

In this study book, a wise man shows how the grace of God in Christ, and the holy joy of Christian living, go beyond what many think. Would you appreciate a fully biblical and Reformed demonstration of how the love-words and love-works of our triune God transform life? Then you should read and digest *Holiness by Grace*.

—J. I. PACKER

Professor of Theology, Regent College

It should not be thought of as extraordinary that a book on the subject of holiness puts its focus on the word “delight.” The very crowning of God’s creation was the placing of his holy creatures, Adam and Eve, in the garden named Eden, which simply means “delight.” Dr. Chapell makes it clear that the soul’s delight will be realized only by godliness in the Christian life—and that, of course, is what the gift of grace is all about. A scholarly and practical study of “the beauty of holiness.”

—D. JAMES KENNEDY

Senior Minister, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church

What a great book! What a necessary book! What a life-changing book! A lack of God’s clear desire for holiness in His people doesn’t come from making the Gospel too good . . . it comes from not making it good enough. This is the book for which I have long prayed, and I enthusiastically commend it to you. If you miss it, you’ll be sorry.

—STEVE BROWN

Professor of Preaching, Reformed Theological Seminary

Grace. We have an entire vocabulary of adjectives to describe it when we sing about it. And yet—if the truth be told—we Christians either have a stubborn tendency to refuse really to believe it, or we stumble over its implications. In *Holiness by Grace* Bryan Chapell comes to help us. Here is biblical teaching carefully presented, popularly written, and practically applied. At times what Dr. Chapell rightly says about the gospel of grace may not be easy to swallow. It chokes legalism and it burns the throat of license. But digest it and it will transform your life.

—SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

Senior Minister, St. George’s-Tron Church, Glasgow

*Holiness by Grace* addresses the tension between human responsibility and divine provision in the process of our sanctification. Dr. Bryan Chapell guides us through these tensions by assuring us again and again of God’s mercy and grace that not only secures our ways to him, but also provides our daily motivation and enablement to serve him. The questions at the end are designed to delve more deeply into these truths leading us in our service to God with the acknowledgment that God must provide what we need to please him. We can never hear enough about God’s grace. This book is a fresh reminder.

—ROSE MARIE MILLER

Author, *From Fear to Freedom*

This is a delightful book, full of sane, practical theology and application. It is not the sort of book that will satisfy armchair theologians pondering exactly how the Mosaic covenant relates to the new covenant; rather, it is the sort of book that teaches Christians how to live—aiming for holiness and delighting in it, responding to grace and being thankful for it, avoiding the countless pitfalls, and learning to please God.

—D. A. CARSON

Research Professor of New Testament,  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

The classic Puritan pastor Richard Sibbes was called “the heavenly Doctor Sibbes” due in part to his God-given ability to make sovereign grace clear to the spiritually sick and weak and wounded. In that same way, Dr. Chapell is a “heavenly physical therapist” for in these pages he carefully instructs a church wounded and weak by theological error of the restorative and healing truth of Reformed sanctification. This volume helps the weary walk more holy.

—JOE NOVENSON

Pastor, Lookout Mountain Presbyterian Church

The historic Protestant doctrine is that we are not only *justified* by faith rather than our works, but we are also *sanctified* by faith rather than our works. Yet, though we give this teaching lip service, very few ministers and Christians know how grace-based sanctification really works. Bryan Chapell has produced a popular, practical, yet theologically sensitive book on this very issue—how God’s gracious acceptance is the dynamic and guide for growth into holy character. This is a great book—an extremely timely book.

—TIMOTHY J. KELLER

Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York

*Holiness by Grace* is a biblical and doctrinal introduction to grace-based godliness—a guide for recovering Pharisees. Bryan Chapell has a special ability to teach the Bible in a way that refreshes the heart. This book will help you see yourself the way God sees you, so that you can serve him the way he wants to be served.

—PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN

Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia

*Holiness by Grace* is a wonderfully clear, biblically nuanced presentation of what it means to truly grow in the grace of God. Chapell is Christ-centered without allowing modern grace movements to become reactions to older legalism. The church needs this book both to correct errors and to guide people more faithfully into the proven paths of the past.

—JOHN H. ARMSTRONG

Director, Reformation and Revival Ministries

Dr. Bryan Chapell has done a masterful job of demonstrating that a rigorous proclamation of the gospel of God’s grace is not only consistent with a call to holy living, it is the only effective way to enable Christian believers to live out that call. I was personally enriched by his careful use of Scripture as the foundation for the teaching of each chapter. I pray that his influence will give us a generation of preachers who know how to preach grace.

—STEVE SMALLMAN

Pastor, Presbyterian Church in America

The role of God’s grace in Christian sanctification is so little understood among believers today. Bryan Chapell deftly brings the light of Scripture to bear on this troublesome question through careful exposition and compelling illustrations. I highly recommend this book.

—JERRY BRIDGES

Former Vice President of Corporate Affairs, Navigators

H O L I N E S S  
*by*  
G R A C E

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*Delighting in the Joy That Is Our Strength*

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BRYAN CHAPPELL

 **CROSSWAY**  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Holiness by Grace*

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My debt is great to those who have taught me the gospel of grace by the testimony of their lives.

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## INTRODUCTION

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# *My Soul's Delight*

“God says, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’” The young preacher quoted the words of Leviticus with such fervor that I had little doubt he really expected us to live up to this command for untarnished righteousness. Yet, as my eyes scanned those seated between the pulpit and my pew, I wondered if he recognized the true challenge in his words:

- On the front row were two sisters, both divorced in the past year. One had recently confided to friends that her loneliness since her marriage had driven her into sinful relationships with other men. The second sister had found more frequent solace in alcohol that trapped her in a horrid cycle of depression that made her treat her kids cruelly, making her feel guilty, and causing her to drink again to escape her guilt.
- Behind the sisters was a successful businessman and long-term elder who had engineered the ouster of the previous pastor with a combination of biblical proof-texting and political intrigue. The elder’s wife, seated next to him, had conducted a skillful phone campaign that created enough questions about the pastor’s credibility to disarm any defense he tried to make.
- In that same pew was a young mother trying to manage two out-of-control preschoolers. Simultaneously she was ignoring disgusted glances from the nearby elder while glaring daggers at her own husband to motivate him to discipline the children.
- Directly in front of me a teenager sat at the opposite end of the pew from his parents as a geographical statement of what he felt about

his relationship with them since he had been grounded for ignoring curfew the previous night.

- Ultimately my attention rested on me, the seminary professor who had been moody with his family for days because of a letter from a stranger that had criticized his work.

My eyes and my heart testified there was not a sinless person among us. Yet the preacher seemed oblivious to our obvious faults. He said it again, “Be holy, for God is holy” (see Lev. 11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:26; 1 Pet. 1:16).

Does God really expect us to be holy as he is? He is infinitely pure. I am an imperfect person. So is everyone about me (see Ps. 14:1-3; Eccles. 7:20). His standard seems either to ignore human frailty or to impose certain failure. We must make sense of this command for perfect righteousness lest our hearts harden into a shrugged, “Get real,” or break into a sobbed, “I can’t do it.”

## — VISIONS OF HOLINESS —

How does God enable us to meet his requirement of holiness? An answer lies along the path of John Bunyan’s famous travelers in the children’s version of *Pilgrim’s Progress* that our family has read after dinners (which have had their own share of imperfect behavior).

Late on their journey, Bunyan’s pilgrims discover a wonderful mirror. There is nothing unusual about the front of the glass. However, on the back of the mirror appears an image of the crucified Lord Jesus. Everyone who looks in the mirror’s face sees an ordinary reflection that includes the blemishes and scars that always accompany our humanity. Yet anyone who observes these same persons from the reverse side of the mirror sees only the glory of the Son of God.

This amazing glass from *Pilgrim’s Progress* pictures the answer to how we can be holy in this life. Our holiness is not so much a matter of what we achieve as it is the grace our God provides. Grace is God’s willingness to look at us from the perspective that sees his holy Son in our place.<sup>1</sup>

God can certainly see the faults and frailties reflected in the mirrors of our lives. Still, he chooses to look at those who trust in his mercy through the lens that features the holiness of his own child in our place. As a consequence he loves and treasures us as much as if we had never sinned.

Many years ago, the preacher Phillips Brooks explained G-R-A-C-E as God's Riches At Christ's Expense. The acrostic beautifully expresses how the blessings of God, which Jesus alone deserves, are mercifully passed to us as a consequence of his suffering and dying for our sin. When we trust that Christ's work, rather than our own achievements, is the basis of our righteousness, then God mercifully grants us the riches of his love that only Jesus deserves. God looks at us as though we were as holy as his own Son, and treats us as lovingly despite our many imperfections.

Most Christians cherish the beauty of the truth that God viewed us through the lens of Jesus' goodness when we claimed him as our Savior. We trusted that Christ's death paid the penalty for our sins, and that we were made right with God—justified—not by our own holiness but by trusting in the holiness he provided. Just as objects look red when viewed through a red lens and green when viewed through a green lens, we believed that when God looked at us through Jesus he viewed us as his own child.

Belief in this provision of grace, whereby God chose to view us as his beloved through no good of our own, became the greatest joy of our souls. What robs many believers of this joy, however, is a misunderstanding of how God continues to view us after we have received the grace that justifies us.

After initially trusting in Christ to make them right with God, many Christians embark on an endless pursuit of trying to satisfy God with good works that will keep him loving them. Such Christians believe that they are saved by God's grace but are kept in his care by their own goodness. This belief, whether articulated or buried deep in a psyche developed by the way we were treated by parents, spouses, or others, makes the Christian life a perpetual race on a performance treadmill to keep winning God's affection.

While the Christian life can be characterized as a race (see Gal. 5:7; 2 Tim. 4:7; Heb. 12:1), we persevere on the course God marks out for us not by straining to gain his affection but by the assurance that he never stops viewing us from the perspective of his grace. God continually offers us unconditional love and the encouragement that our status as his children does not vary even though our efforts do.

When I see my son's energy flag in his cross-country meets, I shout encouragement to revive his resolve and keep him going. I know intuitively that threats or expressions of frustration would sap his strength for the long race ahead (and the many races to come) even if my pressure were to spur him on for the moment.

God is a better father than I, and his encouragement rings more pow-

erfully, wisely, lovingly, and continually in his children's souls. We race in the confidence that his grace does not cease just because we have faltered. Grace becomes not only the means by which God once justified us, it is also the means by which we are continually encouraged and enabled to serve him with undiminished delight.

Since grace is the means by which we find the joy that gives us strength, it is vital that we refine our vision of how God views us. Whether our lives will be typified by joy or by despondency depends largely on the perspective from which we view ourselves. Will earth's or heaven's perspective dominate our vision?

The first purpose of this book is to make heaven's view so clear to us that we will never stop seeing ourselves as God sees us. For if we cannot lift our eyes from an earthly perspective, then we will so focus on our weaknesses and stumbles that the race to please God will be misery. But if we remember that God is the lifter of our heads (Ps. 3:3), then we will raise our eyes to see the affection in his own. When we see that his regard for us does not waver, then his grace will quicken our steps, strengthen our hearts, and delight our souls to carry on.

## — VIEWS OF GRACE —

Another concern must be addressed, however, in a book that seeks to stimulate greater holiness by grace. We must confess that talking about God's unconditional love in order to promote godliness is counterintuitive. If all we do is keep assuring people that God loves them, then what is to keep them from taking advantage of grace and doing whatever they want?

In recent decades a number of wonderful movements of grace have begun to sweep across the evangelical world. These groups include the Sonship, World Harvest Mission, and New Life ministries that have flourished from the seminal influence of the late Jack Miller; Redeemer churches associated with Tim Keller; New City Fellowship churches and ministries in various cities; and the L'Abri fellowships spawned by the teachings of Francis Schaeffer. To these early and deep fountains of grace could be added a great number of ministers, churches, and institutions in evangelical circles that have recently made grace a chief focus of their ministries. Contributors are as diverse as John Armstrong, Charles Swindoll, Joyce Meyers, R. C. Sproul, Steve Brown, Michael Scott Horton, Jerry Bridges, and Phil Yancey.

Without a doubt a grace awakening is occurring, but the new emphasis does not come without varying accents, challenges, and concerns. Concerns that the new emphasis on grace will result in antinomianism (i.e., disregard for the law of God) have become quite numerous and acute. The history of the evangelical church in North America can partially explain the reasons for these concerns.

Much of the evangelical church finds its cultural roots in the modernist/fundamentalist controversy of the early twentieth century. Not only did those who stood for historic Christianity against modern skepticism fight against disregard for biblical truth, they also warred against the lifestyle changes being adopted by those who discredited the right of Scripture to govern their lives.

Concern about lifestyle issues is necessary for biblical Christianity. Early leaders among the North American evangelicals rightly insisted that the Bible has commands that God's people must obey in order to honor him. Problems came, however, when patterns of personal conduct became almost as much an emphasis in evangelical preaching and teaching as the message of God's grace. As a consequence, people began to think of their conduct as a qualification for God's acceptance.

The result of the strong emphasis on lifestyle issues was the creation of codes of conduct that supposedly distinguished real Christians from the secular world and nominal believers. Strict adherence to the codes became the mark of serious Christianity in many churches, even when the particulars could not be biblically proven. In fact, many of the standards of the evangelical code (e.g., do not play card games, drink alcoholic beverages, smoke, or go to movies) became so much a part of the culture of most conservative churches that few people in them even thought to question whether the Bible actually taught all that the churches expected.

Part of the concern about a renewed emphasis on grace is simply a fear of the loss of evangelical identity as interest wanes in adherence to the codes that have distinguished Bible-believing Christians over the past century. The fear has some merit. The codes have, in fact, kept many Christians from dallying with cultural practices and adopting societal patterns wherein lie great spiritual danger. Those who become strong advocates of a grace emphasis must acknowledge the legitimacy of this concern and show how their teaching will provide protection from secular dangers when the codes of conduct are undermined.

Admittedly, strong advocates of the new grace emphasis may not feel

that it is their responsibility to deal with the behavior issues that concern advocates of the codes. Preachers of grace typically see the old evangelical codes as destructive forms of legalism that need to be dismantled. Many of us have been personally wounded by legalistic attitudes in the church and resonate with the need to fight their spiritually corrosive influences.

Still, it is not enough for the advocates of grace simply to react against legalism. We must also respond to the license that always tempts Christians when preachers say, "God will love you no matter what." Legalism makes believers think that God accepts them on the basis of what they do. Licentiousness makes believers think that God does not care what they do. Both errors have terrible spiritual consequences.

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). Grace should not make obedience optional. When God removes good works as a condition for his acceptance, he does not remove righteousness as a requirement for life. The standards of Scripture glorify God and protect his people from spiritual harm. We cannot undermine the legitimate standards of the Bible without grave consequences.

God does not love us because we obey him, but we cannot know the blessings of his love without obedience. Thus, a grace focus that undermines Christ's own demand for obedience denies us knowledge of and intimacy with him. This is not grace.

Grace that bears fruit is biblical. Grace that goes to seed uses God's unconditional love as an excuse for selfish indulgence. Such egocentric living ultimately burdens us with the guilt and consequences of sin that God has designed his grace to remove.

Resting on God's grace does not relieve us of our holy obligations; rather it should enable us to fulfill them (see Eph. 4:7-13). As the assurance of God's love allows us to cease striving to please him for our own benefit, our good works will begin reflecting more of the selfless righteousness that is truly holy.

Through such other-oriented obedience our lives become more Christlike. God's glory and the good of others increasingly replaces self-centered motivations. And, as our obedience becomes a gratitude response to God's grace rather than an attempt to bribe God for blessings, holiness more and more characterizes our actions (Titus 2:11-14). We increasingly and forever serve God in the holiness he grants by his grace, making the pursuit of his holiness our delight (2 Tim. 2:1).

Discovering the gracious source of this delight, and employing it to

avoid the dangers of both legalism and licentiousness, is the purpose of this book. In *Holiness by Grace*, we will journey through key biblical texts that explain how our union with Christ rather than any merit of our own is the basis of our sanctification as well as our justification. This exploration removes our performance as a means of establishing or maintaining our salvation, but it confirms the biblical emphasis on obedience as a gratitude response to God's mercy.

We will explore both the natural and the supernatural effects of grace on the human heart to show how grace leads from guilt to godliness. We will see how a grasp of biblical grace both releases from legalism and rescues from license.

In technical terms, my intention is to explain the role of grace in sanctification. This progressive process by which God makes us more and more like Jesus cannot function if we think that our works earn God's affection, or if we think that our works do not matter. Grace corrects both errors and in doing so grants us the unqualified joy that is our strength for obedience (Neh. 8:10).

Grace overwhelms us with God's love, and as a result our heart resonates with the desires of God. His purposes become our own. Our soul delights in his service as love for him and thanksgiving for his mercy make us long to honor him. True grace produces joy and promotes godliness.

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*Part One*

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PRINCIPLES  
*of*  
GRACE

## *The Power of Joy*

“Mom on Strike.” The words appeared on a sign planted in the front yard of a home near us. A young mother tired of the whining, back talk, and lack of cooperation from her family declared herself “On Strike!” She put the sign declaring her resistance in her front yard and moved out of the house . . . into a tree house in the backyard. From there she vowed not to come down until things had changed.

A local television station got wind of the story and interviewed the family. While the young mother’s comments interested me, what I really wanted to hear was her husband’s explanation. Garnering the sympathy of husbands everywhere, he shrugged toward the television camera and said, “I have the kids doing their chores again. And I’ve told them to cool it with the sarcasm. We are trying to make amends and do whatever we can to get her to come down.” His comments, though tinged with some humor, revealed an assumption that is the cause of much spiritual pain—the assumption that our words and actions can atone for our wrongs.

On a human level, the husband’s remarks make perfect sense. When we have had a problem with people, have failed to meet their expectations, or have caused them pain, we typically resolve to make amends. Wayward children, spouses, employees, students, and politicians all vow to make atonement for their sins with the hope that their actions will compensate for their wrongdoing.

This perfectly reasonable human response gets us into trouble, however, when we try to approach God in the same way to compensate for our wrong. When we know we have failed or frustrated him, we long to make amends. We search the Scriptures for some spiritual discipline or sacrifice

that will make us right with God because we do not want him to be “on strike.” We long for God to come down from whatever “tree house” he occupies and reenter our lives with his transforming power and compassionate blessing. But how can we make God “come down,” when his standards are so high?

## — WHAT DOES GOD REQUIRE? —

To get a view of how high God’s standards are, we have only to glance at Jesus’ reiteration of them at the beginning of Luke 17. First, Jesus tells his disciples that they must *cause no sin* (see vv. 1-3a). Their actions must be so blameless that not only do they not personally transgress God’s law, but also they avoid causing naive and innocent children to stumble spiritually. Next, Jesus says the disciples must *confront others’ sin* (see v. 3b). For the sake of steering others from the spiritual harm of their own actions and to defend the testimony of the church, the disciples must risk personal discomfort and damage by rebuking others who sin. Finally, Jesus says that the disciples must be willing to *forgive any sin* (see vv. 3c-4). Even if someone sins against them seven times in a day and comes back to repent, Jesus says that his disciples must forgive the offender. These really are high standards.

The disciples immediately recognize that the standards Jesus has outlined are beyond human reach. In response they plead, “Increase our faith” (v. 5). The disciples recognize that the Savior must grant them spiritual capacities beyond their own making in order to meet his standards. Their request for an increase of faith is a sanctified way of saying, “You are going to have to help us out here, Lord, if these really are your expectations.”

Jesus responds to the disciples by indicating that they are correct in assuming that the supernatural power required to serve him is a matter of faith. He says, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you” (v. 6). Yes, the power of God does come down as a result of faith. But in what should we place our faith? Should we trust that God will bless us when we get good enough? Are we to believe that, when we achieve a mental state absent of doubt, he will overlook our failures and do what we want? Neither of these solutions, both of which depend on us reaching deep into ourselves for an extra measure of holiness, is the answer. The parable and account that follow tell us that what will move God to act in

our behalf is not the excellence of our actions or of our thoughts, but rather total reliance on mercy that we do not deserve and cannot earn.

## — WHAT WILL MOVE GOD? —

What will move God to express his power in behalf of his people? Jesus explains by annulling common misconceptions that still exist today. He tells the parable of an ungrateful landowner to teach us that God does not open his heart and extend his power to his people simply because they have done their duty:

### LUKE 17:7-10

*7“Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat?’ 8Would he not rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink?’ 9Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? 10So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”*

### GOD IS NOT MOVED BY THE DEEDS WE DO

This parable troubles us. The character Jesus uses to represent the divine perspective seems so unsympathetic. Not only does the master not invite the hardworking servant to his table, Jesus also says the master owes the servant no thanks. In fact Jesus says that, from the way this fictional master treated his servant, we should learn that even when we have done all we were told to do, we should still say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty” (v. 10).

#### *When we do our duty*

Perhaps these harsh-seeming words will make more sense when we transfer the parable to a more modern setting. For instance, we could imagine taking our family to a restaurant to be served by a waitress who had been working hard all day. Even if we were to acknowledge that she was doing a good job and had a right to be weary, we would still be surprised if, along with the meal that we had ordered, the waitress were to bring an extra plate and chair to our table. We would be further amazed if she then sat down

to dine with us. Her doing all that we had asked her to do would not be reason enough for her to think she had earned a place at our table. We would reason, “She was simply doing her job, her duty, and that does not suddenly give her the right to join our family.”

This modern comparison is actually not quite as striking as the point that Jesus is making in the context of his culture. At that time, being invited to a nobleman’s table was a high honor—tantamount to being a part of the master’s own household. A more accurate modern analogy to Jesus’ parable would be a realtor who, after helping us purchase a home, tried to move in. Imagine our consternation if, after our movers had left, suddenly another moving van pulled into the driveway. If our realtor were in the second van, we would ask, “What are you doing?” Were her response, “Well, I helped you buy this home, so now I’m moving in,” we would not hesitate to say, “Now, wait a minute! You were just doing your duty, and that does not earn you the right to our house!” Jesus is saying something very similar. Dutiful obedience alone does not give us a right to the household of heaven.

Though these modern analogies may help us make more sense of his words, Jesus does not intend to give any less offense to his listeners in his parable. We should remember that Jesus is not speaking to Pharisees but to his own disciples. No doubt they were sputtering in frustration at his words and whispering, “But, Lord, we left our homes, abandoned our livelihoods, and have sacrificed acceptance in our religious communities to follow you. Surely you do not mean that God owes us nothing for having done our duty!” Still, Jesus’ words turn even his disciples from ever considering their obedience, however great its measure or duration, as qualifying them for heaven’s household or making them worthy of divine acceptance. The same message applies to us. Our efforts before God will never earn us entry into his kingdom, or obligate him to love us.

### *When we trophy our good works*

However much we may want—or feel the need—to trophy our good works before God in order to merit his acceptance, our accomplishments remain insufficient to obligate him to care for us as members of his family. I considered how foreign such ideas are to our natural thought when I visited a friend who had various large game trophies from Africa displayed around his home. A zebra skin hung on the wall, antelope hides covered chairs, and the foot of a great elephant had been turned into an enormous sitting stool.

Other guests and I asked my friend to tell the background of the trophies. He began to explain where each animal was taken, but then, even as my friend was speaking, it became obvious that he also was sensing the hidden questions on his guests' minds. We were thinking, "Aren't these endangered species? Though these are impressive large game trophies, did you really shoot Bambi?" Sensing our questions (which he had probably answered for many previous guests), my friend began to offer qualifications for each of his trophies. He said, "These animals were shot before they were rare, before there were restrictions on such hunting. And I personally didn't shoot them. My father-in-law did." In effect, my friend had to apologize for his trophies.

Jesus' parable forces us to do the same. Though we may want to display the trophies of our good works, obedience, and spiritual accomplishment, we must recognize that there is not sufficient goodness in anything we do to require God to move in our behalf. When we display our trophies of good deeds, God does not disregard the good in them. But if we try to force our way into his heart by such deeds, he must respond, "Do not forget that what I actually require is that you cause no sin, confront others' sin, and forgive any sin. And, even if you had met these standards perfectly (though you have not), you would have only done your basic duty and I owe you no special blessing for that."

Initially, the discovery of our need to apologize for our "spiritual trophies" is not pleasant. We want to gain honor from God by comparing our goodness to the shortcomings of others. Thinking we have accomplished more good, instinctively we consider ourselves more deserving of divine love. Thus, when we find that our good works do not leverage God and that we cannot trophy our good works before him, we become frustrated.<sup>1</sup>

### *When we put our works on the scales*

The realization that our good works will not move God to love us runs counter to our natural reasoning. Most people justify their qualification for heaven in terms of balancing scales. They readily admit, "Nobody's perfect," but they believe that God will receive them because their good works outweigh their bad. What such people fail to face is the biblical assessment that even our best works end up on the wrong side of the scale in terms of qualifying us for acceptance by God.

For such reasons we can identify well with sixteenth-century German Reformer Martin Luther's feeling that, sweet songs to the contrary, God's

determination to love us through our faith in his grace alone is initially “an exceedingly bitter thing.” Luther wrote,

[I]t will be exceedingly difficult to get into another habit of thinking in which we clearly separate faith and [works of] love. . . . [E]ven though we are now in faith . . . the heart is always ready to boast of itself before God and say: After all, I have preached so long and lived so well and done so much, surely he will take this into account. . . . But it cannot be done. With men you may boast. . . . But when you come before God, leave all that boasting at home and remember to appeal from justice to grace.

[But] let anybody try this and he will see and experience how exceedingly hard and bitter it is for a man, who all his life has been mired in his work righteousness, to pull himself out of it and with all his heart rise up through faith in this one Mediator. I myself have been preaching and cultivating it [the message of grace] . . . for almost twenty years and still I feel the old clinging dirt of wanting to deal so with God that I may contribute something, so that he will have to give me his grace in exchange for my holiness. And still I cannot get it into my head that I should surrender myself completely to sheer grace; yet [I know that] this is what I should and must do.<sup>2</sup>

The message that our gracious God loves us fully despite our sin necessarily implies that he does not account our good works as the reason that he must show us his affection. This truth provides comfort to those whose failures afflict their consciences, but it also robs all of us of any cause for pride in self and of all personal resources for brokering God’s gifts into personal rewards. Long-term Christian workers may find these truths particularly distasteful. It is easy to *feel*, even if we would theologially dispute the claim, that God owes us his favor for faithful service.

An old tale speaks of a man who died and faced the angel Gabriel at heaven’s gates. Said the angel to the man, “Here’s how this works. You need a hundred points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things that you have done, and I will give you a certain number of points for each of them. The more good there is in the work that you cite, the more points you will get for it. When you get to a hundred points, you get in.”

“Okay,” the man said, “I was married to the same woman for fifty years and never cheated on her, even in my heart.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Gabriel, “that’s worth three points.”

“Three points?” said the man incredulously. “Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my money and service.”

“Terrific!” said Gabriel, “that’s certainly worth a point.”

“One point?” said the man with his eyes beginning to show a bit of panic. “Well, how about this: I opened a shelter for the homeless in my city, and fed needy people by the hundreds during the holidays.”

“Fantastic, that’s good for two more points,” said the angel.

“TWO POINTS!!” cried the man in desperation. “At this rate the only way that I will get into heaven is by the grace of God.”

“Come on in,” said Gabriel.

Because of “the great disproportion” between our best works and God’s true holiness,<sup>3</sup> we are unable to trade our righteousness for God’s favor. Our bargaining chips of good works have no currency with God. God will bless according to his purposes good works done in obedience to him, but we cannot bind him to our definition or preferred degree of his blessing.<sup>4</sup> God’s blessings, for instance, may come in the form of difficulties that bring us closer to understanding his heart by allowing us to share in Christ’s sufferings (Phil. 3:10).

If the reason we obey God is to bribe him with our goodness, we need to be reminded that God will be no one’s debtor (Job 41:11; Rom. 11:35). We cannot bank on having a great academic career because we vow to study hard. We cannot secure an absence of family difficulties because our dinner devotions are consistent. We cannot guarantee financial success in our business because we operate with integrity. Our attempts to barter for God’s kindness with our goodness, great efforts, and long-standing resolutions will not move him.

As we discover that the works we thought would justify us before God cannot do so, we ultimately realize that the old gospel song “Rock of Ages” really got it right:

Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy law’s demands;  
could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow,  
all for sin could not atone; thou must save, and thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling;  
naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace;  
foul, I to the Fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.<sup>5</sup>

Many of us regularly sing these words with the thought of our initial salva-

tion in mind. We rejoice that God made us right with him (or “justified” us, as the theologians say) apart from any goodness in us. But health and vigor will be added to our spiritual service as we understand that this song applies to us at every stage of our Christian lives. To grasp fully the grace that daily restores our confidence in his love, we must keep our hands empty of any claim that God must bless us on the basis of our goodness. For if he loves us because of what is in our hands, then the days will come when we will believe that his affection has diminished because our works are small, or that his care has vanished because our deeds are wrong.

*When we seek his blessing by our merit*

Despite the teaching of Scripture, I am at times no less troubled than Christ’s disciples were with God’s determination to resist human efforts to purchase his love. I want to believe that God must be good to the organizations I serve, to the family I love, and to the career in which I strive because I have tried to be good. Such reasoning abandons me, however, when I honestly compare my righteousness to Christ’s standards and ask, “Have I really caused no sin, confronted others’ sin, and forgiven any sin?”

When I face the reality of the inadequacy of my works to merit God’s favor, then I recognize that I must depend on his goodness and not on mine. At times this dependence is scary because it lifts control from me, but there is no other choice when I recognize the true character of my good works. According to Scripture even my best works are only “filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6). There is too much of human imperfection and mixed motives in my best deeds to have them obligate God to do as I wish. Capturing the essence and implications of our limitations, John Calvin wrote,

To man we may assign only this: that he pollutes and contaminates by his impurity those very things which are good. For nothing proceeds from a man, however perfect he be, that is not defiled by some spot. Let the Lord then call to judgment the best of human works: he will indeed recognize in them his own righteousness by man’s dishonor and shame.<sup>6</sup>

Such words should not cause us to think that God never desires or blesses our goodness. Walking in God’s ways is itself a blessing (Ps. 1; Matt. 5:3-10). For example, being faithful to one’s spouse brings integrity to a marriage that is a blessing. Speaking honestly can enhance one’s reputation and help secure faltering relationships. Honoring one’s parents typically devel-

ops good character and protects from harm. Still, no degree of human goodness will lock God into a path of blessing according to our choosing, as though we had become his master through our merit.

God promises to bless obedience by using it for his purposes. The blessings that result, however, should be seen less as credit for our goodness and more as evidence of his faithfulness to his purposes. Ordinarily those purposes involve God's displaying before the world the kindness that he showers upon those who trust in him rather than in their own works. Family unity, personal well-being, financial stability, and community regard are examples of the blessings that regularly flow from honoring God's standards. However, God does not limit his blessings to earthly dimensions (Matt. 5:11-12).

God's ultimate purpose is to make us more and more like Jesus in faith and character (Rom. 8:28-29). Our ultimate need to trust in things eternal and not earthly is served as we experience undeserved earthly blessing. But this need is also refined in the difficulties we face that lead us (and those who observe our faith) to greater dependence on, and satisfaction in, God alone (Ps. 73:26; 2 Cor. 4:17; 1 Pet. 1:7). In such trials God still truly blesses our faithfulness to him, but these blessings can as well involve the mercy of removing us from the grasp of this world's pleasures as rewarding us with worldly delights (Heb. 12:11; James 1:2-4).

Whether God chooses the ordinary path of rewarding our goodness with observable blessing, or the extraordinary path of blessing our obedience with trials that will strengthen our character and stretch our faith, his love is never lacking (Heb. 12:6-11). Were it not for his mercy, which receives our best works with a divine delight that they would not warrant on their own, such imperfect works would justly receive the treatment of "filthy rags."<sup>7</sup>

Divine blessing flows from God's mercy rather than from our merit. Thus, we cannot guarantee that his care will flow according to our plans simply because we conform in some degree to biblical standards. Our works do not obligate God to care for us in the way that we think is best. We cannot put God on a leash through our goodness, nor obligate him to our wishes by our deeds. God blesses according to the wisdom of his eternal mercy rather than in proportion to our works of earned merit.

#### GOD IS MOVED BY THE DESPERATION WE OWN

But if our works in themselves will not move God to care for us, what will? The Bible answers, in the account that immediately follows, the troubling truths of the parable of the unthankful master:

## LUKE 17:11-19

<sup>11</sup>Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup>As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance <sup>13</sup>and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

<sup>14</sup>When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed.

<sup>15</sup>One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. <sup>16</sup>He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

<sup>17</sup>Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? <sup>18</sup>Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” <sup>19</sup>Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

A group of lepers begin to call out to Jesus “in a loud voice” (vv. 11-13). They raised their voices as a consequence of the custom of that day that required a leper to keep his distance from all others. Such a person had to go outside the walls of the city. He could no longer know the warmth of his own family’s touch. He could not even enter a place of worship to seek comfort for his soul and to petition God for help.

Lepers had to leave home, livelihood, and religious community. And, lest anyone get close enough to contract their contagion, they had to call out, “Unclean, unclean!” The phrase communicated not only the condition of their physical health but the presumption of that culture that some spiritual impurity had caused the awful illness. In this desperate condition ten lepers loudly cry out, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!” (v. 13).

And what does Jesus do when these desperate people plead with him for mercy? He does show them mercy. Jesus shows pity to those who have nothing to claim but desperation. He is moved by a desperate cry for help. What is the message to us? Our God is not moved by the deeds that we trophy, but by the desperation that we acknowledge as our own.

***Melting hearts***

Our own relationships reveal how powerfully moving a call of desperation can be. My wife and I have friends whose son in his middle teens has rebelled against them and against God. For four years there have been uncountable protests of innocence for unacceptable conduct, and innumerable promises to “straighten up.” But each justification, though it may

initially have made sense, has turned out to be a righteous veil for actual wrongdoing. Each promise, though it may have been briefly honored, has been broken.

So much pain, embarrassment, and discouragement have been inflicted on these parents that the wife confided to us that she did not know if she loved her son anymore. Her heart had grown hard against her own child. What melted it again was a cry of desperation.

After an escapade followed by more protests of innocence from the son, and more hasty promises to do better, the mother turned her back on her son. Not able to listen again to his excuses and rationalizations, she left the room. As the young man then sat alone on the sofa in the family room, he began to leaf through a family photo album that sat on a coffee table. The pictures of better and happier days past filled him with increasing emotion. One picture struck him with greater poignancy than the rest, and he called his mother back into the room to look at it.

The photograph showed the son as a young child under the approving smile of his mother. The teen now pointed to the photo and said, "Mom, when I see this picture, I understand why you don't know if you can love me anymore. In the picture, hope fills your eyes as you look down at your little boy. But I have dashed all your hopes, Mom. Please forgive me that I have dashed all your hopes."

And what did the mother do? Her hardness broke and she embraced him, with a heart renewed in love for him. She did not delude herself that there would be no more troubles. What moved her were neither protests of innocence nor fresh promises to do better. Rather, she was moved by his statement of absolute desperation. The Bible tells us that this is what moves God also.

God's heart is moved, not when we protest our innocence by pointing to our (inadequate) good works, nor when we promise that we will do better in the future. Though there is no reason for God to love us, yet he does. This is the nature of grace that we must treasure to know the joy that God wants for our lives. Until we recognize that there is no reason God will be moved to love us other than the spiritual need we acknowledge, we have no good news to tell others or ourselves. How could it be good news that God waits to love us until we reach an unattainable standard of righteousness, or that he makes "filthy rags" meritorious? Biblical faith is most evident not when we demand that God honor our flawed deeds, but when we

trust that he will mercifully respond when we humbly and helplessly cry out, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

### *Owning desperation*

Those who cry out in desperation have more hope of moving God’s heart than any who would trophy their own righteousness before him. Those who face the hopelessness of their spiritual condition apart from God’s mercy are nearer to experiencing his grace than those who pride themselves on their goodness. Not beyond God’s mercy is the homosexual dying of AIDS, who in a broken spirit says, “People may condemn me for a life they do not approve but, to tell you the truth, I would have loved anything that loved me back.” In fact, such a man may be nearer to expressing what melts the heart of heaven than I am on the days that my preaching, my position, and my righteousness swell my pride in my personal deserving of God’s blessing.

To experience God’s grace, I must readily and repeatedly confess my own hopeless condition. What makes me willing to do this is the knowledge that it is my desperation that inclines God’s heart toward my own. The awareness that he does not turn away from my desperation will actually draw me to honest confession and deep repentance.

The assumption that God only loves the righteous will tempt me to hide from him (and myself) the flaws under the public veneer of my character and my fears of deeper failures. However, when I know that God will not turn away from me when I unabashedly cry out for his pity, then I am more willing to acknowledge the monsters of sin in my own heart. Unafraid of God’s rejection, I can confront the wicked face of my avarice, my anger, my ambition, my lust, my lack of forgiveness, my doubt, and say, “You, Monster, are mine. Though I hate the spiritual disease your presence indicates, I acknowledge the symptoms of my infection. You, Monster, are why I am so desperate for my Savior’s mercy.” Such honesty moves God to pity us in our desperation, even as the knowledge of this grace makes us willing to cry out for his pardon.

Our Lord’s response to the lepers’ cry for mercy should compel us to confess our sin to him no matter its degree or persistence. We need not wait until we have corrected the wrong in our lives to ask him to forgive us. We should not attempt to compensate for our sin before we ask him to love us. Remember that Jesus cleansed all ten lepers when they cried out for his mercy, even though in his divine nature he could have known that only one

would return to thank him. Neither past failing nor future weakness will dissuade our Savior from showing mercy to us when we honestly acknowledge our desperate need for his grace.

## — WHAT SHOULD MOVE US? —

By showing us what moves God, the Bible also shows what should motivate our goodness. Jesus commends the one leper who returns to give him thanks. The commendation teaches us not only the importance of honoring God but also that such honor should not spring primarily from a desire for personal gain but rather from the delight of selfless gratitude.

### TURNING FROM A DESIRE FOR GAIN

The thankful leper displays his lack of preoccupation with his own gain by returning to Jesus. Because of our familiarity with this account we may fail to observe the potentially great dangers the leper hazards by his return to Jesus. He willingly risks both a change in his health and a change in the Physician's demeanor.

#### *Not for self-promotion*

The leper risks a health change, because he offers thanks for his healing before he has it certified by the priests. One aspect of the miraculous nature of this healing is its swiftness. Jesus commands the lepers to go to the priests, who will declare them cleansed of their disease (v. 14a). The lepers are healed while they are on their way to the priests (v. 14b). Then, the one leper turns back to thank Jesus, before even getting the priests' official declaration that he has been cured (v. 15). The risk in doing this, of course, is that what has changed so quickly could change back just as quickly.

We should consider what the leper risks by placing a higher priority on thanking Jesus than on first securing his certificate of health. The diseased man has not known family, affection, or worship for months or even years. He has been denied the warmth of his family's arms, the security of his home, and the comfort of his church. Now, all he has to do is see a priest who will declare him clean, and the former leper can return to his home, neighbor, and faith fellowship. He has only to go a few more steps to stand before a temple official who has the authority to restore all that is precious

in the leper's life, yet he does not. The man whose healing is so recent as to be suspect, returns to thank the One who made him well (v. 16a).

Something more powerful than pursuit of his own gain motivates this former leper. *Self-promotion* cannot be his motive, for he risks a return of his leprosy by returning to Jesus before going to the priests. But a change in health is not all that the healed man risks.

### *Not for self-protection*

The leper also risks a change in Christ's demeanor. Initially this Jewish holy man, named Jesus, addressed and healed the lepers as a group. But the one who returns to offer thanks is not Jewish (see v. 16b). He is a Samaritan, a race that traditionally hates the Jews and is hated by them. In returning alone to Jesus, the Samaritan can now be singled out. Jesus could now say, "Oh, there was an infidel among those I healed," and then undo the miracle for this foreigner. But *self-protection* is absent from the Samaritan's motivations. There is no apparent maneuvering for personal gain in his return to Jesus. The losses the thankful leper risks indicate that neither self-promotion nor self-protection drives him.

The message implicit in the account of the lepers coordinates with the one already made clear in the preceding parable: what we do for God cannot make God our debtor, and should never be done primarily for our gain. For if we are serving God primarily for our personal gain, then whom are we really serving? Only self. Too many Christians fail to realize this. They serve God in order either to get favors from him (in which case their real motive is self-promotion) or to keep "the ogre in the sky" off their backs (in which case their real motive is self-protection). In each of these cases the motive behind the service is nothing more than sanctified selfishness and, thus, the efforts do not actually honor God. What such people think is gaining them "brownie points" with God is actually to their demerit in heaven's accounting, which considers the motives of the heart as well as deeds of service.

Dealing with God according to his grace is hard to conceptualize for Christians used to thinking that they must broker God's affection with their deeds. However, we can understand how such self-seeking offends God when we consider relationships beyond the spiritual sphere. For instance, I occasionally desire to honor my wife by giving her flowers. If she were to say to me, "Thank you, Sweetheart. Why did you give me these flowers?"

and I were to answer, “Mostly because I want some favors or forgiveness from you in return,” then I would not be surprised if her smile vanished.

While there may be wonderful benefits for me and for our marriage in honoring my wife, if my primary motive for giving her flowers is my own gain, then she will recognize the selfishness of my actions even if I do not. God is no less astute than my wife. He knows whether the primary motivation of my obedience is his honor or my gain. Thus, I should understand why he would not find delight in what I might offer him to buy favor for myself rather than to honor his love. This does not mean that I cannot desire to be blessed by my service to God. In fact, God promises to bless our obedience according to his loving purposes, and in some measure he uses these blessings to encourage us to honor his standards. The point is not that his blessings should never motivate us at all, but they cannot be the driving force of our service. His blessings are the oil that helps the machinery of obedience operate, but love for God and desire for his glory are the pistons and wheels.<sup>8</sup>

The biblical hierarchy of motivations indicates that we must love and serve God first, others second, and ourselves last (Matt. 22:37-39; Phil. 2:3-4). This does not mean that we should have no concern for ourselves (were that even possible), for it is fitting and proper to love what God has redeemed with the blood of his own Son (Ex. 19:5; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9-11). Since God treasures us as he does his own child, then we should not disdain our own value as do some who mistake self-hatred for holiness (Luke 12:7; 1 Cor. 6:19-20).<sup>9</sup> There is an appropriate and healthy Christian love of self that should cause us to delight in God’s blessings, but this self-love is not the primary motivation for Christian service.

#### TURNING TO A DELIGHT IN GRATITUDE

But now a dilemma seems to fall upon us. If our deeds neither move God to love us nor should be pursued primarily for our own gain, then why should we do them? The historic *Heidelberg Catechism* with rather amazing theological candor asks the question for us: “[Since] we have been delivered from our misery by God’s grace alone . . . , why then must we still do good?” Or, to put the question more colloquially: “Since God’s love depends on grace, why bother to be good?” The answer: “. . . [S]o that in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for what he has done for us, and so that he may be praised through us.”<sup>10</sup>

This is precisely the motivation evident in the leper. He turns away

from the self-absorbed course of the others in his group because of his compelling desire to express his gratitude to Jesus. By the healed leper's actions and Christ's commendation, the Bible teaches us that what should move us to serve God is our delight in expressing thanksgiving to him for his grace.<sup>11</sup>

### *Compelling love*

If the primary reason that we honor God is our profit, then we will discover there are many occasions where honoring him offers us no apparent benefit. In those moments we will turn from his ways unless what motivates us is a desire to honor God for his grace rather than a seeking after our own benefit. What ultimately keeps our motives biblically prioritized and holy before God is the profound conviction that obeying God will merit us nothing. This is why Jesus tells us that, when we have done all that we should do, we are still unprofitable servants.

Jesus does not nullify the value of duty in order to dissuade us from serving God, but to keep us from depending on duty to gain God's acceptance. When we understand that our works in themselves earn us no merit with God, then the only reason to do those works is love for him. Thus we learn to serve God not for personal gain but for his glory—not for love of self but for love of the Savior.

Duty compelled by love may sound like an undemanding religion until we recall that there is no more powerful force to motivate the human heart than love. Fear is not more powerful. Guilt is not more powerful. "There is nothing more powerful than love," writes the seventeenth-century English minister Samuel Bolton. "Things impossible to others are easy to them that love. Love knows no difficulties. . . . Love is an affection that refuses to be put off by duties or difficulties which come between it and the person loved."<sup>12</sup>

What compels the mother back into the burning building for her child is love. And what most powerfully and persistently compels us to obey God when there is no apparent earthly gain is love inspired by the mercy of God in Christ (Luke 1:68-75; Rom. 8:15; 2 Cor. 5:14; 1 John 4:18). When we grasp how great is God's love for us, most fully revealed at the cross, then our hearts long to please him with works that fulfill his loving purposes—even when those purposes may be obscure to human eyes. Love for God expressed in thankful praise and service is the ultimate and highest motivation of all Christian worship, obedience, and mission. We do not expect

that our efforts will earn our Savior's love or repay his sacrifice, but rather in thankful devotion we desire to do whatever brings him delight in heaven and glory throughout the earth.<sup>13</sup>

The Scriptures highlight the power of a thankful response to Christ's mercy by recording that the leper risked what he had gained to return to Jesus praising God in a loud voice (Luke 17:15). Just as he had previously called out for mercy in a loud voice, he now praises God with similar volume. The degree of his appreciation reflects his previous degree of desperation (cf. v. 13). His example reminds us that to the degree we recognize our need, to that degree our praise of God will find appropriate expression. As the great twentieth-century theologian B. B. Warfield writes,

We are sinners, and we know ourselves to be sinners lost and helpless in ourselves, but we are saved sinners, and it is our salvation which gives tone to our life—a tone of joy which swells in exact proportion to the sense we have of our ill-desert. For it is he to whom much is forgiven who loves much and, who loving, rejoices much.<sup>14</sup>

If we do not perceive our need great, then we will not rightly give ourselves to the praise of our Savior (Luke 7:47).

Because awareness of our deep spiritual need causes proportionally great praise, we have further reason to acknowledge that our best works are not worthy of God's favor. Scripture's denial that our best works are sufficient in themselves to please God or to compensate for our weaknesses makes our spiritual desperation more acute and, thus, our appreciation of grace becomes more emphatic. Overwhelming gratitude for the spiritual deliverance our Savior alone provides will engender a humble and glad willingness to dedicate the strength of our lives to our Savior's glory.

### *Childlike willingness*

A pastor tells of the time that a daughter brought home a chocolate teddy bear from a gift exchange at her school.<sup>15</sup> The next day the girl's mother opened the door of her daughter's bedroom only to discover her three-year-old son was there. He had been caught red-handed, chomping down his sister's chocolate teddy bear. The boy backed against the wall like a cornered criminal, knowing that there was no hiding his guilt (or his chocolate-smearing hands and cheeks). He immediately began to sob his confession. The mother told him that, despite his tears, he would still have to tell his sister what he had done when she got home from school.

The afternoon was torture for the little boy, as each passing minute seemed like an hour of wondering how his sister would react to his crime. When his sister finally came home, the boy ran to the door. The anxiety that had been building all day behind the dam of his guilt burst from him in a torrent of tears and confession. He cried, "Sally, I'm so sorry, I ate your teddy bear." He was a sorry sight, standing there sobbing in his guilt. Blessedly, the one to whom he confessed was the kind of big sister who was always looking for a chance to love up her little brother. So she took him in her arms, kissed him, and said, "It's okay, Johnny, I will love you anyway and always."

Though he was still crying, the little boy began to giggle. Tears were still running down his cheeks for his shame, yet at the same time he was laughing for joy. With a vigor made more strong by the joy the tears made deep, he hugged his sister with all his strength.

This is a wonderful picture of every Christian who rightly perceives the nature of God's grace. When we face the reality and seriousness of our sin, we are rightly broken to the point of tears. This degree of desperation only makes our joy more deep, however, when we recognize that our God is still willing to say, "Do not despair, Child; I will still love you anyway and always." The love and gratitude that such a gracious pardon generates then becomes the motive for embracing our Lord and his purposes with all the strength of our being. Like the healed leper who fell down at Jesus' feet with a zeal made strong by gratitude, our thanksgiving for spiritual deliverance powerfully moves us to honor Christ with our lives. Thus, the joy that beacons through the tears of repentance moves us to new and more empowered obedience. In such renewed service we discover the truth of the biblical principle that "the joy of the Lord is our strength" (Neh 8:10).

The beautifully worded *Westminster Confession of Faith* captures the power and motivation that follow our awareness of release from the bondage of spiritual guilt through God's mercy alone:

The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the Gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and, in their being delivered from . . . [the] dominion of sin; . . . as also, in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto Him, *not out of a slavish fear, but a child-like love and willing mind* [emphasis mine].<sup>16</sup>

This is a different kind of religion from that of the guilty oppressive-

ness that motivates so many Christians and mires them in an unrelenting slavery to fear of God's disapproval. Because God accepts us on the basis of his unmerited pardon, rather than on the basis of our earning his affection or compensating for our guilt, we are enabled to serve him with an unrestrained childlike love that is a joyful response to his care. The power of this joy to strengthen and heal our lives makes God's mercy the primary message we must share in our churches, counseling rooms, classes, homes, and workplaces.

Teaching God's merciful grace does not undermine Christian obedience. Grace is by definition an unconditional release from the judgment we deserve, and accompanying undeserved blessing based on God's mercy alone. Knowledge that God has provided such loving care motivates us more powerfully than any other force to honor him as the Bible directs. Thus, if our teaching of grace causes us to make light of sin, or to slight the requirements of the Savior, then we have not really understood either the monstrosity of our sin or the greatness of the heart that forgives it.

When we truly perceive how great is the heart that pardons us, then our hearts begin to beat in harmony with that heart. Honoring our Lord becomes the joy of our lives, and love for him becomes the power that fuels that joy.

### *Gospel zeal*

If we have become bogged down in a guilty depression, have begun to equate religious piety with endless despondency over our shame, or have identified holiness with unrelenting sadness, then we have not grasped the grace that marks the gospel. Grace distinguishes its possessors by their joy. The good news proclaimed in the Bible neither slights the seriousness of sin nor shades the wonders of the pardon and power God provides his people. This full gospel message must also characterize the attitudes of God's people, because those with whom we share Christ's living water will be affected by the springs from which we drink. If we are guilt-driven, then so will be our spouses, children, and coworkers. If we pretend to be guiltless, then we will encourage shameless behavior. However, if we exhibit joyful gratitude for the grace of God that pardons our guilt, then we will reproduce grateful spouses, children, and fellow believers who are zealous for God's purposes.

The tears of confession *and* the joy of pardon are required to produce the gratitude that empowers the Christian life. Biblical grace neither mini-

mizes the guilt of our sin nor grants liberty for its expression. We know grace in its fullness when we are broken to the point of tears over the shame of our sin. We, in fact, strive to see our wrongdoing in all its horror and betrayal of our Savior; for when we do, the marvel of our God's grace becomes all the more profound and mobilizing. We delight in the actions that please our Lord and bring him praise precisely because we find strength to embrace him and his purposes in the joy made more real and more deep by our tears of shame. Such actions gain us nothing. Apart from his work, we are still unworthy servants; apart from his cleansing, we are still unsanctified lepers; apart from his blessing, we are still Samaritans trying to be religious.

Such understanding denies us candy-coated perceptions of our lives. We really are the temptable and tempted, the vulnerable and frail, the weak and wretched sinners that the Bible portrays us to be. But we recognize at the same time that such honesty is neither helpful nor healthy if tears of remorse do not at the same time turn us in gratitude toward the One who has delivered us from our guilt. In this soul-deep thanksgiving is the power of new obedience for Christ's sake. We can claim the biblically-balanced, empowering joy our Savior offers when we understand that God is not moved by our deeds but rather pours his mercy on those who confess their desperation and delight in his praise.

The pouring out of mercy and power is evident in this leper's miraculous healing, but we need carefully to consider its source. Jesus said to the Samaritan, "Your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:19).<sup>17</sup> To what faith does Jesus refer? The Samaritan does not repeat any Creed or proclaim the deity of Christ. All he does is fall at Jesus' feet and, in essence, say, "Everything that is now right about me, you did." The leper makes no claim of his ability, and points to no deserving on his part as the reason that Christ has made him well. He simply throws himself at Jesus' feet and says, "Thank you" (v. 16).

"Ah," we may be tempted to say, "that's not very much faith. Why, that's practically a 'mustard seed' of faith compared to the kind of mountainous faith we expect to see in the Bible." But Jesus said in this very passage that if we were to have faith "as small as a mustard seed," then we would see the power of God come down (v. 6). As we will see in future chapters, this belief in God's unmerited grace will transform our lives by unleashing us from the performance treadmill of trying to gain God's affections by our deeds or despondency. When the confession of our hearts is, "Everything

that is right about me, Jesus did,” then the power of heaven’s joy comes to earth for us.

## — RUNNING THE RACE OF JOY —

Some time ago I had the privilege of visiting a senior board member of Covenant Seminary in the hospital. Jim Orders was dying of cancer and knew it. When the cancer was first discovered Jim said to me with a smile, “I always wondered how the Father would take me home.” He had an absolute trust in the goodness of his God no matter what the difficulty. Still, Jim’s dealing with the cancer was never a matter of resignation. Far from it, he was in a race.

Jim raced to finish a book on the history of his family and family business that recounted the grace of God in his life. He didn’t write because he believed that his writing would make God love him more, but because he was so filled with a loving zeal for the Savior. Jim entitled his book *Nothing Happened by Accident*. He deeply believed that the caring character of God revealed in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was operative in every stage of life.

I have never met a man more zealous for the honor of his Savior, nor more certain of the cause of his zeal. Jim believed that his best works merited him nothing, and that God had saved him from his sin solely for mercy’s sake. Out of thanksgiving for God’s grace, Jim served on the boards of numerous Christian organizations, dedicated his business to God’s glory, witnessed to fellow businessmen one-on-one for years in personal discipleship programs and, finally, raced against the clock to record the mighty acts of God in his life.

Jim Orders did not believe any of these deeds would gain him one more ounce of God’s love—that is not why he so zealously gave his life to God’s service. Jim threw himself into homage of the Savior with such energy and joy because he so loved the God who saved him through faith in a great mercy not of human origin. Gratitude compelled Jim to serve his God, and the resultant joy that radiated from his heart made it obvious to all that, though he was dying, this was one of the most “well” persons you could hope to meet. Faith in God’s mercy brought joy through the tears. It always does. May each of us learn to embrace this faith that is the health of our souls, the joy of our hearts, and the truest source of Christian obedience.