

The Practice of Grace Mike Wolff

(This was sent to a group as an email. I posted it here because it is so relevant and important.)

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age... (Titus 2:11-12)

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked. (1 John 2:3-6)

I had an opportunity to talk to a man truly seeking spiritual truth the other night. The subject of the conversation is the reason why whatever hurdles Satan continues to throw in my way, this ministry must press on. John (fictitious name) is one of the most astute real estate investor/entrepreneurs I know. He has made millions through good markets and bad, yet is a very humble man and not at all ignorant to spiritual matters. He, like all true spiritual seekers, knows there is something beyond what he can see, smell, touch, and taste that rules the affairs of men, and yet with so many voices proclaiming they know the way is wondering if there is one true God. John's beliefs were largely centered around a "cosmic consciousness" centered in "god," but our conversations revealed he is drawing from many religious beliefs as to how to define Him.

As we talked, he told me of a conversation he and a Christian friend had held, where they discussed two men: one was a "Christian" (from his words and countenance it was easy to see it was not a fictitious character he had made up) who cheated daily in his business affairs, was basically known as a jerk, and yet went to church on Sunday to worship and be forgiven of his sins, and the other was a Buddhist Monk who spent the majority of his time diligently seeking his god and doing charitable deeds. John asked this man which one was going to heaven, and the man said, "Oh, the first man, for you can't be good enough to get to heaven without Jesus." John asked me what I thought of that, and I told him I believed his friend was half right. The monk was not going to find salvation in good works and diligence alone, but I believed those stealing the grace of Christ while ignoring the command of Christ and living worldly lifestyles were skating on thin ice indeed.

During the height of the Nazi regime in Germany, Adolf Hitler sought to coerce one of the giants of modern Christianity, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to join him in establishing a state run church, for he was not ignorant of the power of religion. When Bonhoeffer would not be swayed, Hitler had him and his family thrown into a prison camp. So impressed by his teachings and ability to create a Christian community within the most hideous of environments, Bonhoeffer's Nazi guards risked their lives to smuggle his teachings out of the camps for the benefit of the free world. Ironically, just days before the death camp at Flossenbug was liberated, Dietrich and his family were put to death by direct order of Heinrich Himmler. According to witnesses he went peacefully to his death, encouraging his people in Christ to the very end.

In his classic, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer devotes his first chapter to what was his chief concern for the church in his day. It wasn't oppression at the hands of monsters like Hitler. It wasn't

even forfeiting life in the crucibles of death camps. He knew that we needn't fear those "who could kill the body, and after that there was nothing they could do." But what he did fear for the church was what he felt could "kill the soul." In this first chapter Dietrich revealed his greatest fear, one more alive and well today than ever in the land of freedom and plenty, and that is what he called "cheap grace." He described it as a grace men bestow on themselves, a grace separated from discipleship, the Cross, and Christ Himself. He called it a grace men concoct and then call upon whenever they need it, and in spite of any sort of pursuit of discipleship. In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard calls this "A costly faithlessness...Bar code faith"; grace that gives men a get out of jail free card to keep in their wallets during life here on earth, act in whatever manner pleases them, and swipe at the gates of heaven to gain access. It is the "Ephesians 2:8-9 without verse 10 gospel" so pervasive in the church today.

In my new book, I refer to this as "the idol of grace." The Pharisees removed the works of God from the heart of God, and made their rituals into an idol they bowed to that took the place of the true God. Any time we remove a part of God's character and truth from the sum of it and we worship it, it becomes an idol. For the past 50 or more years Christian religion in America has made an idol of grace, so men can "cheat in their business dealings and be known as jerks during the week, and then go to church on Sunday and be absolved." I do not believe this is why Christ died. My friend John was being held at arm's length from Jesus because of the "Christian jerks" that are all too common under the reign of the idol of grace in the modern church. Idols serve at man's pleasure, and grace alone requires nothing of man. Yet Jesus in His fullness is the God of truth, command, justice, and the final Judge of men's souls as well as the bringer of forgiveness, love, and grace. God calls us to be what we believe every day to the very best of our abilities, and commands us to an abiding relationship that brings forth the fruit of humility, repentance, and bearing fruit in the lives of others in His love. He calls the pursuit of the kingdom of heaven on earth "the Pearl of Great *price*, for which a man will sell all he has."

There is a rarely preached about word in the Scriptures: "practice." It is a critical word to understand in the disciple's life. In Matthew 7, Jesus says that many will come to Him on judgment day recounting all of the wonderful things they did with their mouths, and yet He will say to them, "Depart from Me, you who *practice* lawlessness." The writer of Hebrews calls *practice* the difference between babes who can't get beyond "elemental discussions of repentance from dead works and faith towards God," and disciples who eat the meat of their beliefs because they have learned through it to discern good and evil.

I prefer to look at it this way: grace is there in abundance for disciples who stumble in their passionate pursuit of Jesus, His kingdom, and His righteousness. I don't believe it is there for those who *practice stumbling*, pursue only their own selfish desires, and then come to church on Sunday to be absolved. I think Jesus summarized this well in the story of the woman caught in adultery. He said, "Neither do I condemn you...but...go and sin no more." Salvation is indeed a free gift, but it is anything but costless. Paul said of salvation that we were "to work it out in fear and trembling."

So I told John I disagreed with his friend when it came to the "Christian jerk." I told him Jesus calls us to forsake our own desires and walk according to our beliefs, and that I didn't think grace was there for those who would be thieves of it all the while practicing selfishness and worldly living. I apologized to him for the preaching the church is doing that is leading men into thinking that sort of living is okay, and for the cross-less, candy store message of salvation we are using in our evangelism Jesus never used in His. It led us into a fruitful talk of the difference between the God of Christians and all other gods, including a discussion of His fathomless grace.

There are so many “Johns” out there seeking sincerely which god to follow, and their greatest hesitation by far to following the God of the Bible is the hypocrisy they see in so many of His people. The idol of grace so many today cherry-pick from the Cross, extract from the Command, and bow to in order to live selfishly yet use to ensure their place in heaven is in a large part why, and dispelling this myth is one of the foundational goals for Reconnections.

Well, I may have lost some of you today. If that is so, then all I can say is “Amen.” Jesus didn’t water down the truth to get people to follow Him, and if I am to follow Him neither can I. The costless grace that caused Bonhoeffer such concern must be confronted and dispatched if we are ever to see the balance of truth and good deeds restored in the church. Until we learn to fear God again and put grace in its proper perspective—until men stop “sinning all the more that grace may abound”—the church in America will continue to look to all the John’s out there like “a bunch of cheaters and jerks who go in on Sundays to be absolved.”