

Amazing Grace

That Saves Christians

S OTHER WRETCHES

BY KEN GIBBLE

Where do you stand on this business of amazing grace? I don't mean the hymn. I mean the *idea* of grace, or the...well...the *doctrine* of it. Do you believe that the mistakes of the past, the wrongs a person has done, even very grievous wrongs, can be wiped away once and for all by God's love

and mercy? Can someone, can anyone, *can you*, be freed from a lifetime burden of guilt by the grace of God? Is that grace poured out, without condition, so liberally, that it can, in the words of the famous hymn, save the person who once was lost? Can grace actually give sight to blind eyes?

That's what the Christian faith proclaims, you know. Many vol-

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umes of theology have been written on the subject of grace, but sometimes it finds its best expression in the most unlikely places. A character in one of John Irving's novels puts it like this:

"The point is, God doesn't love us because we're smart or because we're good. We're stupid and we're bad and God loves us anyway..." (John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*).

What makes that statement so *unlikely* is that it's spoken by a character in a novel whose speech is liberally sprinkled with cuss words. I figured some judicious editing was needed for inclusion in this article.

But that says it about as plainly as it can be said: God doesn't love you or me because we're smart or even because we're good. By the normal, human standards of justice, this idea of grace presents some serious problems.

Some time back I listened to a presentation by a college philosophy professor. His subject was the religion of Islam. He told us that the Islamic faith stresses justice: good behavior is to be rewarded, bad behavior is to be punished, both on the human level and on the sacred level. The presenter said that even though he was a Christian minister and had many times taught and preached the doctrine of grace, he thought that the approach of Islam made a whole lot more sense.

It does, doesn't it? Shouldn't good behavior be rewarded and bad behavior suffer consequences? There's something in us that objects to sinful deeds going unpunished, even our own sinful deeds. A character in another contemporary novel expresses this point of view. Referring to the practice in Catholicism of the faithful declaring sins to a priest in the confessional booth, this character says:

"Confession is a thing I can't agree with. I say it's cheap. You kneel down in that box and say what you done. And then, basically,

you get off scot-free, only cranking out a few 'Hail Marys' or some 'Our Fathers.' No restitution demanded, no community service" (Louise Erdrich, *The Bingo Palace*).

Erasing Our Own Guilt?

One of the best explorations of this debate I've come across appears in Anne Tyler's novel, *Saint Maybe*. The story is about Ian, a young man who blames himself for causing his

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brother's death in a car accident. Actually the death resulted from circumstances beyond Ian's control, but he blames himself nonetheless. Distraught by guilt, Ian wanders into a store-front church one evening. During the prayer time, he says to the small group of worshippers: "Pray for me to be good again. Pray for me to be forgiven."

After the service, Ian is feeling better. He asks the minister, "Don't you think I'm forgiven?"

"Goodness, no," Reverend Emmett said briskly.

Ian's mouth fell open. He wondered if he'd misunderstood. He said, "I'm *not* forgiven?"

"Oh, no."

"But...I thought that was kind of the point," Ian said. "I thought God forgives everything."

"He does," Reverend Emmett said. "But you can't just say, 'I'm sorry, God.' Why, anyone could do that much! You have to offer reparation—concrete, practical reparation, according to the rules of our church" (Anne Tyler, *Saint Maybe*).

The form that Ian's reparation takes is the financial support of his brother's stepchildren. It's a very heavy burden for such a young man, but he sacrifices his own plans and future in order to atone for his guilt.

At the end of the novel, the reader is left to wonder whether Ian did the right thing. On the one hand, he did make a positive difference in the lives of his brother's

stepchildren. On the other hand, he spends much of his own life suffering from a burden of guilt that even his good deeds do not eliminate. He doesn't find grace until the very end of the novel. And it comes in a way that has nothing to do with his sacrifice.

Is Grace Too Easy?

I ask you again, where do you come out on this business of amazing grace? Maybe it is too easy, too cheap. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian martyred by the Nazis, warned of what he called "cheap grace." In his own words:

"[With cheap grace] no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance ...grace without discipleship, grace without the cross" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*).

Bonhoeffer's words ring true. Surely it's a mistake to think of God as an indulgent grandparent who turns a blind eye to the wrongdoings of humanity. Our faith teaches that the cost of salvation

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was the cross of Calvary. This is *costly* grace indeed. But it is God's grace that saves us, not our own efforts.

John Newton was the son of an English sea captain. At the age of eleven, Newton went to sea himself and, after some years, captained his own ship, one that carried African slaves. Converted to the Christian faith, Newton became a minister and hymn writer. Remembering his former lifestyle and his part in the evils of slavery, Newton wrote the words that have become beloved by millions.

"Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

"A Wretch Like Me"

I came across a church hymnal that had taken some liberties with

Newton's words. Apparently, the editors objected to the word "wretch." I guess it sounded to them so... well...so wretched. Most people who sing this hymn aren't wretches, the editors probably reasoned, they're good people, most of them church-goers. So they substituted for the words, "saved a wretch like me," the phrase, "saveth men like me."

It was a bad decision, not only because it used that non-inclusive word "men," but because not one of us escapes the state of wretchedness at various times in our lives. We mess up—sometimes badly. We slip into petty hatreds, we betray confidences, we remain silent in the face of injustice, we break promises, we fail to love our neighbors as ourselves, we fail even to love ourselves properly.

There are times when we feel our lives amount to nothing more or less than colossal failures. We may even hate ourselves.

Wretch is the word for it. A wretch like me. A wretch like you.

My closing word on the matter is simply this—when I bring my life into the presence of the Holy One, I really don't want justice. I don't want what I deserve. I want mercy, divine mercy. I want God's amazing grace.

What do *you* want? □

Kenneth Gibble is a freelance writer whose writing credits include articles, interviews, essays and eight books. As a retired pastor, Ken has become more convinced than ever that loading down people with do's and don'ts is a recipe for spiritual disaster. The issue of law-versus-grace is not only something St. Paul dealt with centuries ago. It's as "now" as how we deal with friends, family and neighbors in our own lives.