

Living by Grace

“As every man hath received the gift, *even so* minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” (1 Peter 4:10 KJV)

Of late, I have been reading the excellent biography of Dietrich Bonhoffer, by Eric Metaxas.

As you may know, Bonhoffer was one of the few Christian leaders in German who stood up to Hitler and the Nazis. He was particularly horrified by the takeover of the German Protestant Churches by the so-called Reichskirche, which was established by the Nazis in 1933 to unify all of the Evangelical Churches in Germany and to give them a new doctrine which was compatible with National Socialism. Those who, like Bonhoffer, objected to this new arrangement formed the independent “Confessing Church” which was horribly persecuted by the Nazis. Most of its pastors either ultimately went underground or were put in concentration camps where many of them died. Bonhoffer himself was so outraged by Nazi policies, especially with regards to the Jews, that he became a part of the plot to kill Hitler, an decision which led to his arrest and eventual execution.

Of particular interest with respect to the subject of our series is Bonhoffer’s concepts of “cheap grace” versus “costly grace.”

In Bonhoeffer's own words:

“cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.”

Or, even more clearly, it is to hear the gospel preached as follows: "Of course you have sinned, but now everything is forgiven, so you can stay as you are and enjoy the consolations of forgiveness." The main defect of such a proclamation is that it contains no demand for discipleship.

In contrast to this is costly grace:

“costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: ‘My yoke is easy and my burden is light.’”

Just how costly grace can be can find no clearer example than in the life of Bonhoffer himself. His choice to follow Jesus as a disciple cost him his very life.

To step back from this issue for a moment, it is important to recognize that “cheap grace” is a heresy. Christian Truth always requires the holding of two seemingly mutually exclusive parts of the truth in tension. For example, Christian Truth requires us to hold the humanity of Christ and the divinity of Christ in tension. The Doctrine of the Trinity requires us to hold the unity of God in tension with the Trinity of Persons. Heresy always consists of holding fast to one part of the truth while denying or ignoring the balancing part of the truth. Heresy is particularly nasty because it contains truth and is always supportable from Scripture, if you pick and choose which verses to examine. It is always possible to “proof text” your way into heresy. It is only when the fulness of the Scriptures are searched with an open mind and an open heart that the balancing truth is revealed and the difficult business of holding the two seemingly irreconcilable aspects of Truth in tension is required of us.

Certainly cheap grace is a heresy because it emphasizes only part of the truth about God. God is indeed loving and merciful. God’s grace is the manifestation the loving and merciful nature of God towards sinful men. There is, however, a balancing truth which must be held in tension with God’s love and mercy, and that is God’s holiness and righteousness. God’s wrath is the manifestation of His holiness and righteousness towards unrepentant sinners.

If we accept the loving and merciful God, the God of grace, but reject the holy and righteous God, the God of awesome wrath, we create for ourselves a god who is a moral idiot, an enabler of human wickedness and vice, a patsy who can be bought off by pious words and ceremonies. Certainly, the God of the Prophets warns His people over and over not to be taken in by such nonsense. “Ye shall be holy, for I am holy,” He tells them.

Before I move on, it is worth noting that “cheap grace” is not the exclusive property of either the Catholic or Evangelical wings of the Christian Church. Both are equally subject to preaching “cheap grace.” The Catholic version of cheap grace places an excessive reliance on the Sacraments as leading to salvation without a demand for true repentance and discipleship. The most grotesque example of the Catholic form of cheap grace is the final scene of “The Godfather,” wherein Michael Corleone renounces the “world, the flesh, and the devil” on behalf of his godson, while at the same moment his henchmen are assassinating all of his enemies. This same kind of sacramental cheap grace is often manifested in the demand on the part of some to “get the young un’s done,” to baptize children without the expectation that they will be raised in the Church.

The Evangelical version of cheap grace emphasizes praying “the sinner’s prayer” as being sufficient for salvation without seeing it as the first step on the road of discipleship. A truly gross form of this is often preached to prisoners who are told that if you just say that prayer you can do whatever you want thereafter and God has to forgive you. In a much more attenuated form cheap grace is often manifested in Evangelical circles by the “me an’ Jesus” Christians, who, having said the prayer see no necessity of becoming a true and living part of the body of Christ, the Church.

Like all heresies, however, “cheap grace” has a contrary heresy, and that is “legalism.” Legalism is the belief that we can, through our own efforts, become holy enough to earn God’s favor. It is the equivalent of a man trying to lift himself by his own bootstraps. It was, of course, the religion of the Pharisees and is the religion of many orthodox Jews today. But before we criticize them too strongly for such a belief, without a belief in the redeeming work of Christ upon the Cross, what other option exists?

What is truly blameworthy however, is Christian legalism. Christian legalism would substitute the keeping of elaborate rules, of “do’s” and “don’ts”, for a living discipleship relationship with Christ. Legalism truly makes the grace of God of none effect. The seductive aspect of Christian legalism is that it looks good. The Christian legalist lives an upright and moral life. He pays his bills and keeps his lawn mowed. He will not be found drunk in the public square. He will fall through the doors of the church every time they open. He tithes, reads his Bible, and says his prayers.

Like “cheap grace” legalism comes in both Evangelical and Catholic flavors. The Evangelical flavor will often be expressed in making certain otherwise lawful pleasures taboo. “We don’t smoke and we don’t chew, and we don’t go with the girls that do!” Need I mention that the Evangelical legalist will often take a very dim view of alcohol, even if Jesus himself drank wine?

The Catholic legalist will also have his “do’s” and “don’ts.” Punctilious observance of fasting and abstinence in Lent, for example. Also, he will rigorously observe all of the Holy Days of Obligation. He will generally be very strong concerning the “right to life” issues.

What both kinds of legalists share is a profound temptation to spiritual pride. Since they do these things in their own power, they will naturally tend to feel pretty good about themselves, and despise others. The best scriptural example of this sort of pride is the Pharisee who prayed, **“God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.”** (Luke 18:11-12 KJV)

What makes this sort of legalism hard to detect is that the true disciple will end up doing many if not most of the same things. The difference is in the motivation. The legalist hopes to earn God’s favor, God’s grace, through his careful observation of the “do’s” and “don’ts” of his particular flavor of legalism. The true disciple knows that he cannot earn God’s favor, but that he has, for no reason except for the love of God in Christ Jesus, received it.

How then are we to navigate between these two heresies? We must at all costs avoid “cheap grace” without falling into legalism. We must absolutely learn to rely upon the grace of God without presuming upon the grace of God. I trust by now that the answer will be perhaps evident. If we set our hearts upon being disciples then we will not be tempted by either heresy. Our behavior should be motivated by two things only. First, gratitude. We must truly appreciate what God in Christ has done for us and will therefore engage in whatever disciplines we are led to adopt as a grateful offering to God. Second, we must truly desire to become like Christ, which is the very meaning of discipleship. In order to advance and perfect our imitation of Christ, we will manfully try to eliminate all behaviors which are not Christlike, and seek to practice those behaviors which are. We know and accept that we will never do this perfectly, but we trust in God to show

us when we has gone off the rails and that when, not if, we repent, he will put us back on the path. As true disciples we have no reason for pride in any spiritual progress we detect. We know and understand that it is solely the result of the grace of God acting in our lives.

By the same token, we will not sit in judgment upon our brother. We will extend grace to him, even as we have received grace. How could the true disciple do otherwise? The true disciple will understand that we are all on our own Christian journeys. We will rejoice when we see our brother stand, lament and reach out a helping hand when we see him fall. And if we feel led to offer a word of correction or advice, it will be done gracefully: privately and with the utmost of respect for our brother as a fellow disciple. Above all, we will pray for our brother and trust in God to deliver both him and us into His Kingdom. “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in (us) will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6 KJV)

Amen.