

Grace on Trial



those who may not know, let's remind them the word "radical" comes from the Latin word *radic* or *radix* which means root—like radish. The etymology of the word means the *root*. So when you and I proclaim *radical grace* (and I commend you—I have long had a respect for you and your proclamation of *radical grace*) let's remind people this "radical" doesn't mean "off the wall." *Radical grace* means taking people back to the roots of the gospel, because that's what we do—that's our goal.

Greg: Let's talk a bit more about you. How did God lead you, and what circumstances happened in your life to lead you to do what you've been doing for the better part of the last two decades?

Steve: At the risk of sounding self-serving, I'll say that my first book, *Grace Walk*, is my story. It tells how I came out of legalism and into an understanding of God's grace that I have today. Not that I've come to complete understanding—we're always on a continuum and still learning, but I wrote my story in the book. The short version of it is that I grew up in a Christian home, went to church all my life, started preaching at 16 years old and became a senior pastor at 19 years old.

Greg: Senior pastor at age 19!

Steve: Senior pastor at 19, can you believe that? I look back in awe, amazed. I was in a little church of just over 100 people and, most of them were over 65 years old, and I was 19. I served as a local church pastor for 21 years and, just to condense

Greg Albrecht: Hi, this is Greg Albrecht for Plain Truth Ministries and *Christianity Without the Religion*. We're here today with a good friend, Steve McVey of Grace Walk Ministries. Steve, thanks for coming to visit us in California.

Steve McVey: I am glad to be with you, Greg. I always look forward to being with you.

Greg: Steve is the president of Grace Walk Ministries. He has published eight books, has offices of Grace Walk in Canada and South America, he travels around the world, and Steve, I've got to tell you that I wish there were more people in this world who are proclaiming *radical grace*.

Steve: When we talk about grace we're talking about Jesus, and I think folks need to have that firmly in their minds, that grace personified is Jesus Christ. So to those who say, well, that's great to talk about grace but there are other things too, I say, well, what else is there? The grace of Jesus Christ is the gospel. *Radical grace*—I like that. For



it all, my heart was in the right place, but little by little my head drifted, my thoughts wandered away from the simplicity of the gospel and I began to more and more make my ministry and my teaching and my own self-expectations to be about performance, about doing the right things that I imagined God demanded or required of me. I thought (and this is the essence of legalism) that it was up to me and that God's blessings in my life and my own spiritual progress



RED (MORGAN FREEMAN) LOOKS AROUND AT THE PRISON WALLS IN THE YARD THERE, AND HE SAYS TO ANDY, “YOU KNOW, IT’S A FUNNY THING ABOUT THESE WALLS. WHEN YOU FIRST COME HERE YOU HATE THEM, AND AFTER A WHILE YOU GET USED TO THEM, AND THEN FINALLY YOU COME TO DEPEND ON THEM.” WHEN I FIRST SAW THE MOVIE I THOUGHT, BOY, THAT’S EXACTLY WHAT LEGALISTIC RELIGION DOES TO PEOPLE.



INSTITUTIONALIZED RELIGION PUTS PEOPLE IN BONDAGE. THE LONGER THEY’RE INSIDE, THE HARDER IT IS FOR THEM TO ESCAPE. LIKE THE OLD GUY (BROOKS) IN THE MOVIE *THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION*.

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were dependent on what I did. In 1990, God put me in a dying church—dying in every measurable way. Through that process, the Lord began to strip me of the confidence in myself that I’d had. He began to show me that it’s not about me and what I can do, it’s not about church programs—it’s not even about ministry. *It’s about Jesus.*

I was a very program-driven guy. I had felt successful as a pastor. I had felt that way because in the tangible, measurable ways that people evaluate success, I met the criteria. But the Lord began to show me that a lot of what I thought was success was just really

manufactured by my own self-effort. Interesting, the first sermon I ever preached was 40 years ago. I began to understand this message that I teach now, 20 years into my ministry, so for the first 20 years I preached legalism. For the last 20 years I’ve been teaching and preaching grace. And I can tell you that my observation after 40 years of teaching and preaching the Scripture is this—grace, authentic grace, produces spiritual fruit. Legalistic teaching and preaching produces religious nuts. I’ve been on both sides.

Greg: One of the things I love about you, and one of the things that binds

us together, is that in the same period of time that you describe your transition from religious legalism to God’s grace, I was going through a similar transition though, from a different set of legalistic prohibitions, prescriptions and potions, but nonetheless out of religion toward God’s grace. I find that enormously affirming about what God was doing, and I know it’s not just you and me. When I look back I’m able to say, Steve McVey was walking through the valley of the shadow of death at the same time I was. And God was taking care of both of us.

Steve: It’s interesting that our backgrounds are very different and yet similar. I see that with people who come to the place where they’re free from religion and begin to walk in grace. That is, the details of our background are different, but the paradigm, the template, is the same. You know, two different religious worlds but, at the risk

WHEN PEOPLE SPEND ENOUGH TIME IN THAT ENVIRONMENT THEY REACH A PLACE WHERE THEY BECOME “INSTITUTIONALIZED.” THEY CANNOT THINK OUTSIDE THAT ENVIRONMENT. OFTEN WHEN INMATES ARE RELEASED FROM PRISON THEY DON’T KNOW HOW TO LIVE IN FREEDOM, AND SO THEY’LL DO WHATEVER’S NECESSARY TO GET RIGHT BACK IN PRISON AGAIN. AND THAT’S WHAT RELIGION DOES.

of sounding crude, whether you're shoveling horse manure or cow manure, your job has one thing in common—you're shoveling the same thing. I'm on biblical ground when I use that metaphor because the Apostle Paul looked back at his religious background and he said "I consider that all but *dung*." That's the genteel word in Scripture—the original word in Scripture is more harsh than that! He said, "I consider it all *dung* compared to what I know now through the knowledge that I have of Jesus Christ." So you and I were working on different farms, but brother we were shoveling the same old manure, weren't we?

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Greg: That's a great illustration of the work involved in legalistic religion—shoveling the same old manure. Thinking we were doing the Lord a service. Another way of looking at this same religious reality is to think of a prison. Every prison has many prisoners, held for various reasons, but they're all being held in bondage. The same thing with legalism—there are people in different legalistic prisons and they're being held for different reasons but the overriding problem is the bondage of legalism—they're all in bondage together.

Steve: When people spend enough time in that environment they reach a place where they become "institutionalized." They cannot think outside that environment. Often when inmates are released from prison they don't know how to live in freedom, and so they'll do whatever's necessary to get right back in prison again. And that's what religion does. Again, I love words. The word "religion" comes from the old Latin word *religare*, and it means to *bind up*...put in bondage. That's what religion does. Now those who want to put a positive spin on religion will say, "Yes, but it means to bind up as if you're binding a broken bone so that it

can heal." But when you have a cast on your leg, you don't keep it there. When you get well, you shed that cast, because if you keep that cast on your leg, it won't heal it, it'll cause it to atrophy so you can't even walk any more.

That's what religion does. It binds us up under a system of obligation and duty that we imagine that God requires of us, and it will cripple us in any sense of being able to make real, authentic spiritual progress. Jesus didn't come just to set us free from our sin. He came to set us free from our religion. The world had religion when he got here. He didn't come to start a new religion—he came to hang a "closed"

Freeman, is sitting out in the prison yard with Andy DuFresne, played by Tim Robbins. Red looks around at the prison walls in the yard there, and he says to Andy, "You know, it's a funny thing about these walls. When you first come here you hate them, and after a while you get used to them, and then finally you come to depend on them." When I first saw the movie I thought, boy, that's exactly what legalistic religion does to people. There's something innate in us all that knows that we're not meant to live that way. But if you live in a restraining, oppressive, religious regime that communicates to you that it's all about your behavior, how you act, what you do, what you think, it makes it all based on those kinds of things. After a while you do get used to it and finally it will strip you, it'll rob you of the innate sense of the truth that God has deposited in all of us and it'll cause you



sign on the sweatshop of religion. This game's over. It's a new day.

Greg: Institutionalized religion puts people in bondage. The longer they're inside, the harder it is for them to escape. Like the old guy (Brooks) in the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. He was released after 50 years. He went and tried to work in the grocery store, he tried to adjust to freedom and to society and he couldn't. He wound up hanging himself in his little bedroom.

Steve: There's another very poignant, very powerful scene in that movie that comes to my mind. It's the one where the character Red, played by Morgan

to become dependent on that very religion that by nature you would hate.

Greg: Given the overview we've talked about thus far, Steve, let's turn our attention to what I'm going to title "Grace on Trial." Let me set up this idea a little bit. You were talking about how you love words. There are words in the Bible which explain our relationship with God in forensic terms—words which are used in jurisprudence, in Halls of Justice. We talk about redemption, and we talk about justification, and these terms have legal meaning.

Religion becomes mesmerized with the idea that God is sitting on the

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bench, and he's a very stern judge. Jesus, of course, is our advocate, and he's the nice guy, which is already a problem because we split up the one God into two, so we've got a problem with the most basic of all Christian doctrines, the Trinity. People have this idea of the bad cop and the good cop—the bad, stern, taskmaster judge, and the really nice, friendly lawyer. Finally Jesus, the nice lawyer uses all of his wits and knowledge and training and finally even has to give his life to the bad cop, the Father, to appease him and get us off the hook. Legalistic religion in Christendom comes along and says, we've got to put grace on trial, because people might get the wrong idea about grace. The taskmasters, the leaders of religion, fear they may lose control if people listen to the gospel. So they determine to demonize grace—to *put grace in its place*.

Steve: Let me clarify what I'm talking about when I use the word "grace." Now I've mentioned legalism and alluded to the fact it's a system of living in which we think we can make spiritual progress or gain God's blessings based on what we do. That's the essence of religion. You must do your daily Bible reading and your prayer, and your going to church, and your giving and your witnessing and your helping the poor and your (create your own list). That's the legalistic view. Grace, in opposition to that, is the view that God blesses us because we're in Jesus Christ and for no other reason at all. Grace is unilateral, unconditional. That goes against the grain of the religious mindset that's been instilled in us by nurture but also came into us by nature in the person of Adam.

Think about the Garden of Eden and I'll tie this grace together with what you were saying about the judicial, forensic aspect of salvation. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, immediately they thought, "Okay, God's angry." And so they hid themselves. They made themselves



coverings and tried to make themselves more presentable. They imagined God would come storming over to them angry about their disobedience. But when God came, he didn't come to dole out punishment, he came for his walk—just like he'd done every day. He said, "Adam, where are you?" God knew where Adam was, but he wanted Adam to know where Adam was. The point is, once Adam sinned, from that day till now mankind has taken their own guilt and shame and smeared it all over the face of God, and we've seen God through the lens of our own embarrassment and our own shame. We have totally misrepresented to others who God is because we projected our filth onto him.

Greg: We're actually hard-wired to view God through the lens of our own shame and guilt, so we presume God to be angry. That's not God. You know, the more religious many become, basically, the angrier God gets. The more careful and the more obedient and the more religiously observant—the angrier God gets.

Steve: We create a god (with a little "g") in our imagination who is nothing like the God of the Bible. This is what happened when Adam and Eve fell. They began to project onto God a faulty concept of who he is. But Jesus came into this world to say, wait a minute, you've got it all wrong! Religion has caused you to think that, but let me show you who he is. If you've seen me, you've seen the Father. Jesus said, "I didn't come to condemn the world."

I think your point about that schizophrenic aspect of the traditional religious viewpoint of God is that you've got an angry, judgmental, harsh God

who's ready to just kick the daylights out of mankind; you've got a loving Son named Jesus who doesn't want to see that happen. It's almost in the minds of some as if Jesus said, "Okay, I know you're filled with rage, Father, and you've got to get it out of your system, so go ahead, kick the daylights out of me. Take it out on me so that you won't have to take it out on them."

Many look at the cross as a place where God the Father was beating the daylights out of God the Son to get his anger out, and then once it was over, God the Father said, "Whew, okay, I feel better now. Okay, now I don't have to beat up mankind."

For years in my Christian life I thought when I sinned that maybe God would begin to feel some anger or judgment toward me again and Jesus would hold up his hand and say, "Wait Father, the scars, the scars." And the Father would say, "Oh, yeah, I almost forgot, yeah, you're right." Who can experience intimacy with a God like that? But that's not how it is. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.

Now we've been entrusted with this message of reconciliation. What is this message? The message that God in Christ took care of your sin. He dealt with it. *The cross was not punitive, it was corrective*. It was him dealing with the issue of sin. *God's wrath is not against us, it was against sin, and he dealt with it*. Daniel prophesied that the Messiah would come and he would put away sin, and that's exactly what he did. John the Baptist said, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." I'm saying God has dealt with sin. He's not angry, he hasn't been angry at us. From the time of Adam he's loved mankind, and that's what

the incarnation, and the crucifixion and the resurrection are all about.

Greg: One of my favorite stories is about an older gentleman. In some versions of the story he's the pastor of a church, in other versions he's a theologian and in still others he's a Christian author. He's giving a lecture and there's a young man in the audience, and the young man raises his hand and he asks the older, wiser Christian gentleman, "When were you saved?" What the young man expects to hear is the story which legalistic religion often prioritizes. He wants to hear what that man did and what circumstances physically led the man to take the actions which allowed him to "give his heart to the Lord" or to "repent," or to "surrender," or to do the right things (you know where we're going on this) to get himself into a relationship with God.

I don't think there's anything wrong with recounting, as I did with you briefly, what God was doing with us and when we changed course and how our relationship with God started. But I love the response of the older gentleman. He looked at the younger man and said, "When was I saved? I should think that would be at the cross of Christ." That's when it happened. Not in 1931 at the camp meeting or 1945 when I heard a specific sermon or in 1956 when I went down the sawdust trail, or (fill in the blank). Those experiences may or may not be helpful, but God in Christ did everything which needed to be done at the cross—the greatest act of love of all time. There has been no other love shown that is greater or deeper or more profound. We can wrap our minds around that, and of course that leads us into this nature of God, called "grace."

Steve: For many years to me the gospel was to say to people, *if you'll ask Jesus, he'll forgive you*. But now I say the gospel is to say to people, *you're forgiven*. That's the good news of the gospel. You are forgiven. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. You're forgiven. That's the gospel. Of course there's the necessity to believe. But that's not what makes it happen. Jesus made it happen at the cross. And it becomes our experience when we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Greg: Let's go to the idea of how

threatening grace is to institutionalized religion. It helps us when we realize we can react to God's grace negatively, because we've actually been propagandized. We've actually been convinced and persuaded that there's something suspicious about grace. People believe, "You'd better be careful about grace. You don't want to be talking about grace too much because you know what that'll do. That'll lead you right into permissiveness." That idea, of course, is blasphemous. God's grace doesn't lead to permissiveness.

Steve: If you ever hear somebody say, "Well, grace leads to careless living and sin," that shows you they don't know the Bible. Titus 2:11-12 says that grace teaches us to live a godly lifestyle. And let me tell you, I think the problem with the religious world today, Greg, is that they're teaching *greasy grace*. Let me explain what I mean by that. What is grease? Grease is something you put on a machine to make it run more smoothly without friction. I say the legalistic religious world is teaching *greasy grace* because what they're doing is adding into the equation our own self-effort, and they're saying you need to dedicate or rededicate yourself to God. *You* need to promise him you'll do better, you'll try harder, you'll do more, you'll be more

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consistent...*you, you, you!* Make it about you and what you do, and that gratifies the flesh because the flesh gets downright excited about the idea that there's something we can add to the equation—but it robs the glory from the finished work of Christ at the cross. *Religion says it's not just about Jesus and what he has done, it's about us and what we do, too, and by adding human performance into the equation, religion gratifies the flesh and makes it easier for people to swallow, so to speak. So it's greasy grace.*

Greg: Would you say that's one reasons why authentic, *radical grace* is not embraced and accepted by more people? Do people reject grace because it actually diminishes us and our efforts?

Steve: Yes. Grace takes the credit away from us entirely and gives all the credit to him. Again, the bent of flesh is to do something, to contribute, to be a player, a partner in this situation. That's what religion is. Religion says things like, "Well, you know, you have to do your part. Yes, the Lord saved you, but now you have responsibility. There are things that you have to do, you know, there are works. Steve and Greg, are you saying we *shouldn't* read our Bible and we *ought* not to pray?" And I say to that question, "That's a categorical error. Why are you couching that question in terms of *should* and *ought*? That's like asking me, "Do you think you *should* kiss your wife? Do you think you *ought* to love her?" I would say you don't know the relationship I have with my wife, do you? It's not duty that motivates me—it's desire that motivates me. But you see, legalists have never been free to do those things—they've always been obligated to do them. And nothing kills inspiration as quickly as does obligation. Grace sets you free to live a godly lifestyle because you *want* to. But the sad truth is that those in the religious institutional legalistic world, they don't know what they want to do. They've never been able to ask themselves, "What do I want?" They've only lived under "What I ought to do," not "What I want to do." So

they're afraid—afraid that if they don't live under that heavy set of demands and religious rules they might go crazy. Why are they afraid? Because they don't know themselves.

Greg: One of the great pictures of the rejection of God's grace offered to us in the Bible, a part of what theologians call the salvation history of the people of God. When the nation of Israel left Egypt, God took them out. God rescued them from physical and spiritual slavery. They didn't take themselves out—God took them out. Finding themselves in the desert, the people decided they wanted to go back, back to the routine where they got three square meals. "This freedom is driving us crazy," they said. "That



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religion stuff we had in Egypt, the gods of Egypt and the slavery, it was kind of tough, but we knew what was going to happen. It was predictable.”

Steve: That’s it. That’s the essence of religion, isn’t it? And the thing about this grace walk and this life of faith is that we’re not in control. Again, the flesh doesn’t relinquish control easily or readily. While we live by grace and walk in faith then we’re dependent on him every minute of every day and we don’t know necessarily what the next thing will be, and it’s a life of dependence. Oh, don’t kid yourself. It’s a lot easier to be busy doing religious things than it is to rest in Christ and trust him and wait on the Lord. It’s easier to do something than it is to trust.

Greg: Before God’s grace, all my life in legalism and religion, I was taught that my main duty was to control people. As a husband, I was told the duty of a husband is to control his wife. Keep her under subjection. Then I was told as a parent, “Keep those kids under subjection.” And then as a pastor, “Keep those people under control.” That’s one of the problems that people have with grace in the pastoral setting, “Well, if we preach God’s grace what’s going to happen to the congregation? They may not come to church or they may not come to church as often. Or they may not give as much money. Or they may—my goodness! They may start doing all kinds of things!” As Dean of Students in a Bible college setting, my job was explained to me as keeping the students under control. *Control, control, control.* You know, God led me to the place where he helped me look in the mirror one day. He said, “Greg, take a look. How are you doing with controlling yourself?” And I had to say, “Not too good.” He said, “ Well, how are you doing with controlling your wife and your kids and the people you preach to?” I said, “Not too well.” And he said, “You know, it’s not really about

control, is it? That’s not what I’m about. You get a wrong perspective when you’re talking about control.”

Steve: Somebody said God doesn’t like it when you sit in his chair. We’re not suited to sit in his chair. The thing we have to do is *let go*. When we’re steeped in religion that’s the hardest thing in the world to do. Remember, again, the essence of religion is to bind up, to control. And so to *let go*? That just goes against everything that has been ingrained in us culturally, even going all the way back to the Garden of Eden when they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “the religion tree” I’ll call it, because remember, that tree was causing them to know right and wrong.

The essence of religion is trying to control ourselves and others. Let me tell you, there are two kinds of people involved in religion, and I know because I’ve been both. There are those who constantly beat themselves up because they *don’t* think they measure up, and then there are those who constantly beat other people up because they *do* think they measure up. There are those who think, when they look at other Christians, “Why can’t I be more like you?” And there are those who think, “Why can’t you be more like me?” It’s the old story of the two sons in Luke 15, the prodigal and the pious. One thinks he’s succeeding and one knows he’s failing. One’s filled with self-contempt, one’s filled with pride. But the reality is they both have a misconception of who the Father is, and they don’t really understand his unconditional love and grace. They both think it’s about performance and behavior.

Greg: When Jesus came, the message he had for religion at that time was “Stop taking yourself so seriously. Come and rest in me.” Religion then and now realizes that Jesus represents a problem for its status quo institutionalism. So religion propagandizes or

demonizes the message it has to get rid of. In the case of grace, religion warns people of disastrous consequences if grace is fully embraced. “Our traditions are going to be destroyed, our whole world is going to be turned upside down,” as they said in the book of Acts. “The status quo we enjoy and life as we know it will be over—if people take this grace thing too seriously.” Jesus said to the man who was lying there and who wanted to be healed (John 5:6), “*Do you want to be healed?*” It was a great question. “Do you really know what’s involved in being healed? Because if you do, I will heal you. But it’s going to change your life big-time.”

Steve: A lot of people don’t want to be healed, you know. You ask that today—do you really want to get well? Because remember, when you do it’s going to take away all your excuses. When you get well, it’s going to put responsibility on you to trust the Lord instead of looking to other people to carry you—like that guy was doing. Not everybody really wants to get well.

Greg: Steve, I want to thank you for your insights and your ministry. I want to thank you for your friendship personally to me and to Plain Truth Ministries. I want to encourage you to keep on writing, keep on traveling, keep on speaking, and don’t give up. We need more people like you in this world who are courageously standing in the face of religious maxims and religious traditions and religious ideas. I thank you for all of that. And I want to thank you for being with us today.

Steve: Thank you, Greg, you are definitely a kindred spirit and I am thankful that, while there’s no formal affiliation between us, we share the same DNA when it comes to promoting the truth of grace and helping people to be free from religion. So it’s always good to be with you. Thanks for this opportunity.

Greg: Thanks everybody for allowing us to share some grace with you, and we encourage you to go out there and do the same. Go out there and share this same message with your friends. Don’t be surprised, not all of them are going to like it, but it is a message that needs to be told. It is the gospel of the Kingdom of God. God bless you all and thanks for joining us. □