

fifteen

FUEL FOR THE FIRE**Grace as Our Motivation**

A student once commented to me (Roger), “I believe God loves me, but does He like me?” How many of us walk around with this question bouncing around our minds? We might think, *I know God loves me, but that’s just because He’s God and He has to. But with all the screw ups I make and sinful things I do, how can He possibly like me? I must be pretty annoying; I can’t imagine that God delights in me. He must just tolerate me and be disappointed in me most of the time.*

These thoughts are especially prevalent when we’re struggling, whether with a particular sin, with spiritual disciplines, or with the wicked motives and thoughts in our minds. The natural next thought that enters is, *How can God use me? I’m so weak and sinful!* We think we need to clean ourselves up and re-earn favor with God to become useable. So we try to assuage God by groveling or performing some sort of penance.

What we’re doing is simply entering the works-motivation cycle the world operates on. When we do this, Christianity becomes legalism—the intent to earn or keep God’s favor through

our own self-righteousness and adherence to a certain set of standards or laws. Often these standards are not even biblical; they're culturally influenced or imposed by someone else.

In this chapter we're going to talk about grace. Not just saving grace, but about living by grace and allowing grace to fuel our service of God and persistence in the mission of finishing the Great Commission. If we allow works to be our primary motivator, we'll end up either proud and self-righteous or frustrated and burned out. Neither will allow us to do what God has prepared for us.

The Great Exchange

The student who asked me whether or not God liked him grew up with a verbally abusive, alcoholic father who spent little time with him and made promises he rarely ever kept. His dad didn't delight in him, and he interpreted God's view of him through this cloudy, shattered lens. We view God through lenses like this all the time—parents, anti-biblical worldviews, elders, even Santa Claus—and end up believing lies about how God sees us. The enemy bombards us with these lies, trying to distort our view of God's character and truth. What we need is to look through the crystal-clear lens of the Word, gaining a true perspective on how God sees us. This is critical for developing the proper motivation for serving Him.

Without an understanding of the biblical concept known as "imputation" it is impossible to beat the cycle of legalism and experience a consistent life in grace. Every person who has ever lived, except Jesus, was born a sinner. Romans 3:10–12 says, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." Through the first

three chapters of Romans Paul has established this case. No one is righteous. All are sinful. To look at it mathematically, each person is 0 percent righteous. No measure of good works can offset the depth of wickedness in our hearts.

At the point of salvation 100 percent of my sin is placed on Christ. Hebrews 10:12 says, “Christ...offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins.” His death on the cross is a once-for-all death, a payment for all of our sins—past, present, and future. His sacrifice was the final sacrifice for sin.

The moment you place your faith in Christ you not only trust Him to take the guilt of all of your sin, you also trust Him to come into your life. The Holy Spirit takes up residence within you. Theologically, when this happens the full righteousness of Jesus is imputed to you (*imputing* is just a fancy, scholarly way of saying crediting or attributing to). Second Corinthians 5:21 says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” A great exchange takes place: Jesus takes our sin and gives us His righteousness.

The church at Corinth is known as one of the most immature and sinful churches of the age. Paul addresses a litany of issues—more than in any of his other letters—ranging from idol worship to incest. Yet in the opening of his first letter to the Corinthian church he says, “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, *saints by calling*” (1 Corinthians 1:2, NASB, emphasis mine). They are appointed saints by God’s grace; they are 100 percent righteous. All the righteousness of Jesus is bestowed on them. They—and we—have become the righteousness of God.

The Greek word for saint literally means sacred or holy—physically pure, morally blameless, consecrated. This is how God now sees us. The phrase Paul uses, “in Christ,” is used

more than seventy times in the New Testament. Being found in Christ, God now sees His Son when He looks at us. And He never ceases seeing us as saints, even in the many times we fall short, fail, and sin.

This is huge! God is not disappointed in us, He doesn't just tolerate us, He actually does delight in us! So why don't we feel this more? Why do we wonder if God is disappointed with us? Why are we often burdened by guilt and shame?

The answer has way more to do with us than it does with God. We don't see ourselves as righteous saints. This is partly because, at nearly every moment of every day, we still experience sin and brokenness. So we get enveloped by this reality and think that God must view us the same way. It's also partly due to the constant bombardment of Satan's lies, which block us from embracing the truths of our identity in Christ.

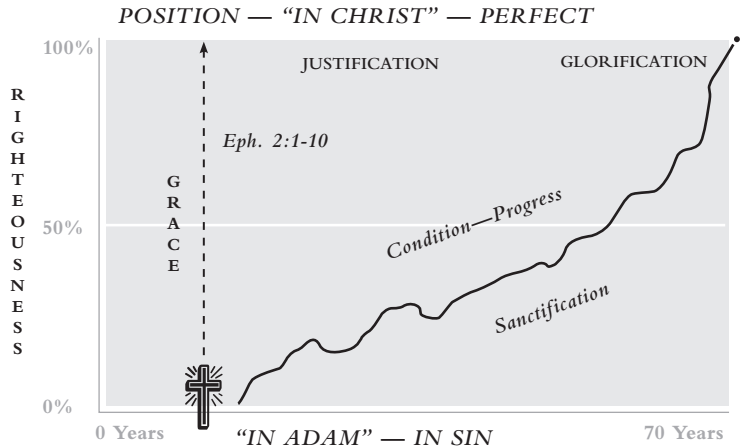
We often say things like "Christians are just forgiven sinners." This is true, but it's not the only thing that's true. In calling us saints, the New Testament focuses not on the past—who we were—but on the present—who we are. Our fundamental identity has changed, and the language of the Bible calls us to live out of this new identity, not a patched-over version of our old one. We're defined by God as perfect, holy, the light of the world, ambassadors for Christ, etc. If we constantly think we're just forgiven sinners, just rotten worms saved by grace, it can lead us to act like we're still guilty and shameful. We need to balance this truth with the truth of how God sees us now, of who we are in Christ.

Position and Condition

We need to learn to live in the tension between our "position" and our "condition." Our position in Christ is certain and

secure, but our condition is up and down, always fluctuating, slowly progressing toward maturity.

The chart below illustrates this dichotomy well.



I found this several years ago and use it all the time to help people grasp their identity in Christ. Many passages are represented by what it communicates, but we'll focus on Ephesians 2.

The first three verses of Ephesians 2 depict us as spiritually dead in our sins and enslaved to the world, the flesh, and the devil:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Ephesians 2:1–3).

Powerless on our own to gain any righteousness, it's only

by God's grace that we're lifted from death to life. Without this divine intervention we'd move blindly along the bottom axis of the chart, living in sin until physical death and eternal separation from God.

The next three verses describe this miraculous intervention: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:4–6). This is the biggest "but" in the Bible. The whole passage, even our whole salvation, hinges on it. *But* because of God's great love and mercy we are saved.

Paul goes on to say that God did three things: made us alive with Christ, raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. But these aren't the only three things God did at the moment of our salvation; Paul has chosen to go with a short list here. In his book *Victory Over the Darkness*, Neil T. Anderson lists thirty-six statements that are true of our identity in Christ. Among them are: I am hidden with Christ in God, I am chosen of God, I am holy and loved, I am made complete in Christ, etc.

This is the great exchange we looked at earlier. In an instant our position before God goes from completely unrighteous, full of sin and blame, to completely righteous, blameless and perfect in Christ. From here on out, our *position* before God remains the same.

Our condition, however, is our day-to-day experience. The moment we trust Christ we enter the process of sanctification, of being set apart and made holy. So, in a paradoxical way, we're being made holy while we've already been credited with holiness. Hebrews 10:14 is a fascinating verse that captures this well:

“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” Bear with me while we venture back to junior high English for a moment. Notice the verb tenses: “has perfected” (our position), and “are being sanctified” (our condition). This is the dichotomy we experience—we don’t feel very righteous but we’re declared to be so.

This might not be as counter-intuitive as you might think. A very similar process happens in the family unit. I have four kids. Before each was born, I didn’t lean over to my wife’s swollen belly and say, “Here are the things you need to do to get in the Hershey family: only one poop in the diaper daily, sleep through the night, and for goodness sake, stop kicking your mother!” Of course not! Nor did I lay out a series of orders my kids had to meet to stay in our favor.

I’d never treat my children this way. I love them dearly, and their position as my beloved children will always be secure no matter what they do. Roxanne and I did invest a lot of time and energy into disciplining them, seeking to correct bad behavior and mold them into mature adults. But our discipline was motivated by love and a desire to help them grow to love God, love others, and lead godly lives. We sought to develop their condition while their position remained rock solid. They never stepped beyond our grace and love.

God sanctifies us in many ways. He brings trials, prescribes spiritual disciplines, uses godly counsel, etc., to bring us to spiritual maturity over time. This process has ups and downs, sharp rises and gradual ones, but hopefully the overall trend is upward. Until we die or Jesus returns we’ll never actually reach a point of 100 percent conditional righteousness, but that’s okay. The means of sanctification aren’t given so we can *keep* in God’s favor. We stand in grace. Our position is secure.

It takes a lifetime for these wonderful truths to make the

fourteen-inch journey from head to heart. I've been a Christian for forty-one years, and still I often wrestle with guilt and self-condemnation. I can assure you that you will never "arrive" at a point where you have it all together spiritually. You will always need the beautiful message of the gospel. You will always have to be intentional to live out of your position rather than your condition.

Serving By Grace

The movie *Saving Private Ryan* closes with (spoiler alert!) Private James Ryan, now an old man, visiting the gravesite of Army Captain John Miller, the man who led a squadron of Rangers through war-torn Europe to bring him home alive. Ryan's three brothers had already been killed in World War II, and the Army made the decision to send Captain Miller and his men to find and save Private Ryan, sparing his mother the grief of losing all her sons. The search ultimately cost Captain Miller his life. Upon seeing his grave, Ryan is overcome with emotion, gripped with the reality that his whole adult life was made possible by Miller's ultimate sacrifice. Through tears, he turns to his wife and says, "Tell me I'm a good man."

At this moment Ryan has tapped into the most powerful motivation for living that we can experience—the motivation to live well because we've been saved by another. Ryan was looking for affirmation that his life was not a wasted one. To have lived a purposeless, wasted life in light of the great sacrifice paid for him would have been the ultimate dishonor. He sought to confirm that his life was lived well—not to repay a debt, but to allow his life to be a response of gratitude, honoring the man who died for him. This is a marvelous picture of living by grace—not seeking to earn favor or pay back a debt, but responding in love and

gratitude, honoring and obeying Jesus because He first loved us.

Paul's letter to Titus captures this same motivation. One of the recurring themes is a call to obedience, and the phrase "do good" or something similar is repeated often. Interestingly, Paul makes his appeal for doing good based not on the motivation of Jesus' Lordship, but rather His role as Savior. Six times in the short letter Paul uses the word *Savior*, a word he uses only six times in the rest of his letters combined. In contrast, he uses the word *Lord* to describe Jesus exactly zero times in Titus, compared with a whopping 257 times throughout the rest of his letters. The essence of this is displayed in Titus 3:8, when, after an eloquent proclamation of the gospel of grace, Paul says, "I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works."

Paul seems to be saying, "Do good, because Jesus is the Savior." He's appealing to the extravagant grace of God, shown in Christ, as motivation for a life of obedience and service to Him. He does this instead of playing on the prevailing natural motivations held by all of humanity, those of earning by performance or serving out of duty or fear.⁸⁸

When we come to grips with the breathtaking reality of the gospel, that we can do—and have done—absolutely nothing to save ourselves or make ourselves acceptable to God, and that He freely and unreservedly loves us and went to infinite lengths to save us, we cannot help but be transformed in the heart. And this transformation by grace produces deep, lasting motivation to serve Him. Our lives become dedicated to Him, acts of worship in response to His greatness and salvation. Our service is fueled by grace.

Performance dominated my motivation for much of my Christian life. I sought God's approval through doing spiritual disciplines and avoiding sin. But I never felt good enough, my

failures and shortcomings were always in the way. I rarely felt God's favor. This began to turn around for me when I took to heart Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now *no condemnation* for those who are *in Christ Jesus*." It doesn't say there is no condemnation for those who read the Bible every day, or no condemnation for those who don't have lustful thoughts. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Period. As I meditated on this verse often I began to experience freedom, and live out my life in service fueled by grace.

The Hindrance of Inadequacy

There are three potential hindrances to serving out of grace and believing that God can use us. All flow in some way from forgetting the gospel and living with a focus on our condition rather than our position. The first is the feeling of inadequacy.

This is what I felt for those early years of my Christian life. I became so focused on my condition—the sin in my life, my lack of success in spiritual disciplines, my lack of credentials to qualify me to be used by God—that I lived in a constant battle with inadequacy. I'd constantly be thinking, "How can God possibly use me?"

One day during a ministry staff meeting my co-workers and I opened up with one another about our problems and struggles. We unloaded everything—sin, doubt, unbelief, shortcomings, the whole nine yards. At the end of the meeting I commented to my co-leader, "It's amazing anything happens in this ministry considering how messed up we are." I had no idea how right I was. It *was* amazing, but not because we had miraculously stumbled upon success in spite of our inadequacies. It was amazing because of the amazing grace of God to use us, broken as we were.

Later that day I opened my Bible to 2 Corinthians, and verse

4:7 hit me like a UFC-style elbow to the face: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” The treasure of the gospel had been entrusted to Paul, who compared himself to a jar of clay—an ordinary, fragile, cracked pot. This is a great picture of what we are—fragile clay pots.

Up to that point in my life I believed the lie that if I could just turn all my weaknesses into strengths, God could really use me. If I could just reach a certain spiritual maturity plateau, then I would be useable. This verse spoke directly against that lie. Jars of clay are incredibly weak and easily broken.

God opened my eyes that day to the reality that I needed to embrace weakness as part of God’s design. He created me for dependence on Him. Ministry success and God’s work through me was all for His glory, His glorious light shining through the many holes and cracks in my fragile clay exterior. God wants the glory, so He works through our inadequacies to do great things. And we are left in the position of continual reliance on His grace, not our strength.

The Hindrance of Pride

This brings me to the second danger: pride. Second Corinthians 12:7–10 says:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more

gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Earlier in this passage Paul writes about a man who was taken up into heaven and experienced unspeakably great revelations (2 Corinthians 12:2–4). Most scholars believe Paul is referring to himself, and that these verses can be read in light of it. Paul's thorn, whatever it may have been, was given to keep him from becoming conceited over what he saw and heard.

This thorn apparently bothered Paul so much that he pleaded on three separate occasions for God to remove it. But God's response is, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." This gave Paul the impetus to boast in weakness and rejoice in hardship or difficulty, knowing that through them God's power was mightily at work. When we are weak, He is strong. Paul's thorn kept him from pride and self-boasting, and instead focused his attention on the all-sufficient grace of God.

In response to this passage I once took out a piece of paper, knelt by my bed, and wrote out two lists: my strengths on one side, my weaknesses on the other. Then, for the first time, I thanked God not only for the strengths, but also the weaknesses He allowed to persist in me.

As we grow and mature we ought to seek to strengthen our areas of weakness. But we will always have weaknesses, and it's better to acknowledge these as gifts from God designed to create humble dependence rather than bitterly resent them. For me, indecisiveness and the way I second-guess myself are weaknesses that have never gone away. Even though I've been in ministry for thirty-nine years and spoken in front of large groups on hun-

dreds of occasions, feelings of indecisiveness, doubt, and second-guessing plague me nearly every time. They're terribly frustrating, but this thorn keeps me dependent on God and trusting in His grace.

God uses us far more in our brokenness than He does in our togetherness. This counter-cultural reality helps keep our invasive pride in check, for pride is probably *the* greatest obstacle to serving the Lord. It's innately anti-God and seeks to exalt ourselves. But God will not let His glory be taken by another; He alone deserves exaltation.

The Hindrance of Shame

Paul did everything he could not to deserve apostleship: persecuting Christians, authorizing their martyrdom, and denouncing Jesus. He was one of the biggest enemies of the early Church. His conversion to Christ happened as he was on his way to Damascus to imprison Christians. Jesus knocked him off his horse, spoke to him, saved him, and turned his life around 180 degrees (Acts 9:1–31). In 1 Corinthians 15 he says: “For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Corinthians 15:9–10).

We often shoulder great shame for what has happened in our past. Shame is deeper than guilt; it is an attack on our fundamental worth as a person. While guilt is more attached to behavior, shame is attached to who we are. We can internalize the fact that our past sins are forgiven—guilt no longer remains—but shame can still linger, feeling like a stain in the soul. This is one of the

most powerful attacks of the enemy. He'll bring up past sin—whether from before you became a Christian or from yesterday evening—and rain down condemnation: “Look at you. You're not qualified to serve Christ—look at what's in your past. You're flawed, you're stained.” He tries to bury us under a burden that Jesus already bore.

But remember Romans 8:1. There is *no condemnation*. The Holy Spirit brings conviction, godly sorrow that motivates change. Satan brings condemnation, a tearing down of our worth and personhood. We need to learn to recognize and reject these lies from Hell, something we'll discuss in the next chapter. Tell that devil, “There is *no condemnation* for me in Christ, you liar!”

Grace radically changed Paul's life. He could have borne tremendous shame over his past sins, but we see no evidence of this. He said, “By the grace of God I am what I am.” Though it may have been a struggle for him, he let his past remain his past, and continued in the grace of God.

I regularly speak at a spring break evangelism conference in Panama City Beach, FL. In the afternoons, students spread out around the beach, initiating conversations and telling people about Jesus. At one of these events I had a conversation with a young woman who shared that as she went out to share her faith one afternoon, her eyes were drawn to a particularly good looking, shirtless guy. Immediately thoughts from her past life of sexual sin flooded her mind. The enemy began to whisper, “How can you go out and share your faith—look at your past life. You're a total hypocrite.” Shame enveloped her. But in that moment she quoted Romans 8:1, telling herself that there is now no condemnation for her, she's in Christ Jesus. She rebuked the slimy devil and declared, “Yes, I can share my faith—I'm a righteous, holy, blameless child of God, an ambassador for Christ!”

She refused to believe Satan's lies. And she moved forward, a person still in need of the wonderful grace of Jesus, all while sharing that great news with others.

It should be stated that for many, dealing with shame requires more than just quoting a verse of Scripture. People who've been sexually, physically, or verbally abused, for example, may have scars with roots reaching into the deepest recesses of their souls. It often takes lengthy counseling and intentional prayer for a person to experience healing from the deep hurt and shame. We don't want to minimize this. Our intent is to address the shameful lies Satan often whispers in his desire to condemn us and derail us from serving God. We can wield the truths of Scripture as a weapon to fend off these attacks. But while this is a great place to start, we may have to acknowledge that deeper work is needed to bring lasting healing.

In Spite of Myself

In the last part of 1 Corinthians 15:10, Paul says, "I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." His ongoing ministry was by grace. He was aware that day by day, city by city, his ministry was purely by the grace of God. God showed up with him, graciously working through him to bring people to Christ.

Years ago, while at Miami of Ohio, my team leader asked me to start going to the University of Dayton once a week to begin a ministry there. I did *not* want to go—I was having the time of my life investing in fraternity men at Miami, and I saw it as a waste of time. Why would I go to another campus when there were so many needs and the ministry was so fruitful where I was?

I went, but only out of sheer obedience to authority. My heart was not in it at all. During the drives to Dayton I'd whine

and complain to the co-worker accompanying me—real mature. I just didn't believe God would show up.

Sure enough, He did. Around my third time there, I met two Christians on the football team who were hungry to grow and motivated to make a difference on their campus. They just had no idea what to do. So I began to spend time with them, and eventually God blessed the campus with a ministry of more than fifty students. My day at Dayton become my favorite day of the week.

My attitude was terrible, but God worked anyway. He wanted to do a work at the University of Dayton, and He did it in spite of the attitude and lack of faith of one of His servants. I remember my time at Dayton as one of the most pure manifestations of God's grace working through me. Paul's words, "not I, but the grace of God that was with me" became very real to me, as it has many times since. Remember, God uses us more in brokenness than togetherness.

Staying In It for a Lifetime

I loved the TV show *24*. From the world's perspective, Jack Bauer was the ultimate man to emulate. Competent, strong, and decisive, he always seemed to make the right decision and almost never lost a fight. I'd watch the show and imagine myself jumping buildings and avoiding car bombs to save the country from nuclear war, all while freeing an innocent girl from kidnappers. I truly envied the dude, and wanted to lead like Jack, though without killing people—most of the time.

But if you are going to be a Finisher who stays in the fight for a lifetime, you will need to be less Jack Bauer and more Apostle Paul. You'll need to consciously live out of your position rather than your condition. You'll need to internalize the gospel and preach it to yourself daily. You'll need to marvel at

the grace of God and let it transform you at a heart level, erasing shame and producing the deep desire to honor God and worship Him with your whole life. You'll need to recognize that you're both a weak, broken individual who needs the grace of God as much as anyone, as well as a righteous, holy ambassador for Christ. You'll need to serve God in freedom—secure in the approval He's already lavished on you.

Grace has to be our motivation for service. Picturing God as a Santa Claus-like figure will not do. Performance motivation never works; it leads only to pride or self-defeat and guilt. Finishers *have* to be people who live by grace.