

Counterfeit Grace

by Eli Brayley



"For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ." - Jude 1:4

GRACE VERSUS COUNTERFEIT GRACE

"Brent, what is the gospel? Can you tell me?"

Brent, a 40 year old business man with a pleasant and talkative personality suddenly began fidgeting in his seat beside me as the two of us flew toward Salt Lake City. We had already been discussing religion, and Brent had shared with me how he had grown up in the Dutch Reformed Church but had later converted to Roman Catholicism since getting married. Beads of sweat started to form on the sides of his temples. After several minutes of agonizing silence, he finally confessed.

"I honestly don't know... I can't believe I can't answer that question!"

I then began to share with him the contents of the first three chapters of Romans. Brent listened intently as we discussed the righteousness of God, the wrath of God revealed against the sinfulness of man, the futility of obtaining justification by the works of the law, and the free grace of God that justifies men through the death of Jesus Christ.

"So you see," I said, "only those who put their trust in Jesus alone shall be saved."

No sooner had I said that, Brent straightened up and grimaced.

"No...", he shook his head, "No... I don't believe that. I believe God is more merciful than that. He is far more gracious than we think. Even if a person doesn't believe in Jesus, as long as they just try to be a good person, I believe God will forgive them."

I replied, "But Brent, we just read how in God's sight there is none that are good, not even one. And God's wrath is revealed against all unrighteousness. And furthermore..."

"Yeah, right, I believe that everybody sins, and I know that Jesus died for our sins... I'm not denying that. But I still think that if a person does his best, even if they don't believe in Jesus, God will be merciful."

This conversation is typical of many thousands of conversations I have had with people about the gospel. The way Brent was thinking is the way millions of people, who profess to be Christians, think about God's grace. I do not fully blame individuals for failing to understand the grace of God as it is in truth, but rather the blame lies to a large degree in the fact that the true Biblical gospel is not being preached in the churches in which these individuals have grown up. This is especially true in the "Bible belt" (areas that are traditionally and culturally "Christian") and in old denominational churches where the gospel, once proclaimed, has been discarded for quasi-gospel liberal alternatives. However, in reaction to this, many well meaning Christians have responded by crying out against this preaching of false grace but have themselves fallen into a pit, which though different, is equally destructive: legalism.

What needs to be seen by these well meaning Christians is that the so-called "grace" that millions of professing Christians claim to believe is actually not grace at all, but is a perversion and a counterfeit of the true grace of God revealed in the Bible. We must see that grace is not the enemy, but counterfeit grace is! Therefore our response to this as the Church of Jesus Christ is not to snap back with an equally graceless message of law, but to stand fast and proclaim the authentic gospel of the grace of God. The very thing that must meet counterfeit grace head-on is grace, not legalism. This is the meaning of Jude's letter, who wrote to exhort the Christians to *"earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints"* (v.3) against those who were bringing in this soul-destructive counterfeit grace. We must preach the true gospel of grace!

UNDERSTANDING JUDE 1:4

So often we fight the wrong battle because we don't understand what exactly it is we are fighting. Jude 1:4 is a classic example of such a misunderstanding. It is often said by preachers: "See here! False teachers sneak into the Church and teach people that grace can be used as a license to sin!" From this verse has come the expression "using God's grace as a license to sin". In fact, the NIV actually translates the verse that way: *"They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality..."* As does the NLT: *"...saying that God's forgiveness allows us to live immoral lives."* This accusation of using the grace of God as a license to sin is brought against professing Christians like Brent, and by attempting to oppose what they think is an abuse of grace, well meaning Christians form a new and equally destructive gospel, one which no more preaches grace than does "the gospel of Brent".

But this is a mishandling of the Scripture. In fact, there is nothing in the Greek text of Jude 1:4 that even suggests such an interpretation as "using grace as a license to sin", and therefore to fight against this assumed notion is to fight the wrong battle. If we look closer at the actual passage, we shall see that the apostle is *not* saying that these false brethren are teaching that one can *use* the grace of God as a license to sin, but that these false brethren are *exchanging* the grace of God for something which they call "grace" but is actually not grace! Rather, it is lasciviousness (wanton ungodliness). It is not that they are preaching grace but falsely applying it... it is that they are not preaching grace at all. The word in the Greek text used to describe what these false brethren are doing is the word, *metatithēmi*, which literally means to "to transpose, change, or transfer two things, one of which is put in place of the other" (Thayer). This is precisely the point Jude is making: these false brethren are replacing grace with something else that is not grace, though they use the word "grace" and talk about it as if it were grace. They are not misusing the true grace of God to sin. They are exchanging grace altogether with something that is not grace, and therefore it is not grace that is the problem, but counterfeit grace!

Now the question must be asked: What does it mean that they are transforming the grace of God into lasciviousness? Notice first that whatever it means, the meaning is one and the same as "denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ." Now bear in mind that these false brethren "crept in unawares," so that means that they were mistaken for true believers in Christ, and therefore were not obviously denying the Lord Jesus Christ. The denial that Jude is talking about is a far more subtle denial - one that is never openly stated but that must be discerned. And we discern it in their message of "grace."

Grace that is not righteous is not grace. In my conversation with Brent, he stated that God was more merciful and gracious than people think, and that even though people don't believe in Jesus, God will still forgive them if they try their best. Though he called this "grace," this is a perfect example of turning the grace of God into lasciviousness. It is tearing the righteousness out of grace and replacing it with an unrighteous, though sweet-sounding, counterfeit. Such "grace" denies both God and the Lord Jesus Christ, for it tramples the blood of the Savior under foot and perverts the true knowledge of God. Concerning this, Paul declared: *"I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain."* (Gal. 2:21) False brethren, though claiming to believe in grace, make void the cross of Christ by saying that people simply need to do their best to be saved. They say that people do not need to believe in Christ, for God is gracious and merciful to forgive. Thus they unwittingly imply that the death of Christ was not needed and betray the fact that they do not understand nor honor the righteousness of God. They make void the law by not establishing the cross, and they make void the cross by not establishing the law. In this way they change the grace of God into lasciviousness.

Yet ironically, this is exactly the same thing that happens when well meaning Christians react to such counterfeit grace with legalism. They come against false grace with false grace, and preach that people must stop their sins in order to be saved. While fighting against the counterfeit grace that says God will be gracious to everyone "just because everybody is essentially good," they respond with an equally counterfeit grace that says that God will be gracious only to sinners who stop their sins and obey His commandments. Nothing has in essence changed except the size of their works-based standard. They both say that people are saved by "grace" because they are "good"! One group has a low standard of

acceptance and the other group has a higher standard of acceptance, but both groups have a standard of acceptance lower and other than the perfect righteousness of God that can only come to us by faith in Jesus Christ! Thus both groups make void the law, nullify the cross, and frustrate the grace of God. The truth is, it is not possible for God to accept any sinner on any basis other than the sacrificial death of His Son Jesus Christ. This is because God requires perfect righteousness. Any grace, no matter how pious-sounding, that does not acknowledge this truth is a counterfeit, changing the grace of God into lasciviousness.

THE GRACE OF GOD IN TRUTH

God's grace can never be separated from His righteousness. God clearly saw all of our sin, despised it, and acted against it by sending His Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for our sin, thereby making the way for sinners to be "*justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*" (Rom. 3:24) It is in this way only that God is able to be "*just and the justifier of those who believe in Jesus.*" (Rom. 3:26) God gives grace to the ungodly, but not in any lenient sort of way, but in a perfectly righteous way that establishes His very own law. Since only the sacrifice of Christ can do this, only those who put their total trust in Jesus Christ shall be saved - and shall be saved by grace. No one's works, however little or however much, can ever merit forgiveness from God. God's forgiveness can only come to us freely because of the death of His Son or it can not come to us at all.

True Biblical grace is a marvelous thing! God loves sinners so much and so desires to forgive them that He has made an impossible situation possible by the blood of His Son! Grace is righteous undeserved favor, and for that very reason it is amazing. Those who know what real grace is cannot help but be overwhelmed and transformed by its power. I believe that the majority of people who talk about grace have never really known what grace truly is. Only when we grasp the fact that grace comes to us in perfect righteousness, and yet also as perfectly free, will we be changed, for only then does it reveal the wondrous love of God our Savior toward sinners, of whom I am chief.

In closing I shall say again: The only way to respond to counterfeit grace is... to proclaim grace!

AMAZING GRACE

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That *saved* a **wretch** like me.
I once was **lost** but now am *found*,
Was **blind**, but now I *see*.

*by John Newton (1725-1807),
former slave trader*

Below is a list of recommended books to help you understand how to enter into grace through faith and then how to grow in grace.

*God's Way of Peace** by Horatius Bonar
We Would See Jesus by Roy Hession
*Revolutionary Love** Festo Kivengere
*Thankfulness and Confession** pamphlet by Brad Scheelke
*An Invitation to Grace in Life Together ** pamphlet by Brad Scheelke
*How to be Free From Bitterness** pamphlet by Jim Wilson
Jesus Changes Everything by Bob George
Jesus Plus Nothing Equals Everything by Tullian Tchividjian
Why Grace Changes Everything by Chuck Smith
Continuous Revival by Norman Grubb
*Discipleship by Grace** by Derek Levendusky
Agape Leadership by Peterson & Strauch
Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce by Eric Metaxas
*Another Hand on Mine: Carl Becker** by William Petersen

For academic readers:

The Great Meaning of Metanoia by Treadwell Walden
The Death of Christ by James Denney

*Note: * indicates our publication or difficult to find.*

If you desire further information, or are interested in the above titles, please contact me at:

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