the Christian life is rooted in grace, let’s make sure we understand what grace is. The general definition of grace I learned in seminary was this:

**God’s unmerited favor for sinners,
who deserve only condemnation and judgment.**

This is hope for the hopeless, love for the unlovely, and grace for the disgraced. Grace is an incredible kindness from a holy God to completely undeserving sinners. It is God pursuing sinners who are on the run from Him. It started in the Garden of Eden, when God came after Adam and Eve, and it continues today. The voice of grace called to the first two sinners in the Garden, “Adam where are you?” . . . and it is that same gentle voice that calls to sinners today.

Make no mistake, sheep wander from the flock, and they will never return unless they are brought back to the fold by the Great Shepherd, who goes after them. The proud pharisaical heart in every man rises up in opposition to the glorious truth that God first seeks the sinner, but it is true nonetheless! Paul reasoned, “If by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace” (Romans 11:6).

Someone once explained grace by using an acronym:

Gods

Riches

At

Christ’s

Expense

It is important to understand what grace is; it is equally important to be sure we understand what grace is *not*. Grace is *not* a license to sin, as some have mistakenly believed. This gross misunderstanding even captured some in the first century church. Jude, the brother of our Lord, warned that “Certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4).

Scotty Smith hits the proverbial nail right on the head in his book, *The Reign of Grace*.

Indeed, it is quite possible to pervert that which is precious and priceless. Jude teaches us that to distort grace is to misrepresent and deny Jesus. Grace is not just a theological proposition to be debated, it is a living Person to be honored and loved. To be wrong about grace is to be wrong about Jesus. To be wrong about Jesus is to be wrong about grace. In his classic volume *The Cost of Discipleship*, German pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about “cheap grace.” What is cheap grace? It is a Christ-less, faithless, tearless, joyless, and loveless misrepresentation of the grace of God.

Cheap grace is a gospel with no call to repentance; it is discipleship with an aversion to suffering; it is a church with no sense of mission, a community of believers clinging more to their ideal than to Jesus’ cross as a definition of true fellowship. In essence, cheap grace is grace emptied of Jesus. Therefore, it is un-grace or a-grace.¹

Those of us who are strong advocates of the grace message must acknowledge the concern from many theologically conservative pastors and theologians who fear that too much emphasis on grace will produce antinomianism in the church. (The word *antinomian* combines the roots *anti* (against) and *nomos* (law), i.e., *against the law*. Antinomianism teaches that the Law of God places no demands on the life of the Christian believer).

While I acknowledge the concern, I disagree with the premise. There can never be “too much grace” when it comes to the Gospel, because the gospel is all grace, from start to finish! However, I do believe that those of us whose overarching theme is grace—God’s mercy, not man’s merit—must clearly explain how this message protects the church from the hedonistic currents of the pagan culture that surrounds us.

Our Lord Jesus made it quite clear His message of grace in no way abrogated the Law of God. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets,” Jesus said; “I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For **truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished**” (Matthew 5:17-19).

God’s grace does not free us to do as we please; it frees us to do as He pleases. Christian codes of conduct are not forms of legalism that need to be disregarded and dismantled. Throughout Scripture we are instructed as to what God requires from His children. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey

what I command” (John 14:15). Dr. Bryan Chapell, president of Covenant Theological Seminary provides great insight into this matter:

Grace should not make obedience optional. When God removes good works as a condition for his acceptance, he does not remove righteousness as a requirement for life. The standards of Scripture glorify God and protect his people from spiritual harm. We cannot undermine the legitimate standards of the Bible without grave consequences.

God does not love us because we obey him, but we cannot know the blessings of his love without obedience. Thus, a grace focus that undermines Christ’s own demand for obedience denies us knowledge of and intimacy with him. This is not grace. Grace that bears fruit is biblical. Grace that goes to seed uses God’s unconditional love as an excuse for selfish indulgence. Such egocentric living ultimately burdens us with the guilt and consequences of sin that God has designed his grace to remove.

Resting on God’s grace does not relieve us of our holy obligations; rather it should enable us to fulfill them (see Eph. 4:7-13). As the assurance of God’s love allows us to cease striving to please him for our own benefit, our good works will begin reflecting more of the selfless righteousness that is truly holy.²

Far from being an open door to a life of sinful, selfish, and self-centered behavior, grace opens the door leading to a life of living for the glory of the King. Here are a few verses that speak clearly of the application of grace (what grace looks like) in the life of saved sinners.

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. (1 Corinthians 15:10)

For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:13)

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21)

Grace is the God-given desire to do God-ordained things through God-directed power. It is living your life for the glory of God instead of your own glory. It is living for God's Big Kingdom rather than your little kingdom. It is pouring yourself out and laying your life down for God (vertical relationship) and others (horizontal relationships), regardless of cost or circumstance.

Grace gives us both the passion and the power to please our God. We can never forget that we have been called by God to live lives pleasing to Him and that demands effort on our part, inasmuch as it is all of grace. When God said, "Be holy because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16) He meant what He said! We will unpack this clear calling from God in upcoming chapters to see where and how His grace and our works intersect.

ETERNAL LIFE

Justification is the theological term to describe what happens when a dead sinner is raised to life in Christ. By faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ, which is a gift of God, the sinner is declared righteous, or "justified," in the sight of a Holy God. Ephesians 2:8-9 explains, "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Paul made it crystal clear that our justification is all of God. Even the faith we have to believe in the person and work of Christ is not of our own doing; it is the gracious gift of God. Peter revealed that "[God's] divine power has granted to us **all things** that pertain to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). *Everything* we need for eternal life has been given to us as a free gift, removing any possibility of man playing any role whatsoever in his salvation.

Commenting on Romans 8:12 assertion, "Brothers, we are debtors," Charles Spurgeon wrote:

As God's creatures, we are all debtors to Him to obey Him with all our body, and soul, and strength. Having broken His commandments, as we all have, we are debtors to His justice, and

we owe to Him a vast amount which we are not able to pay. But of the Christian it can be said that he does not owe God's justice anything, for Christ has paid the debt His people owed.

The great weight of our sin makes us great debtors who simply cannot pay our dreadful debt. The One who owed nothing paid our debt and sealed our pardon with His own precious blood. Hallelujah! As great as our sin is, He is a greater Savior.

Isaiah 44:22 paints a most beautiful portrait of this great work of the One who is both Just and Justifier: "I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you." The implication of our sins being "blotted out" should not be missed. When something is blotted out, it is erased, removed, wiped clean away from existence. Rather than approaching the sinner in anger, which was reserved for Jesus as He hung upon the cross, God approaches the sinner in love and removes all memory of sin forever.

Let's take a brief look at God's approach to the very first sinners, Adam and Eve, recorded in Genesis 3:9. "The Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"

First, God approached, not with a word of rebuke, but with a question of recovery. God was in loving pursuit of these first fugitives of the faith. To be sure, Adam and Eve knew they had done something terribly wrong or they would not have been on the run from the One they had once communed with "in the cool of the day." They had joined in Satan's great rebellion, having traded in grace to cover themselves with disgrace . . . yet God would not leave them there! The voice of mercy called out to them as they crouched, trembling in the brush. The eyes of amazing grace gazed upon them in their piteous efforts to cover their nakedness with fig leaves. The arms of grace reached out to them in their fear. The feet of grace run to them in their lost condition. If we would but understand how mercifully God loves and pursues sinners, we would never fear to fall upon the throne of grace, in spite of the fact that we are all sinners by nature and habit. Because of this unimaginable pursuing work of God's grace we stand acquitted before the court of heaven, now and forevermore; absolved of all our sin—past, present, and future; and fully accepted in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:6).

And if that wasn't good news, that's only the half of it! Not only has all our guilt been removed, it is as if we were never guilty in the first place. Clothed in the righteousness of Christ, we stand before God fully pardoned because all of our sins have been put away. The breathtaking truth of Romans 8:1 is yours, and it is mine: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Because we have been justified—forgiven and credited with the righteousness of Christ—in the sight of

our great God, because of the work of our great High Priest, we are whiter than snow, void of any stain, speck, smug, or spot of sin.

When Romans 8:33 poses the rhetorical question, “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect?” know this: such an accusation will never come down from heaven. It will only spring up out of the pit of hell itself, and, as Steve Brown likes to say, it will smell like smoke. The devil will accuse you, attempt to misuse you, and ultimately try to abuse you, which is the reason we must not only see the Gospel as the “door” into eternal life, but as the “floor” upon which we walk with Jesus in our everyday life, moment by moment.

EVERYDAY LIFE

Sanctification is the theological term which describes the ongoing process in the life of a dead sinner who was raised to new life in Christ. Where justification is a one-time, eternal declaration in God’s courtroom, sanctification is the progressive, lifelong experience for every child, born of grace, who is now “being conformed to the image of [God’s] Son” (Romans 8:29). Sanctification is our growth, as slow and imperceptible as it may seem at times, in Christ-likeness. Because the Gospel is “the power of God” (Romans 1:16), the Gospel that saves us is the same Gospel that sanctifies us. God does not save us and leave us to grow on our own. Prayerfully consider these words from Bryan Chapell:

Most Christians cherish the beauty of the truth that God viewed us through the lens of Jesus’ goodness when we claimed him as our Savior. We trusted that Christ’s death paid the penalty for our sins, and that we were made right with God – justified – not by our own holiness but by trusting in the holiness he provided. Just as objects look red when viewed through a red lens and green when viewed through a green lens, we believed that when God looked at us through Jesus he viewed us as his own child.

Belief in this provision of grace, whereby God chose to view us as his beloved through no good of our own, became the greatest joy of our souls. What robs many believers of this joy, however, is a misunderstanding of how God continues to view us after we have received the grace that justifies us.

After initially trusting in Christ to make them right with God, many Christians embark on an endless pursuit of trying to satisfy God with good works that will keep him loving them. Such Christians believe that they are saved by God's grace but are kept in his care by their own goodness. This belief, whether articulated or buried deep in a psyche developed by the way we were treated by parents, spouses, or others, makes the Christian life a perpetual race on a performance treadmill to keep winning God's affection.

While the Christian life can be characterized as a race, we persevere on the course God marks out for us not by straining to gain his affection but by the assurance that he never stops viewing us from the perspective of his grace. God continually offers us unconditional love and the encouragement that our status as his children does not vary even though our efforts do.³

My work in men's ministry has given me the opportunity to pastor, teach, counsel, mentor, and pray with countless men over the years. One of the greatest challenges I face in working with many of them is their misunderstanding of the radical reach of the grace of the Gospel. Most men fully understand that justification is by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. But when it comes to sanctification, they often replace the grace of God for their own goodness. They are forever running on the performance treadmill, in hopes of maintaining God's acceptance, affection, and approval *throughout their good days*, or regaining it *at the end of their bad days*. Paul explodes this notion in his epistle to the Philippians: "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (1:6).

All of the Christian life is rooted in the grace of God. This is why we must continue to preach the gospel to ourselves moment by moment. We are justified and sanctified *by grace*. We are given every good gift from God *by grace*. We are strengthened throughout our struggles *by grace*. We are motivated to obedience *by grace*. We are empowered for service *by grace*. Grace is the beginning of the Christian life (justification), the end of the Christian life (glorification), and all points in between (sanctification). When I caught a glimpse of this life-changing truth, my life was forever changed—not perfected, but changed. How freeing it was to see that grace did not rescue me and then ask me to strain toward the finish line of life on my own.

THE POWER OF GOD

I said a moment ago that the Gospel is “the power of God” (Romans 1:16). The Gospel is the power of both redemption and transformation. The gospel redeems us from the penalty of sin and transforms us from the power of sin. No matter how hard we try, morality will never do for us what only the Master can do. That is why we must preach the gospel to ourselves every day. We needed the gospel to get right with God the day we were saved, and we need the gospel to delight in God every day after until we are brought home into glory. Jerry Bridges clearly sets forth the power of God in a profound and practical way.

The gospel, applied to our hearts every day, frees us to be brutally honest with ourselves and with God. The assurance of His total forgiveness of our sins through the blood of Christ means we don't have to play defensive games anymore. We don't have to rationalize and excuse our sins. We can say we told a lie instead of saying we exaggerated a bit. We can admit an unforgiving spirit instead of continuing to blame our parents for our emotional distress. We can call sin exactly what it is, regardless of how ugly and shameful it may be, because we know that Jesus bore that sin in His body on the cross. With the assurance of total forgiveness through Christ, we have no reason to hide from our sins anymore.⁴

My own life-experience has convinced me that the reason we see the Gospel only for the lost sinner is because we fail to recognize that we are still sinners after salvation. When Jesus said, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matthew 9:13), we must keep in mind that He was speaking to those who were still blind to the Gospel and those who had already trusted in Him for eternal life. We are sinners throughout all of our Christian lives, and desperately need to hear the Gospel each and every day! We need to see ourselves as the apostle Paul continually saw himself as the “chief sinner.” When Paul took a close look at himself, he could not imagine anyone worse than him. We need to look at ourselves through the very same lenses.

Paul's ongoing battle with sin after he was saved, described in Romans 7, is instructive for every child of God. We do what we do not want to do and don't do what we want to do. And all of this happens after we have been made both alive and new in Christ! Is there anyone reading this who would deny this truth? What is the confession of your life in thought, word, deed, and desire? Like Paul, we

would cry, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24.) That is why the Gospel is so needed in our lives every day. Without it we shrink the size of the gospel to only the “door” leading into the Christian life and not the “floor” as well. And how are we to walk well over the rough, rocky ground of life with no floor to smooth our way?

The Gospel allows us to view the ugly reality our sin and the matchless perfection of God’s holiness without being paralyzed by guilt and despair. We realize a holy God pursued a sinful man and sent His precious Son to die on the cross for him. We also realize that same holy God continues to pursue sinful man *after* he has been raised from death to life by the cross work of Jesus Christ. This understanding, meditated upon daily, is the power of God in the Gospel. The more God massages this truth deep down into our souls, the more we appreciate what Jesus did for us on the cross. Mercy saved us . . . not merit. Grace sanctifies us . . . not goodness. We are, indeed, great sinners. But we have an ever greater Savior in Jesus! When we realize that we already have everything we need in Christ, we no longer have to live lives marked by pretending and performing, lives devoid of the joy of the Lord, which is our strength.

When I was ordained as a PCA minister in 2008, my son Brock and his classmate, Ashley Briggs, who were both aged 10 at the time, sang John Newton’s classic hymn, “Amazing Grace.” It was at that time that I was beginning to flesh out the truth of the grace of the gospel that saved a wretch like me. It’s hard to find better words to describe both the “door” and the “floor” of the Christian life than these words that penetrated my thawing heart that day:

“Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”



BROTHER TO BROTHER

1. What are the implications of viewing the Gospel as only the “door” leading into the Christian life?

2. What are the implications of viewing the Gospel as both the “door” and the “floor” of the Christian life?

3. How would you define the term grace?

4. How would you define the term justification?

5. How would you define the term sanctification?

6. I am convinced...from personal experience in my own life...the reason we see the gospel only for the lost sinner is because we fail to recognize that we are still sinners after salvation. Agree Disagree
Please explain

7. How has the power of God been working both in and through you?

1. Scotty Smith, *The Reign of Grace*, 14
2. Bryan Chapell, *Holiness by Grace*, Introduction
3. Bryan Chapell, *Holiness by Grace*, 9
4. Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, 23