



GRACE FOR EXPLOITED AND ABUSED NOBODIES

*Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of the "brightest and the best" among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these "nobodies" to expose the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies"? That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ. That's why we have the saying, "If you are going to blow a horn, blow a trumpet for God." —1 Corinthians 1:26-31, *The Message**

Biblical word pictures of streams and rivers illustrate the free-flowing grace of God, and by contrast, deserts and parched places portray empty souls cut off from God. Those who find

themselves wandering far from the river of life wither, and become spiritually dehydrated.

God's grace flows downward, from divinity to humanity. It's like water in that it flows to low places, responding favorably to the spiritual gravitational pull of humility. God's grace is normally resisted by religious high places—but welcomed in the lowest of places.

God gives his grace to those who have been humbled, while he resists the spiritually proud (1 Peter 5:5). God's grace is experienced by many who are well aware of their spiritual needs, and therefore willingly come to the river of life. By contrast, those who believe themselves to be spiritually sufficient see no need to make their spiritual home by the banks of the river of life. The spiritually proud see God's grace as unnecessary—it cascades off their souls like the proverbial “water off a duck's back.” God's grace thrives in the lives of nobodies who have been overlooked, exploited, abused and abandoned. When we are down and out we find it far easier to be convinced we are in desperate need of God's grace.

When Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) was first beginning, two opposing groups divided about how they would best help alcoholics. One group, which was called the Oxford Group, required its members to commit to a Christian creed. The Oxford Group essentially believed that its members could work themselves out of alcoholism.

The other group insisted on grace as its foundation—this group, which became the AA we know today—insisted that the only way that alcoholics could deal with their addictions was through grace. They decided not to hide the past, but rather, at the beginning of each AA meeting, each person was

encouraged to say, “Hi, I’m...and I’m an alcoholic.”

This practice in AA, which continues to this day, is not a white flag signaling capitulation to addiction, but rather surrender to a “higher power” who must deliver and redeem a person from alcoholism. AA speaks of God as a “higher power” for its goal is to help people of all faiths and for those who have no faith. A higher power must do for addicts that which addicts cannot do for themselves. Like water, God’s grace flows to low places. Grace involves dependence on the part of the addict—not independence. Accepting God’s grace involves surrender, and few things are as hard to surrender as cherished religious ceremonies, observances and icons.

God’s grace is at the heart of the relationship God offers to you and me—it’s the foundation of that relationship. God’s grace, in turn, flows out of God’s love—and God’s love is the very essence and nature of who he is. But we must understand that God’s generous offer of grace is on his terms, not on ours. His terms are that we surrender all Christless traditions and conventions that attempt to persuade us that in some way our efforts, through our religious exercises, rituals and performances will enable us to grow more righteous, develop more holiness or build more character—making us spiritually sufficient apart from him.

When we do something that we have been assured makes God more pleased with us than he would have been had we not done so, pride is the inevitable result. Some even propose that God is obligated to respond to our religious deeds. The whole performance-based culture leads to spiritual arrogance—with many pridefully concluding:

“I’m-better-than-others because of all the special and unique things I do.”

God opposes religious pride and arrogance while giving grace to the humble. God’s grace is a summary statement of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus consistently opposed the high and mighty, haughty and arrogant, spiritually entitled religious institutionalism of his day, and instead preferred simple fishermen, lepers, prostitutes, lowly tax collectors, despised shepherds, and yes—even women, who were regarded as second-class citizens.

Jesus was grace personified.

Sadly, within Christ-less religion, which predominates in Christendom today, grace is only a word. Why is it that so much of Christendom, ostensibly composed of Christ-followers, is filled with hatred, rage, competition, arrogance and arguments about doctrine, beliefs and creeds? The New Testament overflows with God’s grace. Whatever happened to his grace?

Within Christ-less religion the emphasis is on what individuals can do to make themselves more pleasing to God. Within authentic Christianity, individuals must surrender the idea that they can take care of their own spiritual problems. Accepting grace, which comes from God by way of Jesus Christ, involves an acceptance of the supremacy of the Master, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Opening Our Hands and Hearts

Augustine, one of the early church fathers, once said that God wants to give us good things but our hands are too full to receive them. God always reaches out to us with his grace, but in order to receive his grace we must be willing to empty our

hands and hearts of the religion that we hold near and dear.

If we release the performance-based way of relating to God and open our hands and hearts to him, God will fill us with the riches of his grace. God's grace is the currency—the medium of exchange—of the kingdom of heaven. God freely gives us all the spiritual resources we will ever need, if we will only agree to accept his grace. All that we ever need in order to know and experience God has been accomplished for us, in and through the work of Jesus Christ. It's D-O-N-E.

By contrast, the currency of the kingdom of religion is D-O. The kingdom of religion relentlessly screams at us: "Show me your spiritual money! Earn your own way. Demonstrate what you are doing for the kingdom of religion. Prove yourself. Work harder. Do more. Your account is overdrawn. Put in some overtime. Light more candles, say more prayers, attend church more often—get with the program!"

God's kingdom of heaven operates on an entirely different spiritual platform than the kingdoms of our world. Religious deeds and accomplishments are worthless in the kingdom of heaven—they are like counterfeit or Monopoly money. Currency we earn by our hard work and efforts has no value in the kingdom of heaven.

We have nothing to offer God that he doesn't already have. We can't buy or purchase God's favor. Without God's grace, the hardest working saint you know is spiritually impoverished. The most righteous person you can ever hope to meet, apart from the righteousness which comes only from God, will never accrue spiritual treasures they can use in the kingdom of heaven. God gives his grace to those

who recognize their need, and are willing to sell all that they value and cherish. God gives his grace to those who surrender all their spiritual treasures and trophies, and come and follow Jesus.

The kingdom of heaven is all about God's goodness, holiness and righteousness, which he offers to us, by his grace. If we accept the invitation of his love and grace, then we do so without any strings attached. We cannot import religious artifacts and customs into the kingdom of heaven. God is opposed to legalistic religion with all its Christ-less religious rituals, ceremonies and performances because it drives us away from him. The kingdom of religion makes us proud of what we do and what we accomplish—it deludes and deceives us.

The kingdom of religion encourages many to labor under the false premise that God is trying to fix them. Thus, they perceive their relationship with God as a spiritual behavior modification program. But God is not simply trying to fix and repair us. He is not at all interested in applying religious super-glue to our souls. God is interested in our complete transformation. He offers us, by his grace, a new life in Christ—a spiritual reality we cannot earn.

Resting in Christ

The announcement of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed was and is incredibly great news! The gospel of Jesus Christ is a revolutionary declaration that the old is gone, and the new has come (see 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Revelation 21:4-5). Through his birth, life, death and resurrection Jesus brought a new spiritual kingdom to this earth. It's often

been said that Jesus didn't come to start another religion—he offered salvation from the havoc wreaked by the kingdom of religion. Neither did Jesus come to offer cosmetic reforms to the kingdom of religion. He came with new wine, a new covenant and a new way of relating to God. He didn't come to add to the problem of our shame and guilt—he came to introduce and offer the solution!

In the beginning, when God finished his work of creation he rested. He obviously wasn't tired—he didn't need time to catch his breath. He rested in the sense that the work was over—nothing more needed to be done to the physical creation. *His work was finished.* In the old covenant the seventh-day Sabbath was a memorial of creation, and in this physical covenant the emphasis was on physical performance and deeds. Thus, under the old covenant, the people of God didn't physically work on the seventh day. Physical rest was the physical footing laid down by the old covenant Sabbath, but it was only a shadow (Colossians 2:17) of the Messianic reality of spiritual rest.

However, religion overshadowed and obscured any deeper significance of Sabbath rest, so that the seventh-day day itself, rather than its divine Reality, became just another obligation. The seventh day, along with the other rules and restrictions of the old covenant, became a religious ritual, devoid of any spiritual significance. The Sabbath came to be virtually idolized as the sign of those who were God's people, compared to those who were not. The Sabbath, along with other old covenant stipulations, was enthroned by the religion of Jesus' day as a central part of its distinctive, esoteric and

exclusive identity. Religion assured its followers that they were God's people because they observed the Sabbath. Law keeping and law breaking became, in their eyes, the criteria of one's relationship with God.

The Sabbath was one of the major controversies of Jesus' ministry and teachings. Time and time again Jesus clashed with Sabbath-religion. Astonished Sabbath-keepers heard him declare himself as Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). The gospel of Jesus Christ first diminished and then devalued the past identity of the first Christians (all of whom were, originally, Jewish Sabbath-keepers) and within a few decades demolished it. The physical Sabbath was obsolete, because the gospel of Jesus Christ insisted that relationship with God was based on identity with Jesus, not the Sabbath.

Jesus identified himself as *I AM*, a title or name for God that came to be seen by that law-obsessed community as so sacred that it could not even be spoken. Jesus, God the Son, was the Creator who had rested on the seventh day to begin with—he finished that work. And now he had come to earth to finish another work. He came to finish off performance-based religion and give all humanity true rest. He came to announce another way to know and be known by God. He came to fulfill all of the requirements of the old covenant. When he finished his mission, effectively ending religion as a method by which humanity might experience God, he said, "*It is finished*" (John 19:30).

Rest in Christ turned religious conjectures and suppositions about *how God should work* right-side up. Christ-less religion then, during Jesus' earthly ministry, and ever since that time, believes that

God should reward the faithful, hardworking and obedient. According to religion, one prerequisite for receiving God's favor is physically resting on a prescribed day. In addition to a long and formidable list of stipulations, Christ-less religion believes that God should work through its own conventional religious institutions and structures—through its trained and educated clergy—certainly not through some untrained and unlettered carpenter.

But it was the Carpenter from Nazareth who came to reveal God. Jesus of Nazareth did not conform to the structures and methodologies of religion. His unconventional teaching proclaimed grace, offering true rest, including much-needed rest from performance-based religion as the way to relate to God.

It is with rest in Christ in mind that I invite you to catch a glimpse of grace in the teachings of Jesus. *A Taste of Grace* offers appetizing samples of God's grace through Jesus' parables and stories and metaphors and analogies—as well as in his straight from the shoulder no-holds-barred confrontations with religion and its leadership. By God's grace, the pages that follow offer a taste of the unvarnished, original and authentic grace evident in selected teachings of Jesus.

The kingdom of religion is all about paying your dues and making your own way. It's all about earning and getting what you deserve. *Christianity Without the Religion* is all about God's unmerited favor—it's called grace!