

“An Exhausted World”
by Rom A. Pegram (1/22/17)

Folks, if you've ever been a student of church history, you've probably already heard the term *sola gratia*, Latin for 'grace alone'. It's a term Martin Luther (and others) used to talk about—*how our relationship with God is supposed to work*. However, over the years, I've discovered that even though we claim to live by 'grace alone', *we're more likely to actually live by 'grace a lot'—but not alone*. In this series, I'm determined to take back what the church has lost! For Martin Luther (and others), it was a major reformation of the church to take the whole idea of 'GRACE ALONE' back. And I'm thinking we need yet another reformation today, because we've drifted too far away from the GRACE God originally intended for us, *costing us plenty!*

For instance, some time ago I read a statistic that absolutely floored me. Dr. Richard Leahy, a prominent psychologist and anxiety specialist, was quoted this way: “The average high school kid today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950s.” It turns out, however, the problem wasn't restricted to any one age group. In 2007, The New York Times reported that 3 in 10 American women confess to taking sleeping pills before bed most nights. The numbers are so high and unprecedented, today, that some are calling it an epidemic...

Now, understand, all of these statistics were coming across my radar about the same time the news broke about the dramatic rise of Americans claiming *no religious affiliation*. Those figures went from about 7% in 1990, to about 16% in 2010. And when those under 30 were polled, that percentage more than doubled to about 35%. Now, in 2014 (latest figures I could find), the percentage of Americans who claim no religious affiliation had climbed to 22.8%. Isn't that alarming?

While these numbers may be a bit of a shock to some, I wish *I* had been more surprised by the findings! From my point-of-view, as a pastor, I can tell you ... it's truly heartbreaking out there. The Good News of God's *inexhaustible grace* for *an exhausted world* has never been more needed! What's the cause of all this anxiety? One major key factor is a little thing called ... *performancism* in all areas of our lives...

You know what *performancism* is, don't you? It's the mindset that says ... *our identity and value—as human beings, is directly proportionate to our performance and accomplishments*. In the world of *performancism*, success equals life; failure is synonymous with death. And *performancism* causes us to live in a constant state of anxiety, fear, and resentment until we end up heavily medicated, in the hospital, or just really, really unhappy...

And, as much as I hate to say this, the Church has not proven immune to *performancism*—far from it! I applaud any Christian who wants to engage the wider community with God's sacrificial love—living for neighbors instead of for themselves, BUT ... the unintended consequence of this push is that, *if we're not careful, we can give people the impression that Christianity is first and foremost about the sacrifice we*

make for Jesus ... rather than the sacrifice Jesus made for us; our obedience to him rather than his obedience for us. I hope you'll agree with me today, but the 'hub of Christianity' as it's been called is not 'do something for Jesus'; the 'hub of Christianity' is that 'Jesus has done everything for you'! Now, don't get me wrong. What we do is important, but it's infinitely less important than what Jesus has done for us...

And what Jesus has done for us, folks, is this little thing called GRACE ... that we need so desperately today. The truth is, Christianity should never be primarily concerned with legislating morality—which is too many people's impression of us. Believe it or not, Christianity is not about good people getting better; if anything, it's about Good News for bad people coping with their failure to be good. The heart of the Christian faith is GOOD NEWS, not good advice or even good behavior. And that GOOD NEWS, folks, is GOD'S GRACE...

As I'd said earlier, in the history of the Church—primarily with Martin Luther, there was once a Reformation. And one of the main reforms being called for in the Church at that time was the whole idea around GRACE. Martin Luther claimed that it should be SOLA GRATIA—*grace alone*! That's what scripture teaches. But, today—as in Luther's day, we seem to have a hard time with SOLA GRATIA. Our lives reflect more ... 'grace a lot' rather than 'grace alone'. So, this worship series is a call back to GRACE ALONE—what we all need, *desperately*! And it's what we have *available to us* in Christ! So, let me set up this series by sharing a few things to get us started, beginning with this reality: We need to understand that...

REAL LIFE IS LONG ON LAW AND SHORT ON GRACE. And it's been that way since the day we were born. Do you believe that? My daughter would certainly agree...

I think back to when our kids were young and we especially had problems with our daughter Rachel ... and *vegetables*. I remember telling her things like 'If you eat your peas, you can have some dessert'. She liked dessert. And there were other things too like, 'If you clean up your room, you can go out and play' or later on, 'If you get good grades, you'll pass your class ... and if you pass your class, you can graduate.' It's all reciprocal, isn't it? *The outcome depends on the action...*

And life goes on... 'If you work hard, you'll make some money, and you get enough money, you can buy that car you always wanted. And if you buy that car you always wanted, then maybe she'll finally go out with you, and if you treat her nice, she may stick around. But if you hurt her feelings, and need her forgiveness, you'll have to say you're sorry. And if she agrees to marry you, the guys at work might look at you differently, and then if you get their respect, you might be considered for a promotion...

If this ... then that! But 'that' doesn't happen, unless the 'if' is accomplished! It's all conditional, isn't it? And on and on it goes. The fact is: *Real life is long on law and short on grace!* As mentioned earlier, 'When life gets hard, the hardworking work harder!' We live with long lists of things to accomplish and people to please! Anyone living inside the anxiety, guilt, stress, strain and uncertainty of daily life knows from instinct, and experience, that the weight of life is heavy ... and *we are all in need of relief!*

Unfortunately, we live in a conditional world where the underlying message is always the same: *accomplishment precedes acceptance; achievement precedes approval*. And though our Christian faith includes the answer to the relief we need, it's not always that obvious. So, let me say this...

CHRISTIANITY IS OFTEN PERCEIVED (AND EXPERIENCED) AS THE ULTIMATE VEHICLE OF ... CONDITIONALITY. Christians may talk about God being loving and forgiving, but what they mean is ... *God loves and forgives those who are worthy*—who meet His conditions.

If you're a Christian, you rightly believe God forgave your past sins; that was probably what drew you to God in the first place. But once you made that initial Christian commitment, it was time to get your spiritual act together and be serious. We like to think it was God's blood, sweat and tears that got us in ... but it's *our* blood, sweat and tears that keep us in...

We view God as a glorified bookkeeper, tallying our failures and successes on his cosmic ledger. We conclude that *in order for God to love us, we have to change, grow and be good*. If you want God's love, in other words, you've got to earn it!

But, where did that come from? Contrary to much popular belief in the Church today is this: *the Bible is not a record of the blessed good, but rather it's a record of the blessed bad* (The band sang about this not too long ago—'Your Grace is Enough.' Do you remember?)...

- The Bible's not a witness to the best people making it up to God; it's a witness to God making it down to the worst people (*Jesus came to us, remember?*).
- The so-called heroes of the Bible are not really heroes at all; they fall and fail; they make huge mistakes; they get afraid; they're selfish, deceptive, egotistical and unreliable...
- The Bible is one long story of God coming up against our rebellion with His Rescue, our sin with his salvation, our badness with his goodness, and our guilt with his GRACE...
- **The Bible, folks, is not a recipe book for Christian living, but a revelation book of Jesus who is the answer to our *un-Christian* living...**

So, even though the Church is often perceived as the ultimate vehicle of conditionality, it's actually concerned with the miraculous GOOD NEWS of *God's inexhaustible grace for an exhausted world* ... which leads me to the last thing I want to share as I set up this series for you: THE ANSWER TO OUR EXHAUSTION. Folks...

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS IS GRACE, GRACE, AND MORE GRACE! So, what is grace? Author Paul Zahl gives a great definition and it's this:

Grace is love that seeks you out when you have nothing to give in return. Grace is love coming at you that has nothing to do with you. Grace is being loved when you are unlovable.... The cliché definition of grace is “unconditional love.” It is a true cliché, for it is a good description of the thing....

Let’s go a little further, though. Grace is a love that has nothing to do with you, the beloved. It has everything and only to do with the lover. Grace is irrational in the sense that it has nothing to do with weights and measures. It has nothing to do with my intrinsic qualities or so-called “gifts” (whatever they may be). It reflects a decision on the part of the giver, the one who loves, in relation to the receiver, the one who is loved, that negates any qualifications the receiver may personally hold.... Grace is *one-way love*.

Folks, *grace doesn’t make demands; it just gives*. And from our vantage point, it seems to always be given to the wrong person. We see that over and over again in the Gospels: Jesus is always spending time with and giving to prostitutes, tax collectors, and half-breeds. The most extravagant sinners of Jesus’ day receive his most compassionate welcome. It has nothing to do with the one who’s receiving it; God’s grace truly is a *one-way love*...

Scripture also describes GRACE as a ‘One Way Love’; *listen to our scripture lesson for today* and you’ll get the idea...

Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. ⁸ But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. ¹⁰ This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. ¹² No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us. – 1 John 4:7-12 (NLT)

It’s a love marked by giving, not getting (Eph. 5) ... and, folks, it’s all too rare! Think about God’s Grace in your own life—this *one-way love*. Odds are ... you’ve caught a glimpse of this one-way love in your own life, and it made all the difference...

- Someone let you off the hook when you least expected or deserved it...
- A friend suspended judgment at a key moment...
- Your father was lenient on you when you wrecked the car...
- Your teacher gave you an extension, even though she knew you’d been procrastinating...
- You said something insensitive to your spouse, and instead of retaliating, she kept quiet and somehow didn’t hold it against you the next day...

One-way love is rare. And thankfully, the glimpses we get in relationships are only a fore-shadowing of God’s love for us...

So, let me ask you: *Are you exhausted today?* Do you know what that feels like—at least sometimes in your life? Folks, *GOD'S GRACE is the answer*—GRACE ALONE is all we need. And I look forward, in the weeks ahead, to showing that to you ... as we explore this pure and simple gift. Some think it too good to be true. But it *is* true! It's the truest thing in the entire universe. *God loves us independently of what we may or may not bring to the table.* How unlike the world, but *soooooooooooooo like God!* Are you ready?