

the
DISCIPLINE
of
GRACE

JERRY BRIDGES

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The Discipline of Grace

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CONTENTS

Preface vii

<i>Chapter 1:</i>	How Good Is Good Enough?	1
<i>Chapter 2:</i>	The Pharisee and the Tax Collector	19
<i>Chapter 3:</i>	Preach the Gospel to Yourself	35
<i>Chapter 4:</i>	We Died to Sin	53
<i>Chapter 5:</i>	Disciplined by Grace	71
<i>Chapter 6:</i>	Transformed into His Likeness	87
<i>Chapter 7:</i>	Obedying the Great Commandment	105
<i>Chapter 8:</i>	Dependent Discipline	121
<i>Chapter 9:</i>	The Discipline of Commitment	141
<i>Chapter 10:</i>	The Discipline of Convictions	159
<i>Chapter 11:</i>	The Discipline of Choices	181
<i>Chapter 12:</i>	The Discipline of Watching	203
<i>Chapter 13:</i>	The Discipline of Adversity	221

DISCUSSION GUIDE

How to Use This Guide 239

<i>Lesson 1:</i>	How Good Is Good Enough?	241
<i>Lesson 2:</i>	The Pharisee and the Tax Collector	249
<i>Lesson 3:</i>	Preach the Gospel to Yourself	257
<i>Lesson 4:</i>	We Died to Sin	267

<i>Lesson 5: Disciplined by Grace</i>	<i>273</i>
<i>Lesson 6: Transformed into His Likeness</i>	<i>281</i>
<i>Lesson 7: Obeying the Great Commandment</i>	<i>285</i>
<i>Lesson 8: Dependent Discipline</i>	<i>293</i>
<i>Lesson 9: The Discipline of Commitment</i>	<i>301</i>
<i>Lesson 10: The Discipline of Convictions</i>	<i>307</i>
<i>Lesson 11: The Discipline of Choices</i>	<i>313</i>
<i>Lesson 12: The Discipline of Watching</i>	<i>321</i>
<i>Lesson 13: The Discipline of Adversity</i>	<i>327</i>
<i>Notes</i>	<i>333</i>
<i>Author</i>	<i>339</i>

PREFACE

Shortly after my book *The Pursuit of Holiness* was published in 1978, I was invited to give a series of ten lectures on that subject at a church in our city. One night I titled my lecture “The Chapter I Wish I Had Written.” The nature of that message was that the pursuit of holiness must be motivated by an ever-increasing understanding of the grace of God; else it can become oppressive and joyless.

The study and reflection that went into that lecture started me down the path of further study on the grace of God, culminating in a later book, *Transforming Grace*. As I sought to relate the biblical principle of living by grace to the equally biblical principle of personal discipline, I realized that it would be helpful to bring these two truths together in one book. That is the purpose of this volume.

A publisher’s deadline is both a slave master and a friend. It is a slave master in that it keeps my “nose to the grindstone” when there are so many other things calling, even screaming, for my attention (such as my garage, which desperately needs my attention). The deadline is a friend, however, in that it forces me to say, “Enough is enough.” It seems I am continually thinking

of more things I want to say, but there comes a time when I must turn over a finished manuscript to the editor and trust that the Holy Spirit has prompted me to say all that needs to be said.

One of the more difficult aspects for me of writing a book about grace and holiness is the continual need for self-examination, lest I become like the teachers of the law and the Pharisees of whom Jesus said, “They do not practice what they preach” (Matthew 23:3). The self-examination is often painful, and I have to confess that I struggle to apply much of what I have written in this book. That is why you will find a continual emphasis on the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. It is only the gospel that keeps me pursuing holiness, and it is only the assurance of His grace in Christ that gives me the courage to pass on what I have learned and am still learning.

One of my life verses, which gives both direction and motivation, is Ephesians 3:8: “Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.” It is in that spirit that I submit this book to you.

One of the joys of writing a preface is the opportunity to express appreciation to those who have helped in one way or another in the writing of a book. To that end I must first of all acknowledge the giants who have gone before me and from whose writings I have profited so much. I think particularly of the Puritan theologian John Owen, who, in his writings, has taught me so much about the pursuit of holiness. Next among those who have gone before would be the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian George Smeaton, through whom I have come to a richer understanding of the gospel.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to my friend Dr. Jack Miller, from whom I acquired the expression “Preach the gospel to

PREFACE

yourself every day.” I had been doing that, somewhat out of necessity, for several years, but Dr. Miller helped bring that concept into sharper focus and more conscious application for me.

My friend Don Simpson read the manuscript and gave me valuable feedback and suggestions. This is the third time Don has helped me by reading a manuscript, and he has been a faithful friend. Steve Webb, my editor at NavPress, has also given valuable suggestions and encouragement. Many of my friends across the country responded to an “SOS” for prayer support when I was about halfway through the book and so discouraged I was ready to give it up. You know who you are, so thank you so very, very much.

Sue Zeug, my assistant, typed the manuscript, including numerous revisions, since I am still trying to come into the computer age. My wife, Jane, has again encouraged me by her prayers and patience during the time I have devoted my attention to this book.

Most of all I am grateful to God, who has given me the privilege of ministering to others through the printed page. I am certainly an unworthy servant, and it is, again, only by His grace that I have this ministry.

CHAPTER ONE

HOW GOOD IS GOOD ENOUGH?

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered.

“No one is good—except God alone.”

MARK 10:18

As I was sitting in the doctor’s waiting room one day, my eye was drawn to a remarkable picture of a man being sculpted. The sculpture was complete down to about midthigh, and the finished work showed a very robust and muscular man with the kind of physique all men would like to have. The striking thing about the picture, however, was that the artist had put the hammer and chisel in the hands of the man being sculpted.

I was fascinated by the picture and wondered what message the artist was trying to convey. Perhaps he was trying to paint a picture of the so-called self-made man. As I studied the picture, however, I marveled at how it did depict so well the way many Christians try to live the Christian life. We try to change ourselves. We take what we think are the tools of spiritual transformation into our own hands and try to sculpt ourselves into robust Christlike specimens. But spiritual transformation is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the Master Sculptor.

However, we must not press this analogy too far. The picture was of a block of marble being sculpted into a man. Both the original piece of marble and the finished product were inert, lifeless forms. That is not true in our case. We are endowed with

reason, emotions, and a will, all of which were renewed at the time we trusted Christ for salvation, and which the Holy Spirit works through as He involves us in the transforming process.

The Holy Spirit's work in transforming us more and more into the likeness of Christ is called sanctification. Our involvement and cooperation with Him in His work is what I call the pursuit of holiness. That expression is not original with me. Rather, it is taken from Hebrews 12:14: "Make every effort [literally: pursue] . . . to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."

The pursuit of holiness requires sustained and vigorous effort. It allows for no indolence, no lethargy, no half-hearted commitment, and no *laissez-faire* attitude toward even the smallest sins. In short, it demands the highest priority in the life of a Christian, because to be holy is to be like Christ—God's goal for every Christian.

The word *pursue* in this context means to strive to gain or accomplish. Note the strong verb *strive*. As we have already seen, the Greek word for pursue is translated "make every effort" in Hebrews 12:14. In Philippians 3:12-14, it is translated "press on." The most common use of it in the New Testament, however, is translated "persecute" and carries the common meaning of that word—to track down in order to harm or destroy. It is a very vigorous word.

At the same time, however, the pursuit of holiness must be anchored in the grace of God; otherwise it is doomed to failure. That statement probably strikes many people as strange. A lot of Christians seem to think that the grace of God and the vigorous pursuit of holiness are antithetical—that is, in direct and unequivocal opposition to one another.

To some, the pursuit of holiness sounds like legalism and man-made rules. To others, an emphasis on grace seems to open

the door to irresponsible, sinful behavior based on the notion that God's unconditional love means we are free to sin as we please.

Some years ago, I wrote a book titled *The Pursuit of Holiness*¹ in which I strongly emphasized our responsibility for holiness as opposed to the concept of just turning it all over to God. Thirteen years later I wrote another book, *Transforming Grace*,² in which I urged believers to learn to live by grace, not by performance. After *Transforming Grace* was published, many people asked me how it related to *The Pursuit of Holiness*. The question always seemed to carry the suggestion that grace and the pursuit of holiness are incompatible. One lady even went so far as to wonder how the same person who wrote the book on holiness could possibly have written a book on grace.

Grace and the personal discipline required to pursue holiness, however, are not opposed to one another. In fact, they go hand in hand. An understanding of how grace and personal, vigorous effort work together is essential for a lifelong pursuit of holiness. Yet many believers do not understand what it means to live by grace in their daily lives, and they certainly don't understand the relationship of grace to personal discipline.

Consider two radically different days in your own life. The first one is a good day spiritually for you. You get up promptly when your alarm goes off and have a refreshing and profitable quiet time as you read your Bible and pray. Your plans for the day generally fall into place, and you somehow sense the presence of God with you. To top it off, you unexpectedly have an opportunity to share the gospel with someone who is truly searching. As you talk with the person, you silently pray for the Holy Spirit to help you and to also work in your friend's heart.

The second day is just the opposite. You don't arise at the first ring of your alarm. Instead, you shut it off and go back

to sleep. When you finally awaken, it's too late to have a quiet time. You hurriedly gulp down some breakfast and rush off to the day's activities. You feel guilty about oversleeping and missing your quiet time, and things just generally go wrong all day. You become more and more irritable as the day wears on, and you certainly don't sense God's presence in your life. That evening, however, you quite unexpectedly have an opportunity to share the gospel with someone who is really interested in receiving Christ as Savior.

Would you enter those two witnessing opportunities with a different degree of confidence? Would you be less confident on the bad day than on the good day? Would you find it difficult to believe that God would bless you and use you in the midst of a rather bad spiritual day?

If you answered yes to those questions, you have lots of company among believers. I've described these two scenarios to a number of audiences and asked, "Would you respond differently?" Invariably, about 80 percent indicate that they would. They would be less confident of God's blessing while sharing Christ at the end of a bad day than they would after a good one. Is such thinking justified? Does God work that way? The answer to both questions is no, because God's blessing does not depend on our performance.

Why then do we think this way? It is because we do believe that God's blessing on our lives is somehow conditioned upon our spiritual performance. If we've performed well and had a "good" day, we assume we are in a position for God to bless us. Oh, we know God's blessings come to us through Christ, but we also have this vague but very real notion that they are also conditioned on our behavior. A friend of mine used to think, *If I do certain things, then I can get God to come through for me.*

Such thinking is even stronger when we've had a "bad" day.

There is virtually no doubt in our minds that we have forfeited God's favor for some period of time, most likely until the next day. I've asked people why they think God would probably not use them to share the gospel with someone on a "bad" day. A typical reply is, "I wouldn't be worthy," or "I wouldn't be good enough."

Such a reply reveals an all-too-common misconception of the Christian life: the thinking that, although we are saved by grace, we earn or forfeit God's blessings in our daily lives by our performance.

A BAD DAY

So what should we do when we've had a "bad" day spiritually, when it seems we've done everything wrong and are feeling very guilty? We must go back to the cross and see Jesus there bearing our sins in His own body (1 Peter 2:24). We must by faith appropriate for ourselves the blood of Christ that will cleanse our guilty consciences (see Hebrews 9:14).

For example, in the bad-day scenario I've described, we might pray to God something like the following:

Father, I have sinned against You. I've been negligent in the spiritual disciplines that I know are necessary and helpful for my spiritual growth. I've been irritable and impatient toward those around me. I've allowed resentful and unkind thoughts to lodge in my mind. I repent of these sins and claim Your forgiveness.

You have said You justify the wicked (Romans 4:5). Father, in view of my sins today, I acknowledge that in myself I am wicked. In fact, my problem is not merely the sins I've committed, some of which I may not even be aware of, but the fact that my heart is sinful. These

sins I am so painfully conscious of now are merely the expressions of my sinful heart.

But despite my sins and my sinfulness, You have said, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). Given my acute awareness of my sin just now, that seems to be an incredible statement. How can I be without condemnation when I have so flagrantly and willfully sinned against You today?

O Father, I know it is because Jesus bore the sins I’ve committed today in His body on the cross. He suffered the punishment I deserve, so that I might experience the blessings He deserved. So I come to You, dear Father, and in Jesus’ name I ask You to enable me to effectively share the gospel with this friend just now.

You can readily see by the spirit of humility expressed in that prayer that I am not proposing a cavalier attitude toward sin. Rather, I am saying that God’s grace through Christ is greater than our sin, even on our worst days. To experience that grace, however, we must lay hold of it by faith in Christ and His death on our behalf. Now, your particular prayer may not be as long as the one I’ve written. The issue is not how long your prayer is; it is the attitude of your heart. Do the sentiments expressed in that prayer reflect your heart attitude? I have read that every time the great nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon stepped into the pulpit, he did so with the silent prayer, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13, KJV). Spurgeon’s one-sentence prayer captures all I’ve expressed in four paragraphs.

You can pray a prayer like this whenever you are acutely aware of your need of God’s intervening grace and at the same time are painfully aware of your total undeservedness of that grace. In fact, we obviously should not wait until we have a need

for God to bless us. We should pray such a prayer of repentance and faith just to have our consciences cleansed from all sin and to walk in fellowship with God.

A GOOD DAY

Now, let's go back to the good-day scenario, the day when your spiritual disciplines are all in place and you are reasonably satisfied with your Christian performance. Have you thereby earned God's blessing that day? Will God be pleased to bless you because you've been good? You are probably thinking, *Well, when you put it like that, the answer is no. But doesn't God only work through clean vessels?* To which I reply, "Let's assume that is true. How good then do you have to be to be a clean vessel? *How good is good enough?*"

When one of the Pharisees asked Jesus, "'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:36-39).

Using Jesus' response to the Pharisee as a standard, how good has your good day been? Have you perfectly kept those two commandments? If not, does God grade on a curve? Is 90 percent a passing grade with God? We know the answers to those questions, don't we? We know that Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). And we remember that James wrote, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10).

The point of this good-day–bad-day comparison is this: Regardless of our performance, we are always dependent on God's grace, His undeserved favor to those who deserve His

wrath. Some days we may be more acutely conscious of our sinfulness and hence more aware of our need of His grace, but there is never a day when we can stand before Him on our own two feet of performance, when we are worthy enough to deserve His blessing.

At the same time, the good news of the gospel is that God's grace is available on our worst days. That is true because Christ Jesus fully satisfied the claims of God's justice and fully paid the penalty of a broken law when He died on the cross in our place. Because of that the apostle Paul could write, "He forgave us all our sins" (Colossians 2:13).

Does the fact that God has forgiven us all our sins mean that He no longer cares whether we obey or disobey? Not at all. The Scripture speaks of our grieving the Holy Spirit through our sins (Ephesians 4:30). And Paul prayed that we "may please [God] in every way" (Colossians 1:10). We grieve God and we please God. Clearly, He cares about our conduct and will discipline us when we refuse to repent of conscious sin. But God is no longer our Judge. Through Christ, He is now our heavenly Father who disciplines us only out of love and only for our good.

If God's blessings were dependent on our performance, they would be meager indeed. Even our best works are shot through with sin—with varying degrees of impure motives and lots of imperfect performance. We are always, to some degree, looking out for ourselves, guarding our flanks, protecting our egos. It is because we do not realize the utter depravity of the principle of sin that remains in us and stains everything we do that we entertain any notion of earning God's blessings through our obedience. And it is because we do not fully grasp the fact that Jesus paid the penalty for all our sins that we despair of God's blessing when we have failed to live up to even our own desires to live a life that is pleasing to God.

HOW GOOD IS GOOD ENOUGH?

Here is an important spiritual principle that sums up what I've said thus far:

Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the *reach* of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the *need* of God's grace.

Every day of our Christian experience should be a day of relating to God on the basis of His grace alone. We are not only saved by grace, but we also live by grace every day. This grace comes through Christ, "through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now *stand*" (Romans 5:2, emphasis added).

A significant part of the Mosaic law was the promise of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (see Deuteronomy 28, especially verses 1-2 and 15). Some Christians live as if that principle applies to them today. But Paul said that "the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). Christ has already borne the curses for our disobedience and earned for us the blessings of obedience. As a result, we are now to look to Christ alone—not Christ plus our performance—for God's blessings in our lives. We are saved by grace and we are to live by grace alone.

When we pray to God for His blessing, He does not examine our performance to see if we are worthy. Rather, He looks to see if we are trusting in the merit of His Son as our only hope for securing His blessing. To repeat: *We are saved by grace, and we are to live by grace every day of our Christian lives.*

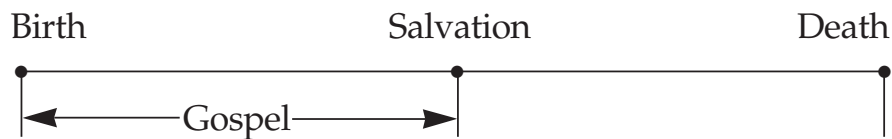
If it is true that our relationship with God is based on His grace instead of our performance, why then are we so prone to fall into the good-day–bad-day type of thinking? It is because we have relegated the gospel to the unbeliever.

A LIFETIME MESSAGE

Consider a simple time line of your life as shown by the following illustration. It has only three points of time: your birth, your death, and the day of your salvation. Regardless of your age when you trusted Christ, the Cross divides your whole life into two periods: you as an unbeliever and you as a believer.



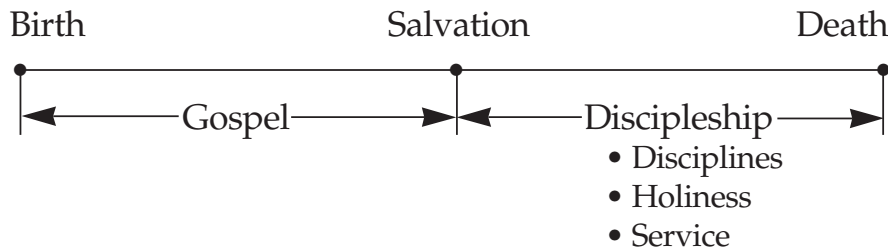
With this time line in mind, what one word describes the Bible message you most needed to hear as an unbeliever? I suggest that word is the *gospel*. It is the gospel that is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16). We need to hear that Jesus died for sinners and that if we come to Him in faith, we will receive the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of eternal life. The message may be “packaged” in any number of ways, but it must always be the gospel. That is what we need to hear and respond to as unbelievers. Now the time line of your life looks like this:



What one word describes the message we most need to hear as believers? I get a lot of different answers to that question, but most of them can be summed up with one word: *discipleship*. After all, Jesus did say, “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). As believers, we are continually challenged with the demands and duties of discipleship. These demands and duties include such things as the spiritual disciplines (quiet

time, Bible study, prayer, worship, church attendance, and so on); obedience to God’s moral will set forth in the Bible or, as I call it, the pursuit of holiness; and service or ministry for the Kingdom of God.³ Almost everything we need to do as believers is probably included in the three words *disciplines*, *holiness*, and *service*.

So now our time line looks like this:



This time line illustrates how we tend to view the Christian life—the gospel for unbelievers and the duties of discipleship for believers. I don’t question our emphasis on discipleship. As I have already observed, Jesus did say, “Go and make disciples.” If anything, we need more challenge and instruction on this three-fold emphasis of disciplines, holiness, and service. But there is something more basic than discipleship, something that actually provides the necessary atmosphere in which discipleship can be practiced. The one word that describes what we must continue to hear is *gospel*.

We need to continue to hear the gospel every day of our Christian lives. Only a continuous reminder of the gospel of God’s grace through Christ will keep us from falling into good-day–bad-day thinking, wherein we think our daily relationship with God is based on how good we’ve been.

It is only the joy of hearing the gospel and being reminded that our sins are forgiven in Christ that will keep the demands of discipleship from becoming drudgery. It is only gratitude and love to God that comes from knowing that He no longer

counts our sins against us (Romans 4:8) that provides the proper motive for responding to the claims of discipleship.

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS AND GUILT

We must remember, however, that the gospel is for sinners. Jesus said, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). The gospel is meaningful for us only to the extent that we realize and acknowledge that we are still sinful. Although we are new creations in Christ, we still sin every day in thought, word, and deed, and perhaps even more important, in motives. To benefit from the gospel every day, then, we must acknowledge that we are still sinners.

Without a continual reminder of the good news of the gospel, we can easily fall into one of two errors. The first is to focus on our external performance and become proud like the Pharisees. We may then begin to look down our spiritual noses at others who are not as disciplined, obedient, and committed as we are and in a very subtle way begin to feel spiritually superior to them.

The second error is the exact opposite of the first. It is the feeling of guilt. We have been exposed to the disciplines of the Christian life, to obedience, and to service, and in our hearts, we have responded to those challenges. We haven't, however, been as successful as others around us appear to be. Or we find ourselves dealing with some of the sins of the heart such as anger, resentment, covetousness, and a judgmental attitude. Perhaps we struggle with impure thoughts or impatience, or a lack of faith and trust in God. Because we have put the gospel on the shelf as far as our own lives are concerned, we struggle with a sense of failure and guilt. We believe God is displeased with us, and we certainly wouldn't expect His blessing on our lives. After all, we don't deserve His favor.

HOW GOOD IS GOOD ENOUGH?

Because we are focusing on our performance, we forget the meaning of grace: God's unmerited favor to those who deserve only His wrath. Pharisee-type believers unconsciously think they have earned God's blessing through their behavior. Guilt-laden believers are quite sure they have forfeited God's blessing through their lack of discipline or their disobedience. Both have forgotten the meaning of grace because they have moved away from the gospel and have slipped into a performance relationship with God.

Most of us probably entertain either of these attitudes on different days. On a good day, as we perceive it, we tend toward self-righteous Pharisaism. On a not-so-good day we allow ourselves to wallow in a sense of failure and guilt. In fact, it may be more than not-so-good days—it may be weeks or months. But whether it is weeks or days, the problem is the same. We have moved away from the gospel of God's grace and have begun to try to relate to God directly on the basis of our performance rather than through Christ.

God never intended that we relate to Him directly. Our own performance is never good enough to be acceptable to Him. The only way we can relate to God is through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. It is only the blood of Jesus that will cleanse us from a guilty conscience and give us the confidence to enter into the presence of God (Hebrews 10:19-21).

The gospel, applied to our hearts every day, frees us to be brutally honest with ourselves and with God. The assurance of His total forgiveness of our sins through the blood of Christ means we don't have to play defensive games anymore. We don't have to rationalize and excuse our sins. We can say we told a lie instead of saying we exaggerated a bit. We can admit an unforgiving spirit instead of continuing to blame our parents for our emotional distress. We can call sin exactly what it is, regardless

of how ugly and shameful it may be, because we know that Jesus bore that sin in His body on the cross. With the assurance of total forgiveness through Christ, we have no reason to hide from our sins anymore.

“But,” you may be saying, “is it good to keep preaching the gospel to Christians who sin over and over again, who never seem to get their spiritual act together? Won’t this cause them to quit trying? Won’t they say, ‘What’s the use of struggling with my sin and lack of discipline? I’m forgiven anyway’? Don’t we need a little bit of performance mentality to keep a sharp edge on our Christian commitment? And besides, what about all those indifferent Christians who never struggle with their sin and lack of commitment to Christ? Won’t this emphasis on the gospel just harden them in their abuse of God’s grace, their attitude that ‘It doesn’t matter how I live because God loves me unconditionally?’”

Let’s consider the latter group of people first. It is true that God’s grace can be abused. Paul anticipated that possibility (Romans 6:1; Galatians 5:13), and Jude indicated it was already happening in the first-century church (Jude 1:4). But we cannot allow some people’s abuse of the truth to deprive us of its value to us, especially when that truth is so necessary to our Christian lives.

As to the first group—those who may be struggling with their sin and failure—the last thing they need is to have more guilt laid upon them. Few things cut the nerve of desire and earnest effort to change like a sense of guilt. On the contrary, freedom from guilt through the realization of forgiveness in Christ usually strengthens a person’s desire to lead a more disciplined and holy life. And it is this deepened desire that will lead to earnest prayer for the Spirit’s aid and a more diligent effort to pursue discipline and holiness.

Years ago I heard a godly minister say, “Discipline without desire is drudgery.” What is it, then, that sparks the desire in

our hearts to lead a disciplined, godly life? It is the joy of knowing that our sins are forgiven, that no matter how much we've stumbled and fallen today, God does not count our sins against us (Romans 4:8).

MOTIVATED BY LOVE

The apostle Paul wrote that Christ died that we should no longer live for ourselves but for Him (2 Corinthians 5:15). To live no longer for ourselves but for Him is the essence of discipleship. That phrase sums up all we could include under the headings of disciplines, holiness, and service. But what is it that will motivate us to live not for ourselves but for Him? Paul said it is the love of Christ: "For Christ's love compels us" (2 Corinthians 5:14).

The idea behind the word *compel* is to press in upon so as to impel, that is, to urge or drive forward by the exertion of a strong moral pressure. Kenneth Wuest, in his expanded translation of the New Testament, beautifully captured the flavor of the word *compel*, as Paul used it here, when he translated, "For the love which Christ has [for me] presses on me from all sides, holding me to one end and prohibiting me from considering any other, wrapping itself around me in tenderness, giving me an impelling motive."⁴

Notice though, what compelled or motivated Paul in such a strong manner. It was not a continual challenge to be more disciplined, or more committed, or more holy. Rather, it was his constant heartfelt awareness of Christ's love for him. It was not the thought that "I ought to do this or that" or a feeling of guilt for not doing something that motivated Paul. Rather, it was his overwhelming sense of Christ's love for him that spurred him on.

We believers do need to be challenged to a life of committed discipleship, but that challenge needs to be based on the gospel, not on duty or guilt. Duty or guilt may motivate us for a while,

but only a sense of Christ's love for us will motivate us for a lifetime.

If the love of Christ for us is to be the motivating force for a life of discipleship, how then can we come to the place where we are acutely conscious of His love? The answer is, through the gospel. It is, of course, the Holy Spirit who pours out His love into our hearts (Romans 5:5), but He does this through the message of the gospel. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus paid for all our sins on the cross and that we are thereby forgiven. As we continually reflect upon that gospel, the Holy Spirit floods our hearts with a sense of God's love to us in Christ. And that sense of His love motivates us in a compelling way to live for Him.

Over the years many devoted Christians have been drawn to Paul's heartfelt desire expressed in Philippians 3:10, "that I may know him" (KJV). Our hearts have resonated with Paul's as we have said, "That's my desire, too, just to know Christ in a more personal and intimate way." What then is the immediate context of Paul's words? What is it that caused him to have such an intense yearning?

The context is Paul's testimony of how he renounced his own self-righteousness in order to gain the righteousness that comes from God through faith in Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:1-9). It is in the context of recounting the gospel as it applies to him personally that Paul feels this surge of desire to know Christ more intimately welling up within him.

A sense of obligation and duty never stimulates such a desire within us. Only love does that. If we are going to persevere as committed disciples of Jesus Christ over the course of our lives, we must always keep the gospel of God's forgiveness through Christ before us. We should, to use the words of my friend Jack Miller, preach the gospel to ourselves every day.

Preaching the gospel to ourselves every day addresses both

the self-righteous Pharisee and the guilt-laden sinner that dwell in our hearts. Because the gospel is only for sinners, preaching it to ourselves every day reminds us that we are indeed sinners in need of God's grace. It causes us to say to God, in the words of an old hymn, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling."⁵ It helps us to consciously renounce any confidence in our own goodness as a means of meriting God's blessing on our lives.

Perhaps more important, though, preaching the gospel to ourselves every day gives us hope, joy, and courage. The good news that our sins are forgiven because of Christ's death fills our hearts with joy, gives us courage to face the day, and offers us hope that God's favor will rest upon us, not because we are good, but because we are in Christ.

Several months prior to writing this chapter, I was given a copy of a letter written by Mutua Mahiaini, the leader of The Navigators ministry in Kenya, Africa, to The Navigators constituency in Kenya. In his letter, Mutua addresses rather eloquently this issue of performance versus God's grace, so I wrote him asking for permission to quote his letter. He kindly consented, so I quote most of it here for you.

We know, of course, how central the forgiveness of our sins is to salvation. We preach it, we believe in it. We see that first repentance and surrender to Christ as a glorious moment. We also accept that having come to the Lord, we must continue to purify our lives. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."


1 John 1:9. But in talking with many believers, I get the impression that most of us consider the ongoing repentance of the saved as a not-so-glorious experience. A sort of sad necessity.

Sin grieves God. We must not downplay the seriousness of it in the life of a believer. But we must come to terms with the fact that God's Grace is GREATER THAN ALL OUR SINS. Repentance is one of the Christian's highest privileges. A repentant Christian focuses on God's mercy and God's grace. Any moment in our lives when we bask in God's mercy and grace is our highest moment. Higher than when we feel smug in our decent performance and cannot think of anything we need to confess.

Whenever we fail—and fail we will, the Spirit of God will work on us and bring us to the foot of the cross where Jesus carried our failures. That is potentially a glorious moment. For we could at that moment accept God's abundant Mercy and Grace and go forth with nothing to boast of except Christ Himself, or else we struggle with our shame, focusing on that as well as our track record. We fail because we have shifted our attention from Grace and Mercy. One who draws on God's Mercy and Grace is quick to repent, but also slow to sin.⁶

Note Mutua's statement that any moment when we bask in God's mercy and grace is our highest moment, higher than when we feel smug in our decent performance and cannot think of anything we need to confess. Does that not remind you of Paul's words, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14)?

Are you and I willing to live like Mutua and the apostle Paul? Are we willing to rely on God's grace and mercy alone instead of our performance, to boast in nothing except the Cross? If so, then we can stop living in our good-day–bad-day scenarios and bask every day in the grace of God. And in the joy and confidence of that grace, we can vigorously pursue holiness.



DISCUSSION
GUIDE

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Each session in the following discussion guide refers to an excerpt from the book and directs the reader to questions for personal study and group discussion. If you are working through this guide with a group, you will probably want to read the excerpt and work through the questions on your own before your group meets. However, if your group meets for ninety minutes or more, you could read the excerpt together and then discuss the questions that follow. This guide can also be used without a group for personal study.

In a study guide on personal growth in holiness, it should not be surprising that some questions ask you to reflect on the sin in your own life. If you are using this guide with a group, you may not feel comfortable sharing with the entire group your frankest possible answers to such questions. In such cases, try to be as honest as possible in the answers you write down for your eyes only, and share with the group only what is appropriate. You may decide there is one other person in the group with whom you would like to discuss some questions privately. In

general, however, the questions in this guide are designed to be appropriate for group discussion.

Most sessions end with a suggestion for group prayer. In some cases, thanksgiving for God's grace is the fitting response to the discussion. In other cases, you will want to ask God for something specific. Because some groups have customary ways of praying together, while other groups are not used to praying aloud, you and your leader will want to adapt these prayer suggestions to suit your group. You could use them as a basis for a time of silent prayer if you prefer not to pray aloud. Or, you could begin learning to pray aloud by letting each person pray just one sentence. If you are using this guide without a group, you might apply these suggestions to a time of private prayer.

May God use this guide to help you grow in the discipline of His grace.

LESSON ONE

HOW GOOD IS GOOD ENOUGH?

Chapter 1 of The Discipline of Grace

*“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered.
“No one is good—except God alone.”*

MARK 10:18

CENTRAL IDEA

Contrary to a common misconception, we do not earn or forfeit God’s blessings in our daily lives based on our performance. Regardless of our performance, we are always dependent on God’s grace, which is His undeserved favor to those who deserve His wrath.

DEVELOPING THE DISCIPLINE OF GRACE

1. What’s your initial reaction to this statement: “The pursuit of holiness must be anchored in the grace of God; otherwise it is doomed to failure”?

___ The grace of God and the vigorous pursuit of holiness cannot be brought together; they seem like direct and unequivocal opposites to me, sort of like “jumbo shrimp.”

___ The pursuit of holiness sounds to me like legalism and man-made rules.

THE DISCIPLINE OF GRACE

___ An emphasis on grace seems to me like an open door to irresponsible, sinful behavior, setting us free to sin as we please.

___ I realize grace and personal discipline go hand in hand.

___ I do not understand what it means to live by grace in my daily life, especially the relationship of grace to personal discipline.

___ Other (describe it):

2. The picture of a well-chiseled man—with hammer and chisel in hand—depicts how many Christians try to live the Christian life. It seems we are always trying to change ourselves with self-help tools (hammer and chisel). Put yourself in that picture and consider this book as a tool available to sculpt you. What would be the difference between using this guide as a tool in your hands and letting God use it as a tool in His? What would each of these look like in practical terms?

3. Consider two radically different, but typical, days in your own life. The first one is a good day spiritually for you. The second day is just the opposite. Then answer the questions that follow.
 - a. Would you enter those two witnessing opportunities with different degrees of confidence? (Would you be

LESSON 1: HOW GOOD IS GOOD ENOUGH?

less confident on the bad day than on the good day?
Would you find it difficult to believe that God would bless you and use you in the midst of a rather bad spiritual day?) Why?

b. Think back to your last really “good” or really “bad” day. Did God’s blessing seem any more real or remote to you on one day than the other? Why?

4. The question of good days and God’s blessing raises the question of whether it is possible to somehow be good enough for God. How good would “good enough” have to be to please God? What answers would Jesus or Paul provide? Have each group member look up one or more of the following Scripture texts and report his or her findings to the group.

- Matthew 5:48

- Matthew 22:36-39

THE DISCIPLINE OF GRACE

- Luke 18:9-14
- Luke 18:18-25
- Romans 3:9-20
- Philippians 3:4-10

5. Draw a simple time line of your life, with three points of time demarcated: your birth, the day of your salvation, and the anticipated day of your death. Regardless of your age when you trusted Christ, the Cross divides your whole life into two periods: you as an unbeliever and you as a believer. When along this time line was grace more than a theological concept to you?

LESSON 1: HOW GOOD IS GOOD ENOUGH?

6. Bridges makes the point that we have relegated the gospel to the unbeliever and foisted the duties of spiritual disciplines, holiness, and service onto the believer. Is that true in your own experience? Why do you suppose that happens?

7. The Pharisee-type believer and the guilt-laden believer both misunderstand the meaning of grace. How so?

8. How does “preaching the gospel to yourself every day” relate to this performance trap?

9. One practical way of “preaching the gospel to yourself” is to adjust the lens through which you read Scripture. With a corrective lens, you could see gospel and grace everywhere in Scripture and thus feel motivated. Without that lens, you might see only law and duty and thus feel unmotivated.
Consider, for example, what motivated Paul. How do you read 2 Corinthians 5:14? Do you think it was *Paul’s love for Christ* that compelled him to do good works and pursue holiness? Or was the compelling factor, rather, *Christ’s love for him*? (Read 2 Corinthians 5:14 in context

and in several translations. You might also look at Romans 5:5 and Philippians 3:10.)

10. Mutua Mahiaini makes this observation:

God's Grace is GREATER THAN ALL OUR SINS. Repentance is one of the Christian's highest privileges. A repentant Christian focuses on God's mercy and God's grace. Any moment in our lives when we bask in God's mercy and grace is our highest moment. Higher than when we feel smug in our decent performance and cannot think of anything we need to confess. . . .

That is potentially a glorious moment. For we could at that moment accept God's abundant Mercy and Grace and go forth with nothing to boast of except Christ Himself, or else we struggle with our shame, focusing on that as well as our track record. We fail because we have shifted our attention from Grace and Mercy. One who draws on God's Mercy and Grace is quick to repent, but also slow to sin.

Are you willing to “bask in God’s mercy and grace” as your “highest moment. Higher than when [you] feel smug in [y]our decent performance and cannot think of anything . . . to confess”? How would you go about adopting this attitude?

LESSON 1: HOW GOOD IS GOOD ENOUGH?

11. (Optional) To some, an overemphasis on the gospel raises the specter of “cheap grace.” Does knowing that your sins are and will be forgiven anyway permit you to keep on sinning and grow slack in your spiritual disciplines? Or does knowing forgiveness compel you to pursue holiness with all the more diligence? Compare your answer with those of Jesus and Paul, provided in the following Scriptures. (You could have each group member look up one text and report to the group.)

- Matthew 23:23-28

- Luke 9:23-25

- Romans 6:1-2, 15-18

- Galatians 6:13, 16-18

- Philippians 3:12-14

- Hebrews 12:14

12. Take a moment at the end of your group meeting to thank God for His abundant grace.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF ALL THIS?

The good news of the gospel is that God's grace is available on our worst days. Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace. We will be exploring more of what that means as we look at the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Meditate on Luke 18:11-12 and read chapter 2 of *The Discipline of Grace* for the next lesson. In preparation for that lesson, reflect on what it means to be smug and self-satisfied in your Christian life.