

Why I Love the Message of Grace

It was John Newton, the former slave trader and the author of "Amazing Grace," who penned the famous words, "How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed." I can relate to that personally, and that's one reason I'm so jealous for the unadulterated grace of God, for grace without mixture, grace without leaven, grace without exaggeration.

On Dec. 17, 1971, the revelation of God's love so flooded my heart that I told the Lord I would never put a needle in my arm again, and I was free from that moment on. No more heroin. No more speed. No more addiction to the needle. No more hallucinogenic drugs. Jesus truly delivered me!

For the previous six weeks there had been a tremendous battle in my soul—beginning Nov. 12, 1971, when I first believed that Jesus died for my sins, which was a major breakthrough for a 16 year-old, rebellious, proud, Jewish rock drummer. Prior to that, I had mocked the message of the gospel and boasted about my sin, but as the believers in a little Italian Pentecostal Church in Queens, N.Y. prayed for me, the Holy Spirit began to convict me (although I had no idea they were praying for me), and I knew something was terribly wrong with my life.

Then, after the light went on in my heart in November, I wrestled with God, shooting heroin one day and going to church the next, until that memorable service on Dec. 17. As the pastor's wife played the piano and we sang the old hymns—hymns which sounded like little ditties to me compared to the Led Zeppelin and Jimi Hendrix music I listened to day and night—I became overwhelmed by the joy of the Lord and received a dramatic revelation.

I saw myself filthy from head to toe, and then I saw myself

washed cleaned with the blood of Jesus and clothed with beautiful white robes, only to go back and play in the mud. I was spurning God's love, a love that was poured out on me when I was a filthy, godless sinner. I was mocking the blood of Jesus, blood that was shed for me when I was stealing money from my own father and bragging about how deceitful I could be.

At that moment, God's goodness exposed my badness, and I surrendered my life to the Lord and said goodbye to the life I had been living. And it was not hard to make the radical break. What a Savior!

That was more than 41 years ago, and I can honestly say that I have experienced more of God's grace as a believer than as a lost sinner. Every day of my life, I am cleansed from the defilement of the world by the blood of Jesus, even as I walk in the light (see 1 John 1:7). And when I have disappointed the Lord and grieved His Spirit (see Eph. 4:30), the moment I turn to him in repentance, he forgives and forgets my sins (see Mic. 7:17-19). What a gracious God!

But there's still more. Every day of my life, I am empowered to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law by God's grace (see Rom. 8:1-4; Titus 2:11-15). As Pastor David Wilkerson said, "According to Paul, we are not walking in grace until we have broken from worldly corruptions. Unless we are endeavoring through the power of the Holy Spirit to lead godly and righteous lives ... we do not know God's grace."

And that's why I'm so jealous for the true message of grace. There are heretical "grace" teachers who exaggerate God's grace, claiming that everyone will be saved in the end. And there are sincere, godly hyper-grace preachers who add mixture to God's grace, claiming that if you ask God to forgive you when you sin as a believer, you are committing the sin of unbelief (really!).

Some of these teachers will even tell you exactly how you should express yourself to God, suggesting the right words to use to be sure you don't say, "Father, forgive me," since hyper-grace teachers believe the moment you get saved, God pronounces your future sins forgiven along with your past and present sins.

To me, when a preacher tells me what words to use in prayer and tells me it's a sin to ask God to forgive me, he is mixing grace with legalism, forgetting the fact that we have a wonderful, intimate relationship with our heavenly Father who is more concerned with the condition of our hearts than with our religious formulas. And although my hyper-grace colleagues emphasize that God is always happy with us and pleased with us, as a righteous child of the Father, I have no problem saying, "Lord, I'm sorry for displeasing you. Wash me clean with the blood of Jesus, and forgive me."

And when I say those words to the Lord, the blood that was shed on the cross is applied afresh to my heart, and that's one reason why I live in 24/7 assurance of the Father's love for me, condemnation free (always, without exception, for decades), eager to find out what pleases the Lord (see Eph. 5:10).

The hyper-grace message, which tells me that nothing I do will ever displease the Lord, which claims that I'm committing the sin of unbelief if I ask Abba to forgive me, and which is so quick to brand those outside of its camp as "law-keepers" and "Pharisees," pollutes something very dear to my heart, and that's why I continue to contend for grace without mixture.

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