

# The Gospel: Good News for All



**Articles by J. Michael Fezell**



**GRACE COMMUNION**  
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*Living and Sharing the Gospel*

# **The Gospel: Good News for All**

By J. Michael Feazell

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## The Chink in Death's Armor

Get a load of this lead sentence from Reuters:

Women who go through menopause in their early 40s may have a slightly higher risk of death later in life compared with their peers, a large U.S. study suggests.

Imagine it, a slightly higher risk of death later in life. Apparently, some women have a slightly *lower* risk of death later in life. Isn't it 100 percent for everyone? Death must not be as inevitable as we all thought. Hmmm. Who pays for these studies, anyway?

The study itself made sense — it showed that women who go through menopause in their early 40s may not, on average, live quite as long after the age of 75 as women who go through menopause later than their early 40s. The *presentation* was misleading — not the study.

Sometimes it's like that with the gospel, too. Presented poorly, even the gospel can be misunderstood. And sad to say, there's a lot of that going around these days.

The gospel is actually good news. It exposes the chink that Jesus put in death's armor. It promises a new life beyond death, a life rich in joy, peace, friendship and love. A life in harmony with a God who loves you and wants you with him no matter who you are, where you've been or what you've done.

But it's not always presented that way. Sometimes the gospel is presented as a way to get big cars, big houses and fancy clothes right now. Just "name it and claim it," people are told.

Sometimes it's presented as an austere framework of rules and regulations overseen by an angry God who'll roast you forever if you don't toe the line.

Sometimes it's presented as a glorious pyramid scheme in which the more

pious salespeople you talk into joining, the greater your eternal income will be.

Jesus said, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). But some believers let their pushy, memorized spiels so grate before people that given a choice, I suspect that most people would rather live next door to a used car salesman than to a Bible-thumping evangelical Christian.

If we could all do it the way Jesus said to, if we could all let our light shine in such a way that people are won over instead of put off, imagine what a positive reputation the good news could have. If only we could present the gospel the way it really is, as a new life in Christ, a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (see Galatians 5:22-23) instead of as some wacky caricature that misrepresents both the gospel and Jesus.

I wonder if there might be some merit in placing our emphasis on being the kind of people that Jesus said his disciples would be, rather than just telling people what to believe. Wouldn't that win more people over to the real power of the gospel?

The chink in death's armor is love, after all, not memorized testimonies. Testimonies have their place, but it's love, God's love, that overthrows death and hell. People can digest genuine, godly love a whole lot easier than fast talk, pushy questions and judgmental frowns. The proof is in the pudding, not in reciting the recipe.

Large studies show that we all have a slightly higher risk of death today than we did yesterday. But because God loves us, because his Son died for us and now lives for us, the teeth have been pulled out of death. Like the old gray mare, death ain't what it used to be. That good news is worth living for. Why not show someone today?

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## Going on a Guilt Trip?

Guilt trips. They're all the rage, you know. Everybody's taking them. No date restrictions. Availability unlimited. People of all ages are welcome. But there are a few hidden costs.

Among other things, guilt trips cost you your stomach lining, your sleep, your sense of humor, your ability to have fun, your productivity and any realistic sense of who you really are and what your purpose really is.

But we stand in line for tickets anyway, as though it's our chief call and duty to leave the world of confidence and hope and set sail for the land of dread and gloom. We stuff every mental container we own with depressing emotions, fear and blame, and then, with the whole load strapped on securely, we lug it across the gangplank and down the narrow hall to our room deep in the bowels of the S.S. Guilty Conscience.

Yet we're religious people, people who know that God forgives sin and that we don't have to be crushed down with burdens of guilt.

Maybe that's the problem. Maybe religion is not the solution to guilt after all. Maybe, if the truth were known, we'd find that religion and guilt are sweethearts. After all, wherever you find one, the other will usually be buzzing nearby like some annoying housefly.

That's because religion is designed to give people a list of things to do to stay on good terms with whatever deity they profess to worship. The trouble is, no one has ever kept their particular list of rules well enough to be absolutely sure their deity isn't one day going to hurl a nasty curse their way. Religion isn't enough. All it manages to do is make people feel worse for their failure. It pumps out guilt like some magic grinder gone mad. What people really need is some hope, some good news, not more religious talk about how bad they are.

## Good news

Christians should know better, of course. We have the gospel – the good news. Sad to say, however, a lot of us are experts at turning even the gospel into religion, which means we end up spending more time on guilt trips (or sending others on guilt trips) than we do resting at home with our Lord of grace.

Freedom from a guilty conscience is so foreign to most of us that as soon as it happens we start feeling guilty for not feeling guilty. It's as though we think we stand in better with God if we refuse to feel forgiven and clean.

[Hebrews 10:19-22](#) says,

Since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience.

This passage speaks of confidence – confidence to be at home in the presence of God, not hiding guilt-ridden behind a trashcan in the corner. That confidence is not confidence in ourselves or in how well we've behaved; it's confidence in God himself who loves us so much that he sent his Son to remove our guilt and give us all the privileges of beloved children.

The gospel, thank God, is not religion. It is the end of religion. It's good news, the good news that God loves you so much that he sent his Son to bear the curse of your sinfulness and be raised from the dead so you can be forever at peace with him.

You don't need religion to be at peace with God; you just need to trust your Savior. You don't have to pack your guilt-trip suitcase with plenty of fear, doubt, worry and anxiety. You don't have to wonder whether God really loves you, or really forgives you, or really has saved you.

Instead of a guilt trip, why not believe the good news – the good news



that cleanses you from a guilty conscience?

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## Standing in Christ Alone

“OK, I can see that we’re saved by grace and not by works, but I’m still not clear on a couple of things. For example, some passages in the New Testament indicate that we won’t be saved unless we are doing good works. How do those passages fit with the passages that tell us we are saved by grace and not by works?”

Good question. Just as these passages tell us, we cannot enter the kingdom of God unless we are righteous, unless we are meeting the righteous demands of the law of God (that is, the law of Christ, not the law of Moses). There is no way around it. Unless we are righteous, we are doomed.

The bad news is, the righteous demands of the law, which are indeed righteous, leave us doomed. Why? Because we don’t have what it takes to be sinless. “There is no one who is righteous, not even one,” Paul reminds us (Romans 3:10).

That is where the gospel comes in. The gospel, which is good news, tells us that God made Christ, who was sinless, to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). It is good news.

That means we are saved by God’s gracious acts of love on our behalf—that’s the only way we can be saved. In spite of our rebellion, he loves us and wants us in his kingdom (John 6:40; 2 Peter 3:9). His eternal banquet of joy and celebration is so important to him that he has decided to have it overrun with guests even if the only guest-pool in the world is made up of nothing but ne’er-do-well, no-good losers.

God wants us at his eternal dinner party, and he has made sure we can have, free of charge (because we haven’t got the price of a ticket), the soapy scrub-down, fragrant oils and clean clothes not to stink it up. He has made it sure—with no help from us, because we bring nothing to the arrangement but our smelly, dirty selves.

So when we read a passage like Galatians 5:24, we need to keep firmly in mind that this kind of person is exactly who God has made us to be in Christ. We are not righteous of ourselves; we are righteous only in Christ, and only by God's grace.

We can believe it or not, but that is what God says he has done. If we believe it, we will welcome the scrub-down and the clean outfit he provides for us.

If we don't believe it (that is, if we don't accept God for who he is, the Father of Jesus Christ through whom he has saved the world), then we will simply continue the futile masquerade we call life and cut ourselves off from the joy of real life waiting for us in God's banquet hall.

### **Standing in the light**

In the kingdom of God, righteous pretenders aren't welcome. Only sinners who know they are sinners, and who trust God to forgive them and make them righteous in Christ, are allowed in. Pretenders, who think they are in some way more deserving, or more acceptable, or less dirty than the others, can't stay. They remain in their sins because they won't give up their little righteousness charade and won't trust God to be their righteousness.

Knowing what God has done for us and in us, we are led to work on ourselves to overcome the sin that so easily entangles us (Hebrews 12:1-3). But keep this in mind: we are accepted as righteous by God only because of what Christ has already done for us, not by our Three-Stooges-Keystone-Cops overcoming performance, which is the best we can ever muster.

The Holy Spirit in us moves us to devotion, but the victory we participate in is the victory of Christ (Ephesians 2:4-7). We can enjoy the glorious fruit of his victory only by trusting him, not by improving our behavior (Romans 3:27-28).

When we rest in Christ, the peace of God removes our doubt, fear, anxiety

and worry (Philippians 4:6-7). We are secure in him, like a helpless baby comforted in his mother's arms.

When God sent his Son to die for our sins and to be raised for our life, he made two things indelibly clear: 1) He loves us immeasurably and unconditionally, to the point of taking our burden as his own, even to the point of death, and 2) Our salvation was entirely his work; there is nothing we can do to save ourselves.

## **Sin**

What is it about sin that makes it so bad? Sin amounts to a self-imposed gulf between us and God. Imagine what would happen to a tomato plant if it declared independence from soil, water and light. Without resting in the elements that produce its life and growth, the little plant is doomed.

It can never be what it is, a tomato plant, without soil, water and light. It can never do what tomato plants do—bear tomatoes—without soil, water and light. Yet our little rebel tomato plant, if we can still call it a tomato plant, has decided it has a better plan toward self-realization than the natural plan that makes tomato plants be tomato plants.

Sin amounts to a state of declared “independence” from God. It cuts us off from the source of our life and being. It is refusing to be who we really are, who we were created to be, in a crazy effort to be who we think we can be. Sin is more than mere actions—it is the very condition of our lives. Individual sins are merely the natural fruit of a corrupt heart.

On our own, because we are sinners, we are like that tomato plant, trying to scratch out a life for ourselves in a hostile world, ignorant of the fact that we are not even in the ground. Lying as we are in the dark on the concrete sidewalk, the best we can hope for is to stay as green as we can for as long as we can and finally wither and die.

But the gospel tells us that we are not on our own. God has come to our

rescue and planted us in the rich, moist soil in the sunlight. What can we do about it? Nothing. But we do have a choice about whether we will believe it and enjoy it, or deny it and shut off our roots and close our leaves and go on pretending we are lying on our side in the dark on the concrete. Such tragic pretense can end only in withered ruin.

### **Dead in sin, alive in Christ**

To put it another way, if any one of us is fog-brained enough to think we are acceptable and righteous before God because of our devoted efforts to do what is right and avoid what is evil, then what can anyone say? Imagine a spoiled can of Spam shedding a layer of its reeking, bacteria-infested mass and then humbly telling you that it would now, free of that layer of putrefaction, make an acceptable lunch for you, and you have something of the idea.

In other words, no matter how much you overcome, no matter how many sins you shed, no matter how many bad habits you replace with good ones, no matter how much better you are today than you used to be, it is still fourth down and one million yards to go.

That is why we need to get our minds off ourselves and onto our Lord and Savior. We need to give up on ourselves and put our trust in Christ. He fixes us from the inside out.

Quit looking at the evidence you see in your life and start trusting him to be for you and do for you what he says he will be for you and do for you. Quit worrying that he will not be faithful on account of your being a sinner, and start trusting him to forgive you and clean you up like he said he would.

It works like this: your unfaithfulness does not keep God from being faithful. He will be faithful because that is the way he is—faithful. You can stick out your tongue at him all day long, and he will still be faithful. You will have a sore tongue and you will miss out on all the fun he wants you to

have, but in spite of your wooden-headedness, he will still be faithful. He will not stop loving you and he will not stop knocking on your door, hoping you will let him come in and eat with you. He is, and always will be, faithful, even when you are not.

We are free to deny him. We are free to give up on him. We are free not to believe him, even to hate him. We have that choice, the choice to love our own self-defined pseudo-lives and turn down his gift of real life. We don't have to enjoy his kingdom. He will let us stew in the misery of sin and death if we want to. Even so, he will always remain faithful, never forcing himself on us but always desiring our love.

As Paul wrote: "The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself" (2 Timothy 2:11-13).

You can get yourself into all the trouble you want, and God will still be faithful. He will hurt for you and grieve for you, because he loves you, but he will not force you to trust him. He earnestly wants you to trust him and receive the glorious benefits of his grace, mercy and love, but the choice is yours.

You ask me if you can sin and still be saved, and all I can say is that you are a sinner and God saves sinners, so there can be no other answer but *yes*. You ask me if I am trying to encourage you to sin, and I answer, no, I am not; I am encouraging you to trust God to love you and forgive you and save you in spite of your sins, because that is what he promises to do.

You ask me how a person can have true faith in Christ and still keep sinning, and I answer, it would be nice if we believers would quit sinning, but nobody in all history has quit sinning this side of death. You try to think of some other way to ask it, and I still can answer no other way if I am to be

faithful to the Word of God.

We are all sinners, and God saves us anyway, because saving sinners is what he does. That is not an invitation to sin; it is simply a fact. God remains faithful to us even when we are unfaithful to him, and thank God it is so. If we put our trust in him and admit we are sinners, he is faithful and just to forgive us.

### **Saved by grace**

“But God will not save us unless we change, will he?”

Change how much? Change a little, change a medium amount, change a lot? Listen! God saves sinners. He heals the sick, not the healthy (Mark 2:17).

“Mike, you know what I mean. We have to change at least some, or he will not save us.”

God does not save on the basis of human changes. He saves on the basis of his own righteousness (Romans 3:21).

“Come on. You know what I mean. If you believe, and Christ lives in you, then you have to put sin out of your life or you won’t be saved.”

OK, how much sin do you have to put out? All sin, most sin, some sin, a little sin? How much sin have you put out? How much sin is still left?

“I may not have all the answers to your cute little in-my-face questions, but I know this much: God is not going to save us if we just keep on sinning and not even caring about it.”

Ah, now we’re getting somewhere. Who said anything about not even caring about it? That is precisely what believers can’t do. Not that there is a rule against it. There doesn’t have to be. When you love somebody, you care, that’s just the way it is. The fact that we are believers means we do care about it.

The very thing that believers are trusting God to do is to forgive their sins

and raise them from the dead. People who sin without caring about it, do not (by definition) care about whether God forgives them for sinning. They might figure that it's nice if he does, but it's all the same to them if he doesn't. It doesn't matter to them what God thinks, one way or the other. They only care about one thing: themselves, which is why they don't mind sinning in the first place.

Believers, on the other hand, care about themselves, of course, but they also care about something else: God. They care that God says sin is wrong, they care that sin destroys, and they don't want to be sinners, which is why they want to be forgiven. They trust God's Word, including what it says about sin. They care about the fact that God loves them and has forgiven them, and they care about loving, thanking, praising and serving their gracious God.

Believers fight their sinful nature, desiring to live in harmony with their calling in Christ. But when they sin, as they all do, they trust God to forgive them for the sake of their Advocate, their Savior. That is, they *ought* to trust him to forgive them. But with all the legalistic you'd-better-measure-up-or-go-to-hellfire preaching and teaching, tragically, many Christians live in dread that God will in the final analysis reject them because of their sins, not save them.

Ask the average churchgoer, "How do you avoid hellfire?" He will say something like this: "By living a good life."

That is not the gospel, but it is the common perception not only of John Q. Public, but also of John Q. Churchperson. Why is it the common perception? Because that is what has passed for preaching in untold numbers of Christian pulpits for centuries. Believers are lured in with promises of grace, then held hostage by a long and slippery list of required moral demands necessary in order to stay on God's good side. It is called religion.



The gospel, however, is not religion. The gospel is a loving God's good news to humans: "I love you so much that I sent my Son, so that by putting your trust in him you will not perish but live in joy and peace with me forever."

### **Let him who thinks he stands...**

When we love God, we obey him. Right? Well, maybe that works for you—maybe the fact that you love God moves you into a life of faithful obedience and steady purity. It doesn't do that to me. I love God with all my heart, and in many ways I do better than I used to when it comes to sin, but I still grieve the Holy Spirit a lot more than I want to.

God's children *want* to obey him. The Spirit of God in us leads us to obey him. Our consciences, appropriately, plague us when we know we are disobeying him. Still, two things to remember: 1) We have been forgiven already, and 2) We keep sinning no matter how much we overcome.

The person who thinks he stands is the one who needs to take heed (1 Corinthians 10:12). Why? Because nobody stands except in Christ. Even with all the apostolic urging to do what is right, not one of us actually walks a pure and holy life—except as we are held in Jesus, and that life is invisible to us (Colossians 3:3).

Unless our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, Jesus said, we have no part in the kingdom (Matthew 5:20). The Pharisees were the most careful and devoted law abiders around! They took the word of God seriously, and they devoted themselves scrupulously to observing it. But Jesus said that anyone who wants to be in his kingdom must have even greater righteousness.

Do you have such a level of righteousness? I don't. And that is the point. Salvation does not come by what we do, no matter how good we are—or think we are. Our righteousness is the righteousness of Jesus (1 Corinthians

1:30), and our faith is in his promise of deliverance, not in what we can do (Ephesians 2:8-9).

So how do we stand? By admitting that we are stone dead, flat on the ground, unable to lift a finger, and by trusting Christ who raises the dead (John 11:25). How do we stand? By faith in the God who justifies the ungodly (Romans 4:5).

How do we know we can trust him? Because he has proved how much he loves us by sending his Son (Romans 5:8). How much proof do we need to be able to put our trust in him? What does he have to do? Die for us? He did just that. More than that, he was raised for us, too. It is in him that our true life is hidden with God until it is revealed with him when he comes (Colossians 3:3-4).

Then we shall see ourselves for what we really are, for what he has made us. We can accept our resurrected life, which includes and springs from our death, or we can reject it in favor of what we have always had—this pitiful excuse for life we see all too clearly right now.

We can keep the little coin we found in the dirt (which gave us the illusion of having a good handle on life), or we can trade it all for what's behind the curtain—trusting God's gracious promise that even though we can't see it yet, it is the mother of all jackpots. In other words, we can die to all the things we thought were worth fighting, clawing and bleeding for in this world, and trust God to give us the real life we don't yet see, the one that is hidden in Christ with God.

The two cannot exist together. We must give up the fake life we hold so tightly with both hands in order to grasp the real life God continually holds out to us (Matthew 6:24).

### **Serious about sin**

Yes, we do need to “get serious” about avoiding sin. But we need to do so

in the context of complete assurance that we are God's forgiven and beloved children for Christ's sake. We need to get serious about sin, knowing full well that God has not and will not reject us because of our sins, and that he will always stand with us in our struggle against sinning.

The only thing that can cause us to lose our salvation is for us to stop caring about it altogether and stop trusting God (Hebrews 2:3). Even then, God will continue to knock on our door, earnestly desiring that we answer it and let him in (Revelation 3:20).

The bottom line is, fight sin diligently but quit worrying that your failures, setbacks and dry periods will cut you off from God. They don't. God is not arbitrary in his love for you, nor does he keep score (1 Corinthians 13:7). He is absolutely true to his covenant promise; he will never leave you nor forsake you, and you can count on that no matter how deep in the miry pit of sin you have wallowed.

In his eyes, even while you still wage war with your sins, you are already new and righteous with him in Christ (Colossians 3:3). He sees you for what he has made you in Christ, not for what you have made yourself by a lifetime of wrong turns, bad decisions, weak moments, failures and sins.

Again, that is why this gospel is good news!

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## **A Simple Matter of Trust**

How can you be sure you are in the kingdom of God and not destined for the lake of fire? Many Christians worry that in the final analysis, they might not be counted among the children of God and will face their fate in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone (Revelation 20:8).

What is the basis for such a worry? Personal sins. Deep inside, we know how ugly and real our sins are and continue to be, and we fear that since God knows it too, there is no way he will “let us in” his kingdom. After all, we know that God is pure and holy, and that his kingdom is also pure and holy. Where does that leave us? Since we are not “pure and holy,” we figure it can only leave us on the outside looking in.

We want to overcome. We struggle to overcome. We pray against our sins. We set our wills against our sins. But when all is said and done, we never quite get rid of them. We are sinners, and as such, we keep on sinning.

“You can’t play games with God,” we are told. “Christ didn’t die for you so you could keep on sinning,” we are warned. We listen to the Ten Points for Overcoming Sin sermons, the Five Rules for Ruling Your Emotions sermons, the Nine Keys for Healthy Happy Families sermons, the Seven Laws of Success sermons. On and on and on they come, the never-ending stream of “Get Your Life Straightened Out or Burn” messages.

We take notes feverishly, we pin them up on the fridge, we pray over them, we try and we try, yet, when the chips are down, we blow it, confronted once again with the stark truth that we are what we are, and what we are stinks. “Don’t kid yourself,” the little voice in the back of your mind whispers. “You’re a loser. If you think God is going to give anything good to you, you must be in dreamland.” So where does our loser life leave us with God? Why should he keep putting up with us? Why should he let us into his

pure and holy kingdom?

### **Bad information**

Somewhere along the line, Christians have given other Christians bad information about how the kingdom of God works. The kind of thinking I mentioned earlier does not come from the Bible. It comes from ugly rumors and twisted tales about God, making him out to be more like one of us than the way the Bible says he really is.

The Bible says God is on your side, even though you are a sinner. That's right. Even though you are a sinner. Don't forget: Christ died for you while you were still a sinner (Romans 5:8).

Contrary to what you may have heard and may have thought, the Bible is not primarily a rule book, though it does contain plenty of good instruction about how humans ought to live. The Bible is not first and foremost "God's instruction manual for humans," which if you don't heed and obey, God will hurl you into his supernatural furnace. Quite the contrary: the Bible is good news, and it is good news for you just as it is for everybody who has ever lived—not merely good news if you straighten up, but pure and simple good news no matter what you have done or do or will do.

In Christ, God has chosen to reconcile his whole creation to himself, and he didn't even ask your permission to do it (1 John 2:2; John 12:32; Romans 8:21; Colossians 1:20). In personal terms, in Christ, God has reconciled *you* to himself, and he didn't even bother to check your credit first. You have been reconciled, like it or not, and the only question left is whether you will trust him that it is so, and enjoy it, and start seeing yourself the way you really are—the way God has made you in Christ—or just keep on seeing yourself the way you always have, through your own dirty, cracked and crooked lenses.

The Bible is the record of God's work of grace through which he has

redeemed the world through his Son Jesus Christ (Luke 24:45-47). When you read the Bible, you are reading about a world of people who need redemption, and whom God has in fact redeemed through the birth, life, death and resurrection of his Son, God with us, God in the flesh, God in death and God in resurrection, Jesus Christ (John 3:17; 5:46; 1 Corinthians 15:3; 1 Timothy 2:4-6).

God holds you as you really are, the way you were always meant to be, in Christ, and what the Word and the Spirit say you are. That is what you actually are, for it is only in God that we exist at all (Acts 17:28). God says that you, as you are held in Christ (which is the only way you exist at all) are good (Romans 6:11, 23; 8:2; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 1:21; 5:17; 17-19). You, as you are in Christ, are God's beloved child, in whom he is well pleased. That is true, whether you want to believe it or not. It is true because God says it is, and what God says is, is.

### **No strings attached**

So what room is there for worry about our salvation? There is no room for worry. Remember, it is for Christ's sake that we are accounted worthy before God. Without Christ, we are dead meat. With him, we are full members of God's family. When he touched the rotting corpse of our loser life, he healed it completely and made us his own. He made us, in him, the beloved children of God (John 1:12; Galatians 3:26). Being "good" doesn't cut it—never did and never will. There is only one ticket into the kingdom of God—trusting in Jesus Christ.

The kingdom of God is free, absolutely free, with no strings attached. You enter it by trusting God to give it to you. You cannot get in with spiritual merit badges. You cannot buy a ticket. All you can do is walk right through the front door by trusting the Giver of the gift to do exactly what he promised—to give you his kingdom (Luke 12:32; Galatians 2:16).

You don't have to worry about the cost; it has already been paid (Romans 5:9; Revelation 1:5). You don't have to worry about how to dress; he will give you an outfit. You don't have to worry about what to say or do when you get inside; he will show you. You don't have to be anybody special, do anything special, pass any test, fit any profile or win any drawing.

It's free. God wants you there. The invitation is platinum-plated real, from God himself. And yes, he knows you are a rat. He took care of that. To him (and he is the One who decides), you are not a rat any more, even though he knows you still act like one. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10, New Revised Standard Version in this article).

The initiative in all this is God's, not ours. It depends on him, not on us. He is the author and the finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). Our part is to believe and accept, and that's it. This is not a "Thanks for everything, Jesus. I'll take it from here" arrangement. No, it is only Jesus, Son of the Father Almighty, with no help from us, from start to finish. You can take it or you can leave it, but there is not one thing you can add to it. If you try, you'll wind up like the fool who sneaked into the banquet wearing his own filthy rags instead of the free wedding garment provided by the King (Matthew 22:12).

"God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "Trust me," God says. "You're in. You don't have to do anything except trust me. The wedding banquet of the Lamb is totally free to you. I have already paid the bill. Now it is time to celebrate. Come on in. Don't bring anything. Everything is provided."

### **It's still about grace**

By now, some Christians are angry with me. "You are taking this grace thing too far," they are thinking. "God wants a changed life, not just some

easy believism. God is not going to just let in anybody who believes. These sinners have to prove the genuineness of their belief by living right.”

They mean prove it by living right to the satisfaction of the “godly” people in the church, namely them, because sinners certainly have nothing to prove to God. Jesus died for sinners while they were still sinners. He knows what sinners we are, and he also knows what sinners the “you’re taking this grace thing too far” people are. That is why we all need grace. It is why the Son of God died for us, and it is why salvation comes by grace.

Regardless of our neurotic need to vindicate ourselves, we are sinners, and left to ourselves, we have no hope. Even if salvation were based on performance, which it isn’t, our little doodle-bug mound of righteousness could never begin to measure up to our Himalayan mountain range of sinfulness.

Still, we desperately look for ways to feel that we are not quite as bad as we really are. After all, we don’t blow up at our family every day. We don’t look at pornography all the time. We don’t gossip in every conversation. We aren’t really bad persons, we just slipped up under pressure. We aren’t really liars, we just shaded the truth a little. We only envy certain people. We are only greedy about some things. We are only inconsiderate, or selfish, or rude, or arrogant, or mean, or callous or pigheaded (et cetera ad infinitum on and on) only part of the time.

But when it comes to the sins of others, now that’s a different matter entirely. There are some sins that we holy righteous folk just cannot and will not abide. Today it is especially vogue not to put up with “those people” who get abortions, “those” homosexuals and “those” fornicators. Well, on second thought, it seems we can abide the fornicators a whole lot better than we can abide the homosexuals.

Our intolerance for certain kinds of sinners whom we find more



disgusting than ourselves extends to most anybody who does most anything that we don't like, whose sins are different than our own. We want rules for others, to keep them in line, and we even want rules for ourselves, to keep us in line (as long as we can keep secret our breaking of them). We feel we have to find a way not to be as bad as we suspect we might be, and keeping some rules and doing some good deeds are great ways to make ourselves feel that we are not as big a sinner as we really are.

We have a hard time accepting and admitting that we are hopeless sinners who could never climb out of the sin pit in a million years. We are sinners, pure and simple, but we keep telling ourselves, to placate our consciences, that we can somehow, someday, put all this sin out of our lives.

It ain't gonna happen, neighbor. Work at it all you want, as hard as you want, and you will still be in the sin pit on the day you die. The only thing that will get you out of it is being raised with Christ, and that has already happened (John 5:25; Colossians 1:13-14; 3:1; Romans 6:11). But you can't live like it and enjoy the fruit of it if you refuse to believe it.

The only thing that matters is trusting God that his word is true—for Christ's sake he has erased all sin, including yours, and removed every record of your guilt forever. He has officially declared you not guilty, free to go, and he has closed the courthouse. You can believe that, you can trust him, you can lay down your burden and take your rest in him (Matthew 11:28-30).

Or, if you are hell-bent on it, you can continue trying to prove yourself worth saving by striving in all the typical ways to make yourself a better person. (That makes it easier for you to condemn others, too.) If you like that kind of life, you can have it. God will grieve for you, but he gives you the freedom to choose to be a fool, if you want it.

### **Faith is not a work**

At this point there is something important that we need to say about faith,

too. You are not saved by faith, but by God's grace. That means God is not even measuring the quality and quantity of your faith. You are not saved by trusting in your faith; you are saved by God for Jesus' sake. You are saved because God loves you and because he is good, not because you have faith. Faith comes in so that you can actually believe that what God says is true and actually enjoy the gift you have already been given.

There is no earning, no merit, in your trust. Don't think faith is the price tag of salvation. It is not. Faith is simply trusting God that his gift to you, which is still invisible, but is more real than anything you can physically touch or see, and is really yours just because he says so. You can receive it or refuse it; either way, it is no less real, and it is no less a free gift. Faith simply enables you to enjoy the gift he has given you.

You don't have to have some certain kind of faith. You don't have to have some emotional experience. You don't have to feel an overwhelmingly deep love, or intense remorse, a surge of power or a wave of peace. You don't need anything at all. Just trust God. Just believe him.

Faith means belief. It doesn't mean breathless, tearful, supercommitment. It just means believe God and quit worrying about whether you are going to "make it into the kingdom"—you already have (Romans 5:1). Christ has qualified us (Colossians 1:12).

### **Receiving the gift**

No analogy is perfect, but let's pretend for a minute that someone you have heard is trustworthy walks up to you and hands you a check for a million dollars. He tells you that it is a gift, no strings attached, and that it is all yours. You can either believe the benefactor and take the check to the bank and deposit it in your account, or you can figure he is a nut and throw the check in the trash. I suppose you could even decide that you'd rather make your own money and haughtily refuse to take his charity. You could

even spit in his eye if you felt especially offended by his generosity, especially if his gift offended your sense of personal dignity by making it look like you were a loser who actually needed the money.

But to get to the point, when your benefactor hands you the check with your name on it, you don't have to dance a jig to make it actually become yours. You don't have to go to his house and wash his windows. You don't have to start pleading with him to forgive all the financial mistakes you have made in your life and shed tears. You don't have to do anything. A hearty thank you would be nice, but you already have the check. It is yours. All that is left to do is to believe that the benefactor wasn't lying and that the check is good, and in that belief, take it to the bank and deposit it in your account.

God has forgiven your sins and given you a ticket to his kingdom. If he waited to see if you believed before he gave you the gift, then it would no longer be a gift; it would be a reward for the act of believing. But that is not how God works it.

Our faith does not affect one way or the other whether God gives us the gift. He has already given it. The only thing faith affects is whether we can enjoy the gift we have already been given. We can let it sit unused and unenjoyed, or we can pick it up and embrace it and kiss it and laugh and enjoy it to the hilt, praising and thanking him forever. Either way, it is still ours, given to us by God absolutely free with no strings attached and no requirements at all.

To use a slightly different analogy, he has not just given us a check that we have to cash—he has already transferred the money into our bank account. It is already there, already legally ours; it is our choice to use it or abandon it.

## **Once and for all**

We do not have to ride the never-ending merry-go-round of trying to

strain up enough faith, or work up enough good deeds, or overcome enough sins, in order to convince the God of our nightmares to finally say “Yes” to us in the judgment. We couldn’t pay for this gift if we lived a million lifetimes. It is a gift.

Imagine someone hoping to make the Pacific Ocean wetter by adding a thimbleful of water to it, and you have a small idea of how realistic it is to think we could actually bring anything to the table of salvation. (On second thought, it might be more like adding a thimbleful of arsenic to the Pacific Ocean, but let’s not quibble over the relative quality of our good deeds.)

The Father of Jesus is not the God of the rumor mill, the God of our nightmares, who makes his list and checks it twice to see if we’ve been naughty or nice. The Father of Jesus is the God of pure grace. He is the One who dealt with all human sin, once and for all, through the Messiah Jesus, who redeemed Israel and the whole world from sin through his own death and resurrection. “Believe in me and live,” he says. “Get off the merry-go-round. It’s not getting you anywhere but deeper in the hole.”

## **New in Christ**

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

You can’t get salvation by works. We all at least give lip service to that. So why do we keep acting like we can? Why do we keep worrying that we may have lost salvation every time we sin? Salvation does not come by works. It comes purely by grace, and we can pick it up and drink it down and enjoy it forever if we simply trust God, who justifies, guess who, the ungodly (Romans 4:5).

He has made us righteous his way, in Christ—not our way, not by our

latest set of good deeds. Verse 10 says we were created for good works. What good works are they? They are good works in Jesus Christ. They are not *our* good works. We are what he has made us. He has made us something we were not before—he has made us new creatures in Christ.

We are strengthened in our inner being with power through his Spirit (Ephesians 3:16). Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (verse 17), not in ways that are open and obvious. He works within us to do anything and everything of worth and value (verse 20). He makes us what we really are in him, God's own children, and he does that in spite of ourselves. Remember, he justifies the ungodly, and ungodly is all we would ever be without him.

### **Confident about the judgment**

John writes about having confidence in the judgment (1 John 4:17). What do we need to do to be confident about the judgment? Only to believe the promise of God (5:1, 5)! Only to trust the Lord both to save us and to give us his righteousness in Christ (Romans 3:21-26). Only to give him our fears and anxieties and rest in his sure word. Peter wrote: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). And care for us he does. Paul described in Romans 8:32-39 the unshakable faithfulness God has for us:

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?... Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

"If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). When we confess our sins we are acknowledging that we are sinners in need of Christ's

righteousness. Why confess such a need unless we trust him to forgive and cleanse, unless we believe him, unless we joyfully accept his free grace?

Confession itself merits us nothing, of course. It is merely a means of expressing trust in God, who has already freely forgiven sinners for the sake of his Son. It is the means by which we actually pick up the free gift of forgiveness and take it home with us.

It is like the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee who went into the temple to pray (Luke 18:10). The Pharisee prayed about all the good things he was doing, but the tax collector said, “Father be merciful to me, a sinner.” Jesus said the tax-collecting sinner went away clean.

Do you see what is happening? The law-abiding Pharisee was seeking purity in the things he could do. But there is only one who is pure—Jesus Christ. The only way to be pure is to be in Christ, and to be in Christ is God’s gift, freely given to all, to be experienced by anybody who trusts him for it.

The tax collector trusted God for mercy and got it. The Pharisee didn’t need to trust God for mercy, he figured, because his deeds were, he believed, already pure. He did not, he figured, need to stand in the beggars’ line for mercy with the likes of the tax collector. So, he wouldn’t receive from God what God has already done for him in Christ.

We cannot be pure by acting pure. We cannot be pure by acting impure. We can be pure only by trusting in God, who saves sinners. The only thing a person has to be to get into the kingdom of God is a sinner (and everybody is a sinner), and the only way to experience it is by believing God, trusting him to wipe the record clean.

God says he has already done that in Christ (1 John 2:2). God says cleansed sinners have Christ’s righteousness attributed to them. God says, “Trust me. It’s taken care of. You don’t need to justify yourself. You don’t need to punish yourself. You don’t need to qualify. You don’t need to clean

up your act. Just trust me. I have taken care of everything. Trust me.”

Righteousness does not come by trying to be good (you are not and cannot be good by trying). Righteousness comes as a gift of God, who declares you righteous for the sake of Christ, who became sin for us all, so that sin could be defeated and our wickedness fixed.

Whatever Jesus takes upon himself gets sanctified, cleansed and saved. He took our sinful wicked minds on himself. That is how we get fixed—not by trying real hard to be good. We can believe it and begin living in the joy of the light, or we can scoff at it and keep right on being miserable sourpusses wallowing in the dark.

Either way, it has been done for us without our help. The heart that has some inkling of how desperate is its need, is the heart that is inclined to seize the truth. The gospel is not good news for folks who think they are already good; it is good news for wretched sinners.

People who consider themselves good, decent folks are not inclined to stand in the soup line for free salvation next to rag-tag spiritual underachievers. They prefer the special entrance for the spiritually well-to-do who have properly purchased tickets in the special VIP section. Only one problem: Their tickets are frauds, and at this banquet, everybody sits in the VIP section.

## **God at work**

Believe it or not, we can trust God to transform us into the image of Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who does the sanctifying work of chiseling off the lifetime of sinful habits and attitudes and thinking, not us. It is the Spirit who transforms us from the inside out (Romans 8:11). Some of that is painful and hard, but it is also liberating and joyous and exciting, because through it we come to know and love Christ more intimately and look forward to his appearing with greater anticipation and hope. It is Christ who brings our lives

into harmony with the reason we were created, to bring glory to God, to love him and, in him, to love the other humans he created.

In case you haven't noticed, even after we come to faith in Christ, we still struggle with sin. But what the gospel declares to us is that we do not ever have to fear that we "might not make it." There is no need to worry that we don't "measure up." We can rely on the Word of God. We can believe the promise.

We can accept God's love and rest in his Word with the assurance that we are saved from our sins, that we belong to him and that he won't lose us (Romans 8:1). We can rest in his promise that in Christ we stand with God right now, and that we will continue to stand with him when Christ comes. We can rest securely in his love, knowing that we are forgiven, and that even though we still often lose our struggles with sin, our saved condition in Christ with God is never in jeopardy, because Christ and Christ alone is both the Author and the Finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2).

That is why Jesus, who knows all about such things, calls this stuff good news. Because it is. That is why this cannot be said enough: Don't let anyone deceive you into thinking that the gospel spells doom for you because you haven't cleaned up your act. They haven't cleaned up theirs either, but that's not the point. The point is this: Jesus Christ came to save sinners, and Sinners R Us. Believe it; it's the gospel truth.

### **One more thing**

There is one more thing we need to mention. Perhaps you have heard someone say something like this: "Jesus died for your past sins, not for your future sins." Wrong! Jesus died for all sins—past, present and future. Remember, when you are in Christ, God does not count your sins against you (Romans 4:6-8; 8:1). Does that sound so antinomian, so doing-away-with-the-law, that you can't swallow it? Does such talk make you afraid that



people might run out and sin all they can and not worry about their salvation? If it does, you are not alone.

God declares that he gives us powerful and absolute grace. But that idea scares some people silly. It runs so counter to all our notions about fairness and plain old common decency that we just can't bear to see it in all its glory. We feel we have to tone it down a little or it will get completely out of hand.

Two things must be said. First, this unvarnished, raw and universal grace is real; it is God's own grace; and it is already a *fait accompli*, a done deal. So whether it bothers the daylights out of you or not, you might as well get used to it, because there is no other ball game in town.

Second, you really don't need to worry that people who trust God for pure and complete pardon for sins past, sins present and sins future will run out and sin all they can, because it simply does not work like that.

Consider this: Does knowing that God has forgiven *your* sins through the blood of Jesus make you want to run out and sin all you can? I doubt it. When you are in Christ, you hate sin, and even though you still do it, you hate the fact that you still do it. The last thing on your mind is to "sin all you can." In fact, when you are feeling close to God, you cannot even fathom the idea of sinning, much less running out and sinning all you can.

Of course, we do not often feel such close intimacy with God, and sin still deceives us and slays us, as Paul put it, but even so, we do not view God's grace as permission to sin—that is not how it works. Sin is a disaster. It creates havoc and ruin. It hurts and destroys. When we sin, to one degree or another, we and those around us suffer the physical and emotional consequences of our sins. But, by the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord, we do not and will not lose the gift of salvation because of our sins.

Through Christ (the Son of God who became human for our sakes, slain from the foundation of the world), God has dealt completely with all human

sin, taking it upon himself and destroying it forever through his birth, life, death and resurrection. God did not save us so that we can continue to sin, but he is not an old fool. He knows we still sin. He does not condone sin. Sin amounts to a betrayal of his love, and he is grieved by our sins.

Still, he loves us so much that he sent his Son to save us from sin and death, and indeed, he saves us absolutely and completely. So even though sin is still present, it does not have the upper hand. We will not die in our sins—we will live forever through Jesus Christ our Lord.

### **Faith not sight**

Christ said everything has been taken care of. But it doesn't take much looking around to see that things don't look very taken care of just yet, not in our lives, not in the church, and not in the world. That is why we have to live by faith, and not by sight.

We trust God that he has taken care of our sins, even though we still grind through them, and that he has indeed taken care of every bad thing in the world, every injustice, every wrong, every hatred, every pain, fear, terror and trauma—even though these things still exert real influence in the world for the time being.

In Christ's death and resurrection, all things, all things, are made right, cleansed, purified and reconciled. We still suffer the consequences of sin, our own sins and those of others. Yet, in faith, taking God at his word, we know two things: 1) Because we are in Christ, our salvation is never in jeopardy; and 2) We are completely safe and secure in God's hands.

He is always with us, in good times and bad, in our successes and in our pain, in our failures and in our tragedies. Nothing, not even our sins, can ever separate us from God. So when we walk through our dark times, whether times of stress, pain, sorrow, tragedy, grief or just plain guilt of sin, remember that our crucified and risen Savior walks with us.

He feels our pain and grieves with us, and he will never leave us; he will never forsake us. Everything is indeed all right, even though our night is awfully dark and cold right now. But the eternal dawn will come, and when it does, and we at last see all things as they really are in Christ, our joy and peace in the Truth of God, the consummation of all our hope, will overflow forever like a thousand Niagaras.

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## **Another Look at Faith**

One night recently I couldn't sleep, and after an hour or so of tossing and turning I got up and went to the kitchen. I stared into the fridge for a minute or so, then stared into the freezer for a while, and finally into the food cupboard, and then started over. During the third or fourth survey of the fridge, I pulled some leftover meatloaf from behind the milk and made myself a sandwich, and went to see if anything good might be on TV at 2 o'clock in the morning.

Flipping through the channels I ran past a Star Trek rerun, an old M.A.S.H. episode, and a Steam Buggy infomercial. Then I came upon a bespectacled, white-haired preacher who, with furled brow, was pointing threateningly and warning his listeners with an air of authority that they had better "wake up" and start "keeping God's law," including, he emphasized, "God's holy Sabbath day," or they would not be in God's kingdom.

He was scary. He had a string of verses lined up, right out of the Bible, that sounded like God was mad at just about everybody, and that the only way out of the horrible mess we've gotten ourselves into is to "repent" and "start keeping God's law."

"Oh, you've heard that it's just by faith, but that is not true," he said. "All those preachers are just preaching an empty faith, without meaning. God will not save you if you are not keeping his law."

I wondered what this preacher counts as "keeping God's law." Does he mean what he says? Does he mean that even one sin will doom you to hell, regardless of your faith? Just how well does one have to keep God's law in order to be saved? Is 95 percent good enough? Or does one have to be perfect?

He admitted that nobody can keep God's law perfectly, "at least not on

our own”—but with Christ in us keeping the law, he said, we can. I felt sick. This finger-waving professing prophet was telling people that if Christ lives in them, then not only *can* they keep the law of God perfectly, but they *must*, or they will assuredly not be saved.

Wait a minute.

I would like to point out that no Christians, not even the sober-faced, stone-jawed preacher on the TV screen or the apostle Paul himself, have ever, EVER, finally got to the point, even with Christ living in them, that they no longer sin.

I am baffled as to why the Law Brigade has never seemed to notice that. Or maybe they have, but quickly put it out of their minds, since it doesn't fit their tidy view of how salvation works. Or maybe it's never occurred to them, and they really do believe, that somewhere, somehow, somebody finally, at last, with the Spirit's help, actually overcame all sin and got perfect and died without ever sinning again.

### **Only in Christ**

The gospel teaches us that “because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4-5). The righteous us—the sanctified us, the perfect us—is a *miracle of grace* performed by God in Christ. That perfect us is “hidden with God in Christ” and won't be seen by us or anyone else until Christ comes back (Colossians 3:2-3). We do not get perfect in this life by trying really hard, by setting goals for overcoming, by following Preacher Fearmonger's seven-point program, or any other form of Christian work, jargon or platitude.

We are accounted righteous by God for the sake of Jesus Christ—and Jesus Christ alone—and that is only because God is holy and good and full of grace and loves us and he *did it*, period (Colossians 1:19-20). That's why we

trust our salvation to him alone and not to the latest overcoming model. With a sense of peace, I went back to bed and fell fast asleep.

### **What must we do?**

Salvation is by God's grace, given freely in spite of our sins for the sake of Jesus Christ, and we experience and enjoy that gift by trusting him. If we don't trust him, we don't enjoy the gift he has given us; if we trust him, we do. It's that simple.

We don't have to know deep theology, or sign the right statement of faith, or recite the right phrases, or read the right books, or belong to the right club. He is already our Redeemer; he has already redeemed us. All we have to do is trust him to do what he has already done and to be who he already is.

"But you had better stop sinning!" warns Preacher Ironjaw, who forever seems to be lurking behind the lamppost. Well, when Preacher Ironjaw stops sinning, maybe we can too. But he won't, because he doesn't have it in him, and neither do we. The sooner we figure that out, the sooner we will cast our burdens on Christ and find our true rest in him.

A crowd beside the Sea of Galilee once asked Jesus, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:28-29).

"But my sins!" your weary conscience protests. Listen. Jesus knows you are a sinner. That's why he died for you. Don't let your sins talk louder than the Creator and Redeemer of the whole universe. Sin and death are done for. *Your* sins and *your* death are done for. They are done for because God condemned them and destroyed them and reconciled all things to himself through the blood of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:19-20). That's the gospel; that's what the Holy Spirit empowers you to know and believe so you can start resting in Christ instead of worrying so much.

### **Not saved by faith**

We are saved by *grace*, by God's own kindness toward us, which he expressed perfectly in Jesus Christ. No work of ours, not even our faith, can save us. Salvation is entirely God's work for us from beginning to end. Our faith is simply the act of accepting what God has already given us even though we didn't deserve it. Faith doesn't cause him to give it to us. It doesn't convince him to give it to us. He doesn't even withhold it from us until we have faith; he died for us while we were still sinners, before we ever had any faith (Romans 5:8).

But without faith, we will not, indeed cannot, see, experience and enjoy his gift. In other words, if we don't trust him, we won't believe him. That means we won't accept and make use of his gift. And when you don't believe you have something and therefore make no use of it, it amounts to the same thing as not having it. Faith doesn't save us, but without faith, the salvation we have in Christ by God's grace is meaningless to us.

So we lament, "But I'm not sure I have faith." By God's grace, the answer to that concern is not to worry about it. Jesus has enough faith for all of us. He provides not only the obedience and perfection, but also the faith (compare 2 Peter 1:3: "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness"). So instead of worrying that we don't have enough faith, we can simply trust Christ to save us in spite of our doubts and weakness. We can trust *him* to have *for us* the faith we need to believe in him.

We can trust Christ to save us in spite of our sins, in spite of our past, in spite of our ignorance, our fear, our doubt. We can trust him to be everything for us that God requires, because he is.

"Wait a minute," you say. "You just said we have to have faith, and then you said if we don't have faith, don't worry about it. What kind of shell game

are you playing?”

It’s no shell game. It’s just that we need to learn *to trust in Jesus, not in faith*. When we start analyzing our behavior to see if it is good enough to make God happy, we are playing a losing game, because our behavior is never that good, for starters. In the same way, when we start to analyze our faith to see if it is good enough, we have already aced ourselves right out of real faith, which is simply trusting Jesus. Instead, we have set up faith as the new work of salvation, and we are trying to see how well *we* are doing. We have ruined the whole thing.

That is why, when we start to worry that we don’t have enough faith, we should just trust Jesus, whose faith is perfect, to be everything we need for salvation. We trust *him*, not our faith. We can set aside our worry about how much faith we have, and remember that we have decided (by God’s grace—through the Holy Spirit freeing us and prodding us) to trust Jesus to save us no matter how things look.

### **Looks are deceiving**

Looks are deceiving. Sometimes things look bad because we feel depressed. Sometimes things look bad because we are plagued by doubt. Sometimes all we can see is our mountain of sins and failures. But we don’t trust in looks and feelings; we trust in Jesus Christ. Feeling good about our progress in holy living does not save us. Feeling bad about it does not condemn us. Christ saves us. We trust in him, not in how things appear to us.

The Bible says that there is *nothing* that can separate us from Christ’s love (Romans 8:31-39). Our worries are no match for his love. Our doubts can’t overpower his love. The shortcomings of our church, our pastor, our friends, or our families are no match for his saving power.

The noise, lack of space, and even chaos of our home, which might keep us from the kind of prayer and Bible study we might hear about others



enjoying, cannot keep Christ from saving us. Not even our roller-coaster-style emotional instability can keep him from making us into his new creation.

When we trust Christ, when we rest in him, we can quit the futile game of counting our good deeds and our bad deeds. We can cast all our cares on him. We can confess, without fear or reservation, all our sins to him. We can rest in his forgiveness, in his acceptance, in his love.

God has not called us to worry, to fret, to fear (Romans 8:15). The Holy Spirit leads us to courage, to boldness, to confidence in the one who loves us and gave himself for us. He is on our side (verses 31-32); why should we worry that he, the very one who is indescribably *for* us, might somehow be *against* us? It makes no sense. Yet every time we fall short, it seems, we go through this traumatic worry session that God is going to pound us instead of forgive us.

### **Sin lies to us**

Sin lies to us in countless ways. It tells us that it is fun. It tells us that we need it, that we deserve it. It tells us it won't hurt us or others. All lies! Once we fall for its lies, though, sin takes off its mask and laughs in our faces while it beats us senseless. Then it starts lying all over again.

Maybe the worst lie of all is when sin tells us that God doesn't like us anymore. Don't ever forget: Christ died for us while we were *still sinners* (Romans 5:6, 8). God does not hate sinners. He loves them. That's why he died for them.

Are you a sinner? What a surprise! Well then, sinner, God loves you. He loves you right in the midst of your sinfulness; it is right there in your sinfulness that his greatest display of love took place on the cross.

That means that when we confess our sins, we are not begging for God to do something that he might not otherwise do. We are, in a word, *celebrating*

the forgiveness he has already given us. We admit our need and then celebrate the restoration of fellowship we have with God through Jesus Christ. We celebrate our friendship with God, who loved us and saved us, coming to us in our sinfulness and taking it away. (And in the joy of such celebration of God's love and grace toward us sinners, we likewise forgive those who have sinned against us.)

### **Trust his mercy**

When we trust in Christ, we believe he knows what is best for us. That means we listen to what he tells us to do, and we do our best to do it. Still, even though we commit ourselves to live by every word of God, we fail in so many ways. But because we trust in Christ, we do not *ever* have to despair! We ask forgiveness, *in full assurance* that we have it, and we get up and try again.

This process is an exercise of faith, of trusting in the One who saves us and is at work in us. As C.S. Lewis wrote: "We learn, on the one hand, that we cannot trust ourselves even in our best moments, and on the other, that we need not despair even in our worst, for our failures are forgiven. The only fatal thing is to sit down content with anything less than perfection" (*Mere Christianity*, chapter five).

### **Keeping faith strong**

Faith is not a feeling. It is not an emotion. It is a gift of God that prompts a decision, a decision to trust in Christ no matter how we feel. Sometimes we mistake our emotions for faith, and we think that because we have bright feelings toward God we are full of faith, or that because we are in the dumps we lack faith. But that is a mistake. Faith is not based on moods. It is a gift, ministered to us by the Holy Spirit, and it must be held onto even when the winds of doubt and fear threaten to pull it away.

But it is not usually the wind that causes us to lose faith; winds usually

motivate us to hold on tighter. No, it is usually neglect—just setting it down someplace and planning to get back to it sometime, but rarely getting around to it. That is why Christians make it a point to pray and read the Bible and confess their sins every day, as well as meet together every week. When we do that, we are reminded of what we believe, and therefore it is less likely that our confidence will slip away (see Ephesians 3:12; Hebrews 10:25).

Such constant reinforcement, such practice or exercise, helps our grip on faith remain strong, which is important, because it is only through faith that we can see things the way they really are—instead of the way they appear to be. The more we let God remind us of the truth, the less inclined we are to believe sin's lies.

Without faith, the lies that sin tells us start to sound logical again. Without faith, we start to think God is angry at us again. Without faith, we start to think salvation comes by good behavior again. Without faith, we start to forget the real gospel, and that makes us start down either the road of arrogance or the road of despair, depending on how we feel about the way our dimming eyes decide to size up our behavior.

One way we could describe faith is this: Faith is the Holy Spirit nudging us to believe what is really true in spite of the great pendulum swings in how we feel about things. Here's what is really true: God loves us and he saved us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

## **Faithfulness**

Some Christians think that God ordained before all time some to be saved and the rest to be lost. But the Scriptures tell us that what God has ordained before all time is his own steadfast love, that is, his unswerving covenant faithfulness (Acts 13:32-33). He will finish what he began in Christ before all things (Ephesians 1:9-10), and he will do it because he is faithful, and in spite of our human unfaithfulness (Romans 5:6). Our unfaithfulness becomes the

tool through which God magnificently displays his utter faithfulness (Romans 5:10, 15; Titus 3:3-7).

Christ, the ever-living God whose word cannot be broken, became God in the flesh, the perfectly faithful human for all our sakes, thereby keeping his covenant with humanity from both ends. From God's side, as God, he became and provided everything we needed for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3); from our side, as human, he became and offered up to God everything humans needed to be and needed to give to God (Romans 8:1-3). That is why we find our fullness, our true selves, only in our union with Christ, for it is only in our union with Christ that we are truly ourselves as God created us to be (Colossians 3:3-4).

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## Believing the Gospel

Many Christians are afraid of the gospel. We are afraid of the gospel because it is too good. Many of us are more comfortable with *religion* than we are with the *gospel*. We prefer to read the Bible as a divine rulebook that guards the entrance to the kingdom than to read it as God's witness to his redemption of the whole cosmos through his Son.

We prefer to think that when God breathed the life of his Word into the Bible, he was merely creating a religion—a divine formula to show humans what things to do and not to do in order to get on God's good side and stay there.

But the gospel is not a new and improved religion. The gospel is an affront to religion. It is the end of religion, the end of all systems of works designed to make us acceptable to God. The gospel, by contrast, tells us that God himself has already, through Jesus Christ, made us acceptable. The gospel is good news; religion is bad news; and the gospel wins. Christ is victorious. Sin is vanquished.

We are overcomers only in Christ, not in *our* overcoming anything. We are sinners, always have been and will continue to be to the day we die. Whatever we may have overcome is like removing a spoonful of sand from the beach. Unless and until we are found in Christ, we remain dead in our sins. And we are found in Christ only by trusting him to be for us who he says he is and to do for us what he says he does. Only when we trust him will we accept his gift of mercy and life, and only when we wake up to our sinfulness will we trust him.

As long as we think we are “doing OK,” or that we “aren't all that bad” or that we are “making progress” or even that we will never be “good enough,” we will not trust him. All such thinking is trusting not him, but ourselves. It is

thinking that his acceptance of us is based on how well we behave. It is thinking that if we do better, then he will accept us, or conversely, that he accepts us because we have been overcoming.

God accepts us because he wants to accept us, and not because we have measured up. God dealt with our sin by the blood of Christ, not by giving us a new and improved law code. We are justified because God justified us himself, personally, through his Son. God did for us in Christ what we could not do for ourselves, and he calls on us to trust *him* to be our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30).

That means we do not have righteousness. It is not just a matter that we “have got some problems.” It is not just a matter that we have “a few things to overcome.” It is not even a matter of “putting sin out of our lives.” It is a matter of understanding that we are hopeless losers, sinners through and through, and that even our “good” deeds are thoroughly laced with selfish impurity. Until we see that, until we see ourselves for what we really are, we will not trust him who alone saves sinners.

## **Fear of the gospel**

Many Christians are afraid of the gospel because it puts everybody on the same level—“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). That means that we, being sinners ourselves, have no ground to feel spiritually superior to people who do things that disgust and offend us.

Others are afraid of the gospel because the gospel requires them to believe that God will save them in spite of their sins. We have a hard time trusting God to do exactly what he promised to do—forgive us our sins. We want to prove to him we can “do it.” We want to show him we’ll be faithful, that we will be obedient, that we will be “good Christians.”

But the truth is, we won’t be. We will sin, and we will sin again, and again. And until we believe the gospel, instead of some fairy tale about

having to please God before he will accept us, we will not enter God's rest. God saves us; changes in our behavior do not.

We can live in misery, struggling to be found worthy by perfect obedience and constantly failing, and fearing that God is waiting to squash us like flies, or we can trust his Word. (Or even worse, we can live in appalling arrogance, actually believing that we are worthily obeying God and trusting him to accept us for our "holy deeds.")

God is our salvation; our improved behavior is not. To repent is to turn to God and away from ourselves. It is to admit that we are sinners and that we need God's mercy. It is to trust God to be faithful to his word of grace spoken in his Son before the world began. It is to remove our little homemade crown and hand it over to our Maker, the author of eternal salvation.

God is our righteousness; our illusion of good behavior is not. When we come to see our righteousness as filthy rags, as indeed it is, then we can begin to see our need for God's grace and mercy. When we believe his word of salvation in his Son, then we can begin to trust him to forgive all our sins and save us.

## **Trusting God**

Why is it so hard to trust God to forgive us and to make us his perfectly righteous children in Christ? Perhaps one reason is because we can't stand to think of ourselves as, or to think that others might think of us as, bald-faced sinners. We prefer the façade of pretending to be good, decent folks. But we are not good, decent folks. Nobody is good, decent folks. At best, we are less destructive and wicked than we could be if we let ourselves go entirely.

Have you ever noticed that if you behave decently for a day or two, you begin to feel like you are a pretty good person after all? And conversely, if your natural self gets loose for few minutes and you behave like the ratbag you are, then you feel depressed, disappointed and frustrated that you are not

as grand as you had been imagining?

But what is there to be disappointed about? Why, given what you are, a sinner, were you expecting not to behave accordingly from time to time? Our disappointment ought to be in our failure to honor the God of our salvation, not in our failure to look impeccable to ourselves and others.

If our disappointment comes from failing to honor God, then we would be free to see more clearly that in spite of our sin, we can rest in the atonement of Christ, for our sins are forgiven in him. The reason we need a Savior is because we need saving. The gospel declares that God has indeed saved us through Christ. Christ died for us ungodly people while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8).

Please don't tell me that we "were" sinners, but now we are not to be sinners anymore. Please drop the rhetoric. We *are* sinners. We *do* still sin after conversion. Every Christian who ever lived continues to sin after conversion. That doesn't make sin OK. It doesn't condone sin. It is simply a fact, and one we would all do much better to just admit, and quit pretending that if we try hard enough we will become sinless.

There is one way in which we are not sinners. As believers we are in Christ, and as such, we are not sinners, in the sense that God does not count our sins against us (Romans 4:8). In other words, when we do not pretend that we are not sinners, but instead put our trust in Jesus Christ who saves sinners, God does not count our sins against us (compare 1 Timothy 1:15). We are *forgiven* sinners.

## **Overcomers**

What must we do about sin? We must trust God to forgive our sins. We must *trust him!* He is our only hope. We are sinners, and unless God forgives our sins, we come under the condemnation all sinners deserve. We are not going to stop being sinners. I'm sure you have tried, like I have, and



discovered that despite occasional bouts of improvement, sin is still alive and well in your life. But God says that if we trust him *he* will take care of our sins and *he* will count us righteous *in Christ* who, *for our sakes*, became the perfect human.

The Bible is not a rulebook for new and improved religion. It is the Word of God, God's chosen revelation of himself to us, declaring to us that in Jesus Christ he has dealt with the sins of the world so that whoever trusts him will be saved. That is good news. It is the gospel. It is not religion. Don't be afraid of it.

I know. You're still waiting for me to say something about the importance of behaving right. But I'm not going to. At least not in the way you are probably used to. We are overcomers in Christ alone; when it comes to godly overcoming, there is no other way to be an overcomer.

When you trust Christ to be your righteousness, your behavior will be set by the Holy Spirit on the road to improvement, regardless of whether you constantly set "overcoming goals" for yourself. But if you try to improve your behavior without trusting Christ to be your only righteousness, you may or may not be successful, and whether or not you are won't make a hill of beans of difference in terms of your standing with God.

In other words, salvation is not based on what you do; it is based on what God has already done. When you trust God, you are in Christ, and when you are in Christ, God does not count your sins against you. If you do not trust God, you are still in your sins, because you are not in Christ.

## **Priorities**

Here's a gospel tip: don't make behaving better your main goal in life. If you do, you'll always be frustrated, disappointed in yourself and miserable, not to mention a judgmental and obnoxious prig. You're welcome to it if you want it, but will-powering yourself into a better you is a no-win life goal.

Will-power goodness is the root of religion; it has no place in the gospel.

Instead, make your main goal in life knowing and trusting in the Lord your God for absolutely everything, including your behavior. When you do that, your preoccupation with yourself and how good you are will fade, and your eyes will begin to open to the righteousness of God and the joy and peace of his kingdom. The Holy Spirit will reorder your priorities, and the pain your sins naturally cause in your life will more readily drive you to God for mercy and help to overcome.

Let me say it another way: Work on yourself and make every effort to change for the better—*but not because you think it will make you less a sinner and get you in good with God*. Take overcoming seriously. Do it because God wants you to, because Jesus Christ gave you a new life, because it is right, because everybody who loves you wants you to, and because it will make your life much more blessed, rewarding, peaceful and pleasant. But don't do it because you think that's how you will get into the kingdom of God. It isn't.

Regardless of how much you improve (and you need a *lot* of improvement—I know you; you're just like me), you are still a sinner, and the only hope of salvation you've got is the mercy of God, along with his word that in Christ he extends it to you. Trust *him*, not your good life, when it comes to salvation. When it comes to salvation, trust the word of God that it is a *fait accompli* in Christ; when it comes to behavior, trust yourself to the supervision of the Holy Spirit and put your heart into overcoming.

Don't think that good behavior results in salvation; but know that salvation results in good behavior. But don't let that make you think that poor behavior equals unsaved, and good behavior equals saved. It does not work that way; don't forget that we all still sin. Sin involves not merely acts but attitudes, and God knows even the deepest secrets of our hearts.

Rest in this: God loves you; he's proven it in Christ, and he will make you into what he wants you to be. You can trust him to do it. Get to know him. Spend time with him. Put your confidence in him. Make him the priority in your life, and you will begin to find his love influencing the way you live in the world and the way you interact with others.

Whether we experience hardship or ease, prosperity or poverty, bad times or good times (and Christians experience them all), our ability to cope with what comes our way will depend on our trust in God. But all the while, because we are in Christ, our salvation is not in question. We are saved by God's grace through faith, and even our faith is God's gracious gift to us.

Remember, the gospel is good news. It is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). Therefore, as Hebrews 10:23 encourages us, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."

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## Take the Leap

Jesus once told a story about two kinds of people who went to the temple to pray. One of them was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). Now, these days, 2,000 years after Jesus told the story, we might be tempted to nod knowingly and say, “Yes, of course, the Pharisee was a self-righteous hypocrite, right?” Well, maybe, but let’s put that assessment aside for the moment and consider what Jesus’ listeners would have been thinking.

First, Pharisees were not thought of as hypocritical bad guys, as Christians today tend to think of them. Pharisees were the devoted, careful, faithful religious minority of the Jews who were standing heartily in the breach against the growing tide of liberalism, compromise and syncretism with the Roman world and its pagan Greek culture. Pharisees called the people back to the law and committed themselves to faithfulness in obedience.

When the Pharisee in the story prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people,” he was not just whistling Dixie. It was true. His respect for the law was impeccable, and he and the Pharisee minority devoted themselves to keeping it in a world where its importance had become seriously eroded. He was not like other people, and he was not even taking the credit for that—he was thanking God that it was so.

Tax collectors, on the other hand, were notorious crooks—Jews who worked for the Roman occupation forces collecting tax revenues from their own people, and worse, men of few scruples who routinely inflated the bills for their own profit (compare Matthew 5:46). Those listening to Jesus’ story would have instantly pegged the Pharisee as a man of God—the white hat—and the tax collector as the archetypal wicked man—the black hat.

But Jesus, as usual, was making an unexpected point: God isn’t helped or

hampered by who you are or what you've been up to; he forgives everybody, even the worst sinners. All we have to do is trust him. Equally as shocking, people who think they are more righteous than others (even with ample physical evidence of it) are still in their sins, not because God hasn't forgiven them, but because they won't receive what they don't believe they need.

### **Good news for sinners**

The gospel is for sinners, not for righteous people. Righteous people don't get into the gospel as it really is, because they have the notion that they don't need that kind of gospel. To righteous people, the gospel is the good news that God is on their side. They feel confident in God because they know they are behaving in a more godly manner than the blatant sinners in the world around them. They give a good deal of attention to the terribleness of the sins of others, and they are glad that they are close to God and not living like the adulterers, murderers and thieves who they see on the streets and in the news. To righteous people, the gospel is a trumpet of condemnation toward the sinners of the world, a warning message that sinners should stop sinning and begin living like they, the righteous people, do.

But that is not the gospel. The gospel is good news for sinners. It declares that God has already forgiven their sins and given them a new life in Jesus Christ. It's a message that causes sinners who are sick of sin's cruel tyranny over them to sit up and take notice.

It means that God, the God of righteousness, who they thought was against them (since he has every reason to be), is really *for* them, and in fact loves them. It means that God is not holding their sins against them, but has already in Jesus Christ paid for their sins and broken sin's death-grip on them. It means they don't have to live another day in fear, doubt or guilt. It means they can trust God to be for them in Jesus Christ everything he says he is—forgiver, redeemer, savior, advocate, provider, friend.

## **No mere religion**

Jesus Christ is not just another religious figure. He is not a cow-eyed weakling with a nice, but in the end unrealistic, idea about the power of human kindheartedness. Nor is he just another great moral teacher who stirred human hearts to rise to a higher level of social responsibility.

No, when we talk about Jesus Christ, we are talking about the eternal source of all things (Hebrews 1:2-3), and more than that, he is also the redeemer, the purifier, the fixer of all things, who by dying and rising reconciled the whole out-of-kilter universe to God (Colossians 1:20). Jesus Christ is the one who made everything that is, who keeps it all in existence every moment, and who takes all its sin on himself to completely redeem it—including you and me. He came to us as one of us, to make us into what he created us to be.

Jesus is not just another religious figure, and the gospel is not just another religion. The gospel is not a new and improved set of rules, formulas and guidelines to get us in good with an otherwise ill-tempered Supreme Being; it is the end of religion. Religion is bad news; it tells us that the gods (or God) are hopping mad and if we do this, that and the other thing just right, then they (or he) will change their minds and smile on us.

But the gospel is not religion: it is God's own good news to humanity. It declares all sin forgiven and every man, woman and child God's friend. It is a golden invitation on a silver platter to anybody and everybody who has sense enough to believe it and accept it (1 John 2:2).

“But there's no such thing as a free lunch,” you say. Well, actually, there is, and this is it. It's not only a free lunch, it's a free banquet, and it lasts forever. You don't need anything to get in but to trust in the One who is throwing the party.

## **God hates sin—not us**

God hates sin for one reason only—because it destroys us and everything around us. You see, God is not out to destroy us because we're sinners; he's out to save us from the sin that destroys us. The good news is—he's done it. He did it in Jesus Christ.

Sin is evil because it cuts us off from God. It makes us afraid of him. It keeps us from seeing reality as it really is. It saps our joy, scrambles our priorities and turns what ought to be serenity, peace and satisfaction into chaos, anxiety and fear. It makes us despair of life, and never more thoroughly than when we actually achieve and possess everything we think we want and need.

God hates sin because it destroys us—but he doesn't hate us. He loves us. That's why he has done something about sin. And what God has done about sin is forgive it—he has taken away the sins of the world (John 1:29)—and he has done it through Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:6).

We are sinners—but that doesn't mean that God wants to stay away from us, contrary to what you may have heard. Rather, it means that as sinners, *we* want to stay away from God. Yet without him, we are nothing—our very being, all that we are, depends on him. The treacherous blade of sin cuts both ways: On one side, it compels us out of fear or mistrust or both to turn our backs on God and his love for us, and on the other side it leaves us starving for that very love. (Parents of teens understand this very well.)

### **Sin removed in Christ**

Maybe during your childhood you got the idea from the grownups around you that God is a sort of stern judge, holding your every action in the balances, ready to blast you with a curse if you blow it, or to let you into heaven if you measure up. But the gospel gives us the good news that God is not a stern judge at all; he is Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ, the Bible tells us, is the perfect representation to us humans

of exactly what God is like (Hebrews 1:3). In other words, when God stoops low to come to us as one of us to show us what he is like—how he thinks, how he acts, who he hangs out with and why—he is Jesus Christ.

Yes, God made Jesus judge of the whole world, but he is anything but a stern judge. He forgives sinners; he doesn't condemn them (John 3:17). Sinners get condemned only if they refuse to come to him for forgiveness (verse 18). This is a judge who pays everybody's penalties out of his own pocket (1 John 2:1-2), declares all charges dropped against everybody forever (Colossians 1:19-20) and then invites the whole world to the greatest celebration in history.

We can sit on our duffs and debate all we want about who will or who won't believe him and accept his mercy and come to his party, or we can leave all that to him (he can handle it), jump to our feet and scramble on down to the party ourselves, spreading the good word to and praying for whoever crosses our paths along the way.

## **Righteousness from God**

The gospel, the good news, tells us: You already belong to Christ—receive it. Enjoy it. Trust him with your life. Enjoy his peace. Open your eyes to the beauty, the love, the peace, the joy in the world that can be seen only by those who are at rest in Christ's love. In Christ, we are free to face and admit our sinfulness. Because we trust him, we are not afraid to confess our sins and unload them on his shoulders. He is on our side.

“Come to me,” Jesus said, “all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

When we rest in Christ, we get out of the business of measuring righteousness; now we can be completely honest and uninhibited in freely



confessing to him our sins. In Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14), it was the sinning tax collector, who freely admitted his sinfulness and wanted God's mercy, who was made righteous. The Pharisee, who was devoted to righteous living and kept track of his holy successes, had no clear view of his sinfulness and his correspondingly acute need for forgiveness and mercy, so he would not reach out and receive the righteousness that comes only from God (Romans 1:17; 3:21; Philippians 3:9). His very success in "holy living" became the fog that prevented him from seeing how badly he needed God's mercy.

### **Honest assessment**

Christ meets us with grace in the midst of our deepest sinfulness and ungodliness (Romans 5:6, 8). It is precisely there, in our blackest unrighteousness, that he, the Sun of righteousness, arises for us with healing in his wings (Malachi 4:2). Only when we can see ourselves as we really are in our real need, as did that extortionist tax collector in the story, only when our daily prayer can be, "God, have mercy on me, the sinner," are we able to allow ourselves to rest peacefully in the warmth of his healing embrace.

We don't have anything to prove to God. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows our sinfulness and he knows our need for mercy. He has already done for us everything that needed to be done to secure our everlasting friendship with him. We can rest in his love. We can trust in his word of forgiveness. We don't have to measure up; we only have to believe him and trust him. God wants us to be his friends, not his electronic toys or his tin soldiers. He is looking for love, not cowering or preprogrammed servitude.

### **Faith, not works**

Good relationships are based on trust, faithful commitment, allegiance, and above all, love. They are not based on mere obedience (Romans 3:28;

4:1-8). Obedience has its place, but it is, we ought to understand, a side effect of the relationship, not the cause of it. If you allow obedience to be the ground of your relationship with God, you will sink either into sticky pride, like the Pharisee in the parable, or into fear and frustration, depending on how honest you are with yourself about your true reading on the perfection scale.

As C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, “There would be no sense in saying you trusted a person if you would not take his advice.” When you trust Christ, you will listen to his advice and do your very best to live by it. But when you are in Christ, when you trust him, you will do your best without fear of rejection when you fail, as we all so often do. Fail, that is.

When we rest in Christ, our striving to overcome our sinful habits and thoughts becomes a commitment rooted in the faithfulness of God in forgiving us and saving us. He has not thrown us into the middle of some never-ending battle to measure up (Galatians 2:16). Quite the contrary, he is bringing us with him on a journey of faith in which we learn to stop dragging around the chains of slavery and pain from which he has already freed us (Romans 6:5-7).

We are not doomed to an impossible uphill struggle to prove ourselves worthy; instead, we are given the grace of a new life in which the Holy Spirit teaches us how to enjoy the new us created in righteousness and hidden with Christ in God (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:2-3). Christ already did the hard part—dying for us. How much more will he do the easy part—bringing us home (Romans 5:8-10)?

## **Leap of faith**

Faith, we are told in Hebrews 11:1, is our assurance of the things that we, the beloved of Christ, hope for. Faith is the only reality we currently sense of those good things God has promised—things that remain, as yet, invisible to

our five senses. In other words, we see with the eyes of faith, as though it were already here, that wonderful new world in which voices are kind, hands are gentle, there is plenty to eat, and no one is an outsider — things for which we have in this present evil world no tangible, physical evidence.

The faith generated by the Holy Spirit, who enflames in us this hope of salvation and the redemption of the whole creation (Romans 8:23-25), is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9). In this faith we are swaddled in his peace, his rest and his joy by the incomprehensible assurance of his overflowing love.

Have you taken the leap of faith? In a culture of acid stomachs and high blood pressure, the Holy Spirit urges us toward the path of serenity and peace in the arms of Jesus Christ. More than that, in a world of shocking poverty, disease, starvation and brutal injustice and war, God invites us (and enables us) to open our eyes of faith to the light of his word, which promises the end of pain, tears, tyranny and death, and the creation of a new world in which righteousness will be at home (2 Peter 3:13).

“Trust me,” Jesus tells us. “Despite what you see, I am making everything new—even you. Quit worrying, and trust me to be for you, for your loved ones and for the whole world exactly who I told you I am. Quit worrying, and trust me to do for you, for your loved ones and for the whole world everything I have told you I will.”

We can trust him. We can give him our burdens—our burdens of sin, our burdens of fear, our burdens of pain, disappointment, confusion and even doubt. He will carry them, just as he carries us, even before we ever knew it.

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## Getting a Grip on Repentance

“A horrible dread.” That was how the young man described his deep fear that God had rejected him because of his repeated sins. “I thought I had repented, but I did it again,” he explained. “I don’t even know if I really have faith, because I’m afraid God might not forgive me again. No matter how sincere I think my repentance is, it never seems to be enough.”

Let’s talk about what the gospel means by repentance toward God.

The first mistake in trying to understand what repentance means is to go to an English dictionary for a definition of the word *repent*. Contemporary dictionaries tell us how words have come to be understood at the time the dictionary was compiled. But a modern English dictionary does not tell us what was in the mind of a person who was writing 2,000 years ago in Greek about things that were first spoken in Aramaic, for example.

*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* says this of the word *repent*: 1) to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one’s life; 2a) to feel regret or contrition; 2b) to change one’s mind.

The first definition is exactly what most religious people believe Jesus was talking about when he said, “Repent and believe.” They believe that Jesus means that only people who stop sinning and change their ways will be in the kingdom of God. But that is precisely what Jesus was *not* saying.

### Common mistake

It is a common mistake for Christians to think of repentance as ceasing to sin. “If you had really repented, you wouldn’t have done it again” is a refrain many tormented souls have heard from well-meaning, law-upholding spiritual counselors. We are told that repentance is to “turn around and go the other way,” and it is explained in the context of turning away from sin and turning toward a life of obedience to God’s law.

With that idea firmly in mind, Christians set out with the best of intentions to change their ways. But along the way, some ways change, and some ways seem to stick like super-glue. Even the ways that change have a nasty way of cropping up again.

Is God satisfied with such mediocrity, such hit-and-miss obedience? “No, he is not!” the preacher exhorts, and the vicious, gospel-crippling cycle of commitment, failure and despair takes another spin around the going-nowhere rat-race-track of futility.

Just when we are feeling frustrated and depressed about our failure to measure up to the high standards of God, we hear another sermon or read another article about “real repentance” and “deep repentance” and how such repentance results in a complete turning away from sin.

So, we crank up the commitment jalopy and go at it again, with the same, miserable, predictable results. Our frustration and despair deepens, because we realize that our turning away from sin is anything but “complete.” We can only assume we have not “really repented.” Our repentance was not “deep” enough, or “heartfelt” enough or “true” enough. And if we have not really repented, then we must not really have faith. Which means we must not really have the Holy Spirit. Which means we must not really be saved.

Finally, we either get used to living like that, or, as many have done, we finally throw in the towel and walk away from the whole medicine show people call Christianity.

We won’t even talk about the disaster of people who actually believe they have cleaned up their lives and made themselves acceptable to God. Their state is far worse.

Repentance toward God is simply not about a new and improved you.

## **Repent and believe**

“Repent and believe the gospel,” Jesus declares in Mark 1:15. Repentance

and faith mark the beginning of our new life in the kingdom of God. They don't mark it because we did the right thing. They mark it because that is when the scales fall off our darkened eyes and we at last see in Jesus Christ the glorious light of the liberty of the sons of God.

Everything that ever needed to be done for human forgiveness and salvation has already been done through the death and resurrection of the Son of God. There was a time when we were in the dark about that. We couldn't enjoy it or rest in it because we were blind to it.

We thought we had to make our own way in this world, and we spent all our effort and time plowing as straight a furrow in our little corner of life as we could manage.

We devoted all our attention to keeping our life and our future safe and secure. We worked hard to be respected and appreciated. We stood up for our rights and tried not to let anybody or anything take unfair advantage of us. We fought to protect and preserve our reputation, our family, our belongings. We did everything in our power to make something worthwhile of our lives, to be winners and not losers.

But like everybody who ever lived, it was a losing battle. Despite all our best efforts and plans and hard work, we simply cannot control our lives. We cannot keep disasters and tragedies and failures and pains from coming out of nowhere and shattering what little scraps of hope and joy we have managed to piece together.

Then one day, for no other reason than that he wanted to, God let us in on the way things actually are. The world is his, and we are his.

We are dead in sin, and there is no way out. We are lost blind losers in a world of lost blind losers, because we don't have the sense to hold the hand of the only One who knows his way around. But that's OK, because he became a loser for us through crucifixion and death, and we can be winners

with him by joining him in his death so that we can also join him in his resurrection.

In other words, God gave us good news! The good news is that he has personally paid the heavy price for all our selfish, rebellious, destructive, evil lunacy. He has freely saved us, washed us, purified us, dressed us in righteousness and set a place for us at his eternal banquet table. And through the gospel, he invites us to trust him that it is so.

When, by the grace of God, you come to see that and believe it, you have repented. To repent, you see, is to say: “Yes! Yes! Yes! I believe it! I trust your word! I’m leaving behind this rat-race life of mine, this pointless struggle to hold together with chewing gum and baling wire this death I thought was life. I’m ready for your rest. Help my unbelief!”

Repentance is a change *of how you think*. It is a change of perspective, from seeing yourself as the center of the universe to seeing God as the center of the universe, and trusting your life to his mercy. It is to surrender. It is to throw down your crown at the feet of the rightful ruler of the cosmos. It is the most important change you will ever make.

### **Not about morals**

Repentance is not about morals. It is not about good behavior. It is not about “doing better.”

Repentance is putting your trust in God instead of in yourself, your wits, your friends, your country, your government, your guns, your money, your authority, your prestige, your reputation, your car, your house, your job, your family heritage, your color, your sex, your success, your looks, your clothes, your titles, your degrees, your church, your spouse, your muscles, your leaders, your IQ, your accent, your accomplishments, your charity work, your donations, your kindness, your compassion, your self-control, your chastity, your honesty, your obedience, your devotion, your spiritual disciplines or

anything else you can come up with of yours or associated with you that I left out of this long sentence.

Repentance is putting all your eggs in one basket—his basket. It's getting on his side, believing what he says, throwing in your lot with him, giving him your allegiance.

Repentance is not about promises to be good. It is not about teeth-clenched straining to “put sin out of your life.” It is trusting God to have mercy on you. It is trusting God to fix your evil heart. It is trusting God to be who he says he is—Creator, Savior, Redeemer, Teacher, Lord and Sanctifier. And it is dying, dying to your need to be thought of as right and good.

We are talking about a love relationship—not that you loved God, but that he loved you (1 John 4:10). This Person is the very fountainhead of all that is, including you, and it has dawned on you that this Person loves you for who you are—his beloved child in Christ—certainly not for what you have, or what you have done, or what your reputation is, or how you look, or any other characteristic you have, but purely and simply for you in Christ.

Suddenly nothing is the same. The whole world has suddenly become bright. All your failures no longer matter. They are all redeemed and made right in Christ's death and resurrection. Your eternal future is assured, and nothing in heaven or earth can take your joy away from you, because you belong to God for Christ's sake (Romans 8:1, 38). You believe him, you trust him, you put your life in his hands, come what may, whatever anyone says or does.

You can be lavish in forgiveness, in patience, in kindness, even in losses and defeats—you have nothing to lose, because you have gained absolutely everything in Christ (Ephesians 4:32–5:1). The only thing that matters to you is his new creation (Galatians 6:15).

Repentance is not just another worn out, hollow, moth-eaten commitment



to be a good boy or girl. It is dying to all your big images of yourself and putting your weak, loser hand in the hand of the Man who calmed the sea (Galatians 6:3). It is coming to Christ for rest (Matthew 11:28-30). It is trusting his word of grace.

### **God's initiative, not ours**

Repentance is about trusting God to be who he is and to do what he does, not about your good deeds versus your bad deeds. God, in his perfect freedom to be exactly who he wants to be in his love for us, decided to forgive our sins.

Let's be clear about this: God forgives our sins—all of them—past, present and future; he does not tally them (John 3:17). Jesus died for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8). He is the slain Lamb, and he was slain for us, for every one of us (1 John 2:2).

Repentance is not a way of getting God to do what he has already done. Rather, it is believing he *has done it*—saved your life forever and given you a priceless eternal inheritance—and such believing blossoms into loving him for it.

“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us,” Jesus told us to pray. When it dawns on us that God has, for reasons entirely internal to himself, simply decided to write off our lifetime of selfish arrogance, all our lies, all our cruelty, all our pride, lust, betrayals and meanness—all of our evil thoughts, deeds and plans, we have a choice to make. We can praise him and thank him forever for his indescribable sacrifice of love, or we can go right on living the “I’m-a-good-person-you-shouldn’t-think-I’m-not” rat-race life we love so much.

We can believe God, we can ignore him, or we can run scared of him. If we believe him, we can walk in joyous friendship with him (and since he is a friend of sinners, all sinners, that makes everybody, even bad people, our

friends too). If we don't trust him, if we think he won't or can't forgive us, we can't walk joyously with him (or with anybody else, for that matter, except for people who behave like we want them to). Instead we will be afraid of him and eventually despise him (and everybody else who doesn't stay out of our way).

## **Two sides of the same coin**

Faith and repentance go hand in hand. When you put your trust in God, two things happen at once. You realize you are a sinner who needs God's mercy, and you decide to trust God to save you and redeem your life. In other words, when you put your trust in God, you have also repented.

In Acts 2:38, Peter told the crowd, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Belief, or faith, is part and parcel with repentance. By saying, "repent," he was also implying "believe," or "trust."

Later in the story, Peter puts it this way: "Repent and turn to God...." This turning to God is a turning away from yourself. It does not mean you will now be morally perfect. It means you have turned away from your personal ambitions of making yourself worth something to Christ and instead put your trust and hopes in his word, his good news, his declaration in his own blood of your redemption, forgiveness, resurrection and eternal inheritance.

When you trust in God for forgiveness and salvation, you have repented. Repentance toward God is a change in the way you think, and it affects everything in your life. The new way of thinking is the way of trusting God to do what you could never do in a million lifetimes. Repentance is not a change from moral imperfection to moral perfection—you are incapable of that.

## **Corpses don't improve**

You are incapable of moral perfection because, the fact is, you are dead. Sin has made you dead, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:4-5. But even though you were dead in your sins (being dead is what *you* have contributed to this process of forgiveness and redemption), Christ made you alive (this is what *Christ* has contributed: the whole thing).

The only thing dead people can do is nothing. They cannot be alive to righteousness or to anything else, because they are dead, dead in sin. But it is precisely dead people, and only dead people, who get raised from the dead.

Raising the dead is what Christ does. He does not pour perfume on corpses. He does not prop them up and dress them in party clothes and wait for them to do something righteous. They are dead. They can't do anything. Jesus isn't the least bit interested in new and improved corpses. What Jesus does is resurrect them. And again, corpses are the only kind of people he resurrects.

In other words, the only way to enter into Jesus' resurrection, his life, is to be dead. It doesn't take much effort to be dead. In fact, it doesn't take any effort at all. And dead is precisely what we are.

The lost sheep did not find itself before the shepherd went looking for it and found it (Luke 15:1-7). The lost coin did not find itself before the woman went looking for it and found it (verses 8-10). The only thing they contributed to the whole process of their being sought, found and rejoiced over in a big party was being lost. Their utter, hopeless, lostness was the only thing they had that allowed them to be found.

Even the lost son in the next parable (verses 11-24) finds himself already having been forgiven, redeemed and fully accepted purely on the basis of his father's lavish grace, not on the basis of his "work-my-way-back-into-his-good-graces" plan. His father had compassion on him without ever hearing the first word of his "I'm so sorry" speech (verse 20).

When the son finally accepted in the stench of the pigpen his deadness and lostness, he was on his way to discovering something amazing that had been true all along: his father, the one he had rejected and disgraced, had never stopped loving him passionately and unconditionally.

His father flatly ignored his little scheme for redeeming himself (verses 19-24), and without even a probationary waiting period, restored him to full rights as son.

Likewise, our utter, hopeless, deadness is the only thing that allows us to be resurrected. The initiative, the work and the success of the whole operation is entirely the Shepherd's, the Woman's, the Father's, God's.

The only thing we contribute to the process of our resurrection is being dead. That is as true for us spiritually as it is for us physically. If we cannot accept the fact that we are dead, we cannot accept the fact that we have, by the grace of God in Christ, been raised from the dead. Repentance is accepting the fact that you are dead and receiving from God your resurrection in Christ.

Repentance is not bringing forth some good and noble work or mouthing some emotion-laden speech designed to motivate God to forgive you.

We are dead, which means there is absolutely nothing we are capable of doing that could possibly add anything at all to our being made alive. It is a simple matter of believing God's good news of forgiveness and redemption in Christ through which he resurrects the dead.

Paul articulates the mystery, or paradox if you prefer, of our death and resurrection in Christ in Colossians 3:3: "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."

The mystery, or paradox, is that we have died, yet we are, at the same time, alive, but that life, which is glorious, is not apparent: it is hidden with Christ in God, and it will not appear as it actually is until Christ appears, as

verse 4 says: “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” Our life is Christ. When he appears, we will appear with him, because he is our life.

So let’s come at this again. Dead bodies can’t do anything for themselves. They can’t change. They can’t “do better.” They can’t improve. The only thing they can do is be dead.

God, however, is the very Source of life, and he absolutely loves to raise the dead, and in Christ, he does just that (Romans 6:4). The corpses bring nothing to the process except their deadness. God does it all. It is his work, his alone, from beginning to end. Which means there are two kinds of raised corpses: those who receive their redemption with joy and those who, preferring their familiar deadness over life, despise it, close their eyes, clasp their hands over their ears and devote all their energies to pretending they are still dead.

So again, repentance is saying “Yes!” to the gift of forgiveness and redemption that God says you have in Christ. It is not doing penance, making promises or drowning in guilt. Repentance is not about a never-ending string of “I’m deeply sorry” or “I promise I won’t do it again.” Let’s be brutally honest. Chances are you *will* do it again, if not in actual deed, at least in thought, desire and emotion. Yes, you are sorry, maybe even deeply sometimes, and you truly don’t want to be the kind of person who will do it again, but that’s definitely not the heart and core of repentance.

Remember, you are dead, and dead people act like dead people. But even though you are dead in sin, you are also, at the same time, alive in Christ (Romans 6:11). But your life in Christ is hidden with him in God, and it doesn’t show itself very consistently or very often—yet. It’s not going to be revealed for what it really is until Christ himself appears.

Meanwhile, even though you are now alive in Christ, you are also, for the

time being, still dead in sin, and your deadness does show itself just about all the time. It is precisely that dead you, that you that can't seem to stop from acting stinkingly dead, which Christ has resurrected and made alive with him in God—to be revealed when he is revealed.

That's where faith comes in. Repent and believe the gospel. The two go hand in glove. You can't have one without the other. To believe the good news, that God has washed you clean in the blood of Christ, that he has healed your deadness and made you alive forevermore in his Son, is to repent.

Likewise, to turn to God in your utter helplessness, lostness and deadness, receiving his freely given redemption and salvation, is to have faith, to believe the gospel. They are two sides of the same coin, and it is a coin God gives you for no other reason, no other reason at all, than that he is righteous and gracious toward us.

### **Behavior not a measure**

Someone will say, repentance toward God will result in good morals and good behavior. I do not dispute that. The problem is, we love to measure repentance by the absence or presence of good behavior, and that is to tragically misunderstand repentance.

The truth is that we do not have perfect morals or perfect behavior, and anything short of perfection is not good enough for the kingdom of God. So let's dispense with any nonsense about how "if your repentance is sincere then you will not commit the sin again." That is precisely not the point of repentance.

The point of repentance is a change of heart, from being on the side of yourself, from being in your own corner, from being your own lobbyist, press agent, union rep and defense attorney, to trusting God, to being on his side, to being in his corner, to dying to yourself and being God's completely

forgiven, redeemed and beloved child in Christ.

To repent means two things we don't naturally like. First, it means facing the fact that the lyrics "Baby, you're no good" are a perfect description of us. Two, it means facing the fact that we are no better than anybody else. We are standing in the same soup line, with all the other losers, for mercy we don't deserve.

In other words, repentance emerges from a humbled spirit. This humbled spirit is one that has no confidence left in what it can do; it has no hope left, it has given up the ghost, so to speak, it has died to itself and put itself in a basket on God's doorstep.

### **Say 'Yes!' to God's 'Yes!'**

We must get rid of the hideous notion that repentance is a promise to never sin again. Such a promise is pure hot air, and it is spiritually meaningless.

God has declared an almighty, thundering, eternal "Yes!" to you through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Repentance is your saying "Yes!" to God's "Yes!" It is turning to God to accept his blessed gift, his righteous declaration of your innocence and salvation in Christ.

To accept his gift is to acknowledge your deadness and your need of life in him. It is to trust him, to believe him and to put yourself, your being, your existence, all that you are, in his hands. It is to rest in him and to give him your burdens. So why not rejoice in the rich and burgeoning grace of our Lord and Savior and take our rest in him? He redeems the lost. He saves the sinner. He raises the dead.

He is on our side, and because he is, nothing can come between him and us—not even your wretched sins, or your neighbor's. Trust him. It's his good news for all of us. He is the Word, and he knows what he is talking about.

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# Obeying God

“If we are forgiven already, what’s to stop us from continuing to sin? I realize we are saved by God’s mercy and not by being good, and I realize we could never be good enough anyway, and I realize that even our goodness is tainted with sin, but still, doesn’t God want us to stop sinning?”

I have never met a Christian who did not care about how he or she behaves. It just comes with the territory – Christians care about how they live. But I have met lots of Christians who have trouble believing that God could keep on loving them and forgiving them in spite of how rotten they behave. For them, we need to emphasize God’s grace.

Most of us Christians have an easy time seeing at least some of our sins and trying to do better. But we have trouble handing off our deep sense of guilt and failure to Christ. Most of us are always struggling to overcome something, but our moments of peace and rest in God’s unconditional love are few and far between.

Even our goodness is tainted with sin. We are never guilt-free. But in Christ, we *are* guilt-free, not because of our behavior, but because of him. God accounts us righteous in Christ. All we can do is believe it, because we can’t see evidence of it. We might see some improvement in this or that aspect of our lives, but we never see anything close to perfection.

So, we should fight sin in our lives, and because Christ lives in us, we do. But we should never measure God’s love for us by our success in achieving sinlessness. God wants us to trust *him* to be our righteousness.

When we trust him to be our righteousness, three things happen:

- We realize we are not righteous (that is, we are sinners in need of mercy).
- We realize his promise to forgive us and save us is good.

- We rest in him.

God got hot with Israel over *unbelief* ([Psalm 106:6-7, 21, 24](#); [Hebrews 3:9, 12, 19](#)). They would not trust him to do what he said he would do for them, which was to save them, to be their salvation, to take care of them. Instead of trusting him, they would make treaties with neighboring countries, or sacrifice to the gods of other nations, or trust in their own military strength.

Trusting in God means that when we are hurt or taken advantage of, or when problems arise or tragedy strikes, all is not lost, because Christ was raised from the dead for us. It means that we know we have nothing to lose because everything we have was given to us by God in the first place.

It means we can cast all our cares on him because he cares for us. That takes faith, because God's deliverance from the many things that fall on us in this life seldom comes in ways that make sense to us. Sometimes deliverance doesn't come in this life at all. In the same way, overcoming all our sins doesn't come in this life, which means we have to *trust* him when he says he doesn't count our sins against us ([Romans 4:1-8](#)) and that our lives are now hidden with Christ in God ([Colossians 3:3](#)).

## **Holy in Christ**

Sin is our enemy, as well as God's enemy. It destroys the creation, including us. But God has moved powerfully, decisively and once for all in Christ to redeem the creation, including us, from the corruption of sin. The outcome of the war with sin has already been determined through the death and resurrection of the Son of God. The devil, along with the sin and death he champions, has already been defeated, but he still exercises influence in the world until Christ returns.

By grace, we are *God's* children. Our hearts are turned to him, devoted to him and sanctified by him. We have tasted his goodness and experienced his

love, and we have given our allegiance to him. We fight sin in our lives and strive to walk in righteousness because he lives in us.

Christ's victory is our victory. In other words, what Christ did, he did for us, and he stands for us with God. We are holy only because we are in Christ. That is something we can see only with the eyes of faith – we have to trust God that it is so.

### **Christian life a paradox**

Here is another way of putting it: God has given us an active part in Christ's victory. We stand clean and forgiven in Christ's blood even while we seek to live in harmony with God's perfect love. A repentant heart and a commitment to obedience characterize our lives of faith in Christ, yet we often fall short of Christ's ideal. When we fail, which is continually, we can trust in the forgiveness of our God who loves us so much that he gave his Son to redeem us. In Christ we stand – and we stand only because we are in Christ, who is *for us*, as opposed to *against us*.

In Christ, even though we are sinners, we are righteous. Even when our commitment flags, Christ's commitment to us does not – God is faithful even when we falter ([2 Timothy 2:13](#)). There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ ([Romans 8:1](#)).

This is a paradox, at least from our perspective. But from God's perspective, it is the way the universe is put together. God loves and redeems, and he has made all things new in Christ. We are dead in sin, yet we are alive in Christ ([Ephesians 2:5](#); [Colossians 2:13](#)). We still sin, yet God no longer considers us sinners ([Romans 4:8](#)). Our real lives, which are a new creation, are hidden in God with Christ ([Colossians 3:3](#)). Just as the old creation is judged, the new creation is saved.

Does that make sin OK? Sin is never OK. But it is defeated. Its teeth have been pulled. It is on its last legs. It still slaps you around and might even kill

you, but God has you covered forever.

Jesus confirms the principles of the life of the kingdom in Matthew 5. The old categories of the law are transcended by Jesus' description of the transformed heart that reflects the new life in him. It is a heart that puts others ahead of self, that not only avoids hurting others but also actively loves others. It is a pattern of life that cannot be measured by outward appearances, but flows instead from a new creation, a new interior, a new birth. It is the heart of Christ. It is a heart we are *given*, not one that we work up with moral energy and personal commitment.

“Why does Jesus say that anyone who does not keep the whole law and teach it will be called least in the kingdom of heaven?”

Because it is true. But remember, it is in Jesus that we keep the whole law, not in ourselves. Jesus has kept it for us. The law condemns us because we cannot help but fail to keep it ([Galatians 3:10-14](#)). In Christ, there is no condemnation.

We become law keepers only by putting our faith in Jesus, who himself alone is our righteousness. We don't begin to have what it takes to stand righteous in the presence of God. Jesus does, and the gospel is God's good news that God has *in Christ* made us everything he wants us to be. He has already done it.

Because we can't see any physical evidence of that, we can know it only by faith in the One who gives us the gift ([Galatians 3:22](#)). That's why God pleads, “Trust me!”

When Jesus refers to the law in Matthew 5, he is not talking about the whole old covenant law. Otherwise we would all be wearing blue tassels and phylacteries and sacrificing lambs. Whatever way Jesus is defining “law” here, we are law keepers only through faith in him, not through our ever-bungling efforts to avoid sin.

## **Devotion born of trust**

Jesus is our Savior, Lord and Teacher. We can start with the confidence that we are forgiven and saved, as God's free gift to us through his Son. Jesus is our Savior. With that trust in God's word of grace, and because his love is growing in us from the moment we believed him, we can (in his strength) devote ourselves to doing whatever he says. Jesus is our Lord, which also means he is our Master, our King, our Ruler.

We come to know God better and understand his will more fully by listening to what he has given us about himself in the Bible. Some of the ways we listen to him are: reading the Bible, listening to teachers in the church ([Ephesians 4:11-14](#)), reading devotional writing by Christian teachers, as well as listening to God's prompting of our wills during prayer. Jesus is our Teacher.

Obedience is important. We are commanded to obey God. If we believe in God's mercy and love through Christ, then the Holy Spirit works in us to lead us to desire to obey God, and to actually obey him.

We bear fruit, but it is not really that we are doing it ourselves. The Holy Spirit is working in us to bear it. The beauty is that the Spirit makes us able to cooperate with his work in such a way that we are pleasing God and bring glory to him through Christ.

But we often fall short. Again, we can rest in the confidence that God has already forgiven us, already saved us and already made us his saints. In that confidence we don't have to languish in discouragement; we can get up and continue our struggle against sin, resting in the sure and unlimited love of God. Our failures, lapses and sins are not the measure of who we are in Christ; his faithful word and his victory for us are the true measure of who we are.

We are in a battle with sin, but the victory does not depend on us; it

depends on Christ, and he has already won. We are living out the implications of his victory in our own struggles, and because the victory is already his, our God-given part in his victory is not at risk.

Our part has already been secured by the Son of God. By God's gracious will for us, we are safe in Christ, and we can take joy and rest in God's presence if we believe his word about that. (If we won't believe God's word about that, then we won't be able to rest in his joy. God doesn't force people to stay out of hell, but hell is not his choice for them.)

### **Teaching right living**

The church should teach people right ways to live, always keeping in mind that this is not the same as teaching people how to be loved by God or how to be saved. The two must be clearly distinguished from one another. God already loves us and has already saved us from our guilt, even though we are sinners. Right living can help us avoid loads of trouble, pain and heartache, but it can't make God love us or save us any more than he already has.

However, right living pleases God. He loves to see us living in tune with him and becoming the persons he has made us to be in Christ. Likewise, he hates to see us torturing ourselves and living in fear and despair about our sins, out of harmony with the new creation he has made of us in Christ. Do we stop loving our children when they ignore our rules and warnings and get themselves hurt? God loves us even more than we are able to love our children.

With the new covenant in Christ, God has eclipsed the old system of reward for righteousness and punishment for sin ([Hebrews 10:9-10](#)). That system bound everyone under sin and death ([Galatians 3:21-22](#)). Because of our helplessness, weakness and bondage, he has taken on himself for us the consequences of sin, and he, as the righteous Human for all humans, shares

with us the rewards of his righteousness: reconciliation and unity with God. We receive everything Christ has done for us only one way: *in faith*. Without faith, without trust in God that his word of the gospel is true, we will not accept his love, reconciliation and eternal life.

This means that we must get rid of the notion that our behavior determines how God feels about us. God alone determines how God feels about us, and he decided before all time that he loves us, and his Son is the perfect Human for us in our place so that God's love for us may be complete and eternal precisely because its essence is his love for his Son. He will be faithful even when we are not faithful, because in Christ we are reconciled with the Father, and it is in Christ that he loves us for the sake of Christ.

So, when we teach people to live rightly, we are teaching them, and ourselves, how to live free of the bondage and pain that accompanies sin. We are not teaching how to be better than others, more loved of God than others, more important to God than others, or even more righteous than others. That is because our righteousness is only in Christ, and we walk in that righteousness only by faith in him, not by avoiding sin.

To be sure, life is indescribably smoother if we avoid illicit sex, drugs and violence. But we need to remember that the blood of Jesus is just as necessary for indifference, laziness, stubbornness, selfishness, gossip, judgmentalness, secret envy and the like, as much as it is for adultery, theft, heroin trafficking and murder. We are all sinners, regardless of how much success we achieve in right living, and we all stand in need of mercy at the foot of Jesus' cross.

### **Faith in the faithful One**

Still, the church does have the role of teaching right living, and every one of us has an obligation to God to commit ourselves to doing everything God wants us to do. God gives us all this instruction about right living because it

is good for us, and because it reflects the way he is toward us. The more we trust in God to save us from our sins, the more we desire to turn away from sin. Yet it is God himself, reigning in his divine freedom to save sinners in Christ, who actually delivers us from sin.

Whatever instruction the church gives in paths of right living needs to be framed in humility and love. The same Bible from which we draw God's pearls of wisdom about human conduct provides us his testimony about his Son who died to save us from our failure to heed perfectly such instruction.

Every teacher of the Bible is a sinner. As fellow sinners with the world, we must guard against the tendency of the church to allow its proclamation to descend into a mere rattle of condemnation against people who don't walk in the precepts of the Bible. To become a voice of condemnation does violence to the gospel and reduces the Christian proclamation into merely another religion vainly trying to hold together a powerless façade of human morality.

The church is where the gospel visibly intersects human history. It is the place where sinners have found out they are clean and forgiven, and where these forgiven sinners continually offer to God their worship, praises and thanksgiving.

It is where this good news of the gospel is celebrated and affirmed for everyone who will listen. It is where the love of Christ can take root in the world. It is where people of faith have been made able, by their Savior and Lord in whom they trust, to be like him in the world – a friend of despised people and sinners.

Wherever the church comes into contact with the world, the world should be the better for it. The poor should be hearing good news. Prisoners should be hearing about the release that transcends physical freedom. People in bondage to personal and societal sin should be finding mercy, kindness and hope.



The cleansing, purifying light of Christ's truth and love and peace should be finding its way into dark fears, lost hopes and tortured souls. This should be happening because the crucified Christ is risen and living in his people, not because the church found an ancient book of laws it can use to more effectively condemn sinners.

Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it ([John 3:17](#)). That is why the gospel is *good news!* How sweet it is when the proclamation of the church is the same good news.

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## Getting Real

Most of us go to great lengths to look good in the eyes of others, but according to Jesus, it is only when we honestly see ourselves as we really are that we can become who God has made us to be. Life has much more to offer than the frustrating rat race of “keeping up appearances.”

### **New life**

The night Jesus was arrested, he spent some time telling the disciples about the Holy Spirit. He referred to the Holy Spirit with a word that was translated into Greek as *parakletos*, a word conveying the sense of “advocate,” “friend” or “supporter.” *Parakletos* was used to describe, for example, a person who would stand beside you in court—to support you and your cause, to speak up for you, to hearten you. *The Message* paraphrases it as “the Friend.”

Jesus knew that things were about to get difficult, not just for him, but also for those who would follow him. So he said to the 11 disciples (Judas had already left to betray him),

I’ve told you these things to prepare you for rough times ahead. They are going to throw you out of the meeting places. There will even come a time when anyone who kills you will think he’s doing God a favor. They will do these things because they never really understood the Father. I’ve told you these things so that when the time comes and they start in on you, you’ll be well-warned and ready for them. (John 16:1-4a, *The Message* paraphrase)

What is it that these persecutors did not understand about the Father? For starters, they did not understand that the Father loved the world so much that he would send his Son to save it from its sins. They did not understand the “mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God...which he

accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ephesians 3:9, 11). And they didn’t understand that “in him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence” (verse 12). Jesus went on:

I didn’t tell you this earlier because I was with you every day. But now I am on my way to the One who sent me. Not one of you has asked, “Where are you going?” Instead, the longer I’ve talked, the sadder you’ve become. So let me say it again, this truth: It’s better for you that I leave. If I don’t leave, the Friend won’t come. But if I go, I’ll send him to you. (John 16:4b-7, The Message).

The disciples were sad because Jesus was leaving them. But what they didn’t yet understand was that his going to the Father would result not in their loss of him, but rather in their union with him and with the Father. How? Because he would send the Holy Spirit, the Friend, who would draw them into the eternal relationship of love that exists between the Father and the Son.

## **Sin, righteousness and judgment**

Jesus continued:

When he comes, he’ll expose the error of the godless world’s view of sin, righteousness, and judgment: He’ll show them that their refusal to believe in me is their basic sin; that righteousness comes from above, where I am with the Father, out of their sight and control; that judgment takes place as the ruler of this godless world is brought to trial and convicted. (John 16:8-11, The Message)

*How is the world wrong about sin?* The world thinks sinners can make up for their sins by doing works of goodness. But here is the fascinating thing. Now that Jesus has come to forgive all sin and reconcile all things to God, the only kind of sin that can remain is the sin of not trusting in him who takes away all sin. The root of all sin is unbelief in God’s own atonement for human sin through Jesus Christ.

*How is the world wrong about righteousness?* The world thinks of righteousness in terms of human virtue and goodness. But here is the fascinating thing. Now that the Son of God has lived a sinless human life and has been accepted by the Father as the perfect offering of humanity in sinful humanity's place, righteousness can be defined only in terms of the gift of God, a gift rooted in Jesus Christ, who, in our place and as one of us, did everything his Father commanded him to do for our sakes.

*How is the world wrong about judgment?* The world thinks people who endure great suffering in this world are great sinners under God's curse, and that people whose lives are abundant have been judged worthy and are under God's favor. But here is the fascinating thing. Now that the Son of God has destroyed the works of the devil (the pioneer of sin), judgment can be defined only in terms of the condemnation of the god of this world, not in terms of the condemnation of the people Jesus came to save.

But Jesus said the Holy Spirit would bring the truth about sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:13-14). To be forgiven of sin, to be judged righteous, and to be freed from the grip of sin are all gifts of the Father to us through Jesus Christ. We experience them only by trust in God's word of grace and salvation, which he gives us by the Holy Spirit. In Christ, we are reconciled to the Father, partakers of Christ's righteousness and of Christ's union and communion with the Father.

## **Getting real**

In the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee, Jesus illustrated the difference between the world's view of sin, righteousness and judgment and the true view that the Spirit would lead us to see. The two men went to the temple to pray, one a tax collector and the other a Pharisee. You can read the story in Luke 18:9-14. Take special notice of verse 9: Jesus told this story for the sake of those "who were confident of their own righteousness and looked

down on everybody else.”

Such people don't feel the need to pray for God's mercy, like the tax collector did. But the tax collector saw himself before God as he really was — a sinner in great need of mercy, and he is the one who “went home justified before God” (verse 14). And think about this: The tax collector had to trust God with his life, didn't he? He knew he deserved nothing, but he trusted God to be the way God says he is: “the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6).

When we go to the judgment seat of God, honestly confessing our sinfulness and asking for mercy, the Judge turns out to be the Defense Attorney who turns out to have taken our crimes on himself and then declared us innocent and set us free. That is why we live in the world as people who understand grace, mercy and compassion and who devote ourselves to extending these to others.

The Prodigal Son in the Luke 15 parable knew he needed mercy, and that is all he knew, so he went to ask for it. When he did, he found out that he had had it all along — but only after he had come home, trusting his father to be merciful, was he able to start enjoying it.

### **Forgiven and forgiving**

The instruction in the story of the Prodigal Son goes hand in hand with what is called the Lord's Prayer, because the Holy Spirit leads us to forgive others as he has forgiven us. Jesus told the disciples to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.” This is not a new form of legalism. It is, rather, a description of what life is like among those who are in Christ. People who cannot see their own condition of sinfulness, and therefore do not feel their own need for mercy, do not extend mercy to others. People who understand the grace they have received from God, on the other hand, are not quick to hold a grudge or to withhold forgiveness. Because we are in Christ,

we are forgivers, and we trust God to forgive us.

When we pray, “Forgive us our debts,” we do not ask as though God might not do it. In Christ, God has already forgiven us. Our asking is both a reminder of and a participation in the forgiveness we already have in Christ. In the same way, the prayer “as we forgive our debtors” is also a reminder of and a participation in our new life in Christ, in which we forgive as we have been forgiven (compare Ephesians 4:32-5:1-2).

### **Turn and trust**

We can trust God to give us everything we need for life, godliness and salvation. Because he is the Judge, we have nothing to fear in the judgment. And more than that, God does what he does for us because it is his good pleasure to do so (Luke 12:32). He is for us.

We don’t have to be prisoners of “keeping up appearances.” We don’t have to carry around anxiety about whether we will “make it into the kingdom.” We can live carefree before God, casting all our anxieties, all our cares, upon him, because we know he cares for us (see 1 Peter 5:7).

With God, we can “get real.” We can be perfectly honest with ourselves and with him. We don’t have to hide anything. We can unload all our sinfulness, all our failures, all our fears on the One who loves us and gave himself for us — and who makes all things new, including us!

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## **Trusting God With the Problem of Sin**

“OK, I understand that the blood of Christ covers all sin. And I understand that there is nothing I can add to the equation. But here’s my question: If God, for Christ’s sake, has completely forgiven me for all my sins, past, present and future, then what is to stop me from just going out and sinning all I want? I mean, is the law meaningless for Christians? Does God now condone sin? Doesn’t he want me to stop sinning?”

These questions are important. Let’s go through them one at a time, and see if any more crop up along the way.

### **All sin forgiven**

First, you said that you understand that the blood of Christ covers all sin. That’s a great beginning. A lot of Christians don’t understand that. They believe that the forgiveness of sins is a transaction, kind of a business deal, between a person and God. The idea is that you do the right thing for God, and God will give you forgiveness and salvation.

For example, you put your faith in Jesus, and God rewards you by applying Jesus’ blood to your sins. Tit for tat. That would be good deal, but still a deal, a transaction, and not the pure grace proclaimed by the gospel. In this way of thinking, most people are damned because they didn’t ante up in time, and God divvies out the blood of Jesus to only a few; it never actually redeemed the whole world.

But many churches don’t even leave it there. Potential believers are lured in with the promise of being saved by grace alone, but once the believer enters the church, the list of rules comes out. If you don’t toe the line, you might get kicked out, and under certain circumstances, not only out of the church, but out of the kingdom of God as well. So much for “saved by grace.”

There are sometimes situations in which a person must be removed from the fellowship of the church (which does not remove a person from the kingdom), but that's another subject. For now, suffice it to say that organized religion tends to have a love affair with keeping sinners out of the church, whereas the gospel trumpets them an invitation to enter.

According to the gospel, Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice not only for our sins, but also for the sins *of the whole world* (1 John 2:2). That, contrary to what many Christians have been told by their preachers, means absolutely everybody. Jesus said, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). Jesus is God the Son, by whom and through whom all things exist (Hebrews 1:2-3), and his blood redeems no less than everything he made (Colossians 1:20).

### **By grace alone**

You also said that you understand that there is nothing you can bring to the table to sweeten the deal God has drawn up for you in Christ. There again, you are way ahead of the game. The world is full of sin-battling preachers who lay weekly guilt trips on their cowering flocks with a long list of specially selected commissions and omissions that reputedly ignite God's ever-shortening fuse and threaten to land the whole pathetic lot of spiritual low achievers in the fiery torments of hell.

The gospel, on the other hand, declares that God loves people. He is not out to get them. He is not against them. He is not waiting for them to trip up so he can squash them. Quite the contrary, he is on their side. He loves them so much that he has set free from sin and death all people everywhere by the atoning sacrifice of his Son (John 3:16).

In Christ, the door is open to the kingdom of God. People can believe God's word (faith), turn to him (repent) and claim their freely given inheritance—or they can continue to deny God as their Father and reject their



part in the family of God. God honors our choice. If we disown him, he lets our decision stand. That is not the choice he wants us to make, but he does allow us the freedom to make it.

## **Response**

God has done all that needed to be done for us. In Christ, he has said “Yes” to us. It is up to us to say “Yes” to his “Yes.” But the Bible indicates that there are, amazingly, some who say “No.” They are the wicked, the haters, the ones who oppose God and themselves. They have committed themselves to the proposition that they have a better way; they have no need of God. They regard not God or man. To them, God’s offer of complete amnesty and eternal blessing is a meaningless and worthless insult. God, who gave his Son for them, ratifies their appalling decision to remain the children of the devil they have chosen over him.

God is the Redeemer, not the destroyer, and he has done this for no other reason than that he wants to, and he is free to do what he wants. He is bound by no outside rules, but he has freely chosen to be utterly faithful to his covenant love and promise. He is who he is, which is exactly who he wants to be, and he is our God, full of grace and truth and faithfulness. He forgives our sins because he loves us. That is how he wants it, so that is how it is.

## **No law could save**

There is no law that could bring eternal life (Galatians 3:21). We humans simply don’t keep laws. We can argue all day over whether it is theoretically possible for humans to keep the law, but the fact is, we don’t keep it, never did and never will, and nobody ever has but Jesus.

There is only one way salvation comes, and that is through God’s free gift apart from anything we do or don’t do (Ephesians 2:8-10). Like any gift, we can take it or leave it. Either way, it is ours already by God’s grace, but we can use it and enjoy it only if we actually take it. That is a simple matter of

trust. We believe God and turn to him. If, on the other hand, we are foolish enough to reject it, we will, tragically, continue to live in our self-imposed darkness and death as though we never had light and life handed to us in a golden goblet.

## **Hell a choice**

Such a choice, such contempt for God's free gift—a gift paid for by the blood of his Son through whom all things exist and consist—is nothing less than hell. But it is a choice made by people whose invitation to pre-paid life is just as real and valid as the invitation of those who accept theirs. Jesus' blood covers all sin, not just some sin (Colossians 1:20). His atonement is for all the creation, not just part of it.

Those who scorn such a gift are kicked out of the kingdom only because that is their own preference. They want no part of it, and God, though he never stops loving them, won't allow them to stick around and ruin the joy of the eternal celebration by stinking up the place with the pride and hate and unbelief they have made their gods. So they go to where they like it best—to hell, where there is nobody having fun to spoil their miserable self-absorption.

Free grace is good news! Even though we didn't earn it or deserve it, God decided to give us eternal life in his Son. Believe or scoff, it's our choice. Whatever we decide to do about it, this much is forever true: Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has concretely demonstrated how much he loves us, and how far he has gone to forgive our sins and restore us to himself. He has freely poured out his mercy everywhere in abounding love on absolutely everybody. It is pure grace—God's free gift of salvation, and it is enjoyed by everybody who believes his word and accepts him on his terms.

## **What stops me?**

That brings us to your questions. If God has already forgiven my sins

even before I commit them, what is to stop me from just going out and sinning my brains out?

First, let's clear some ground. Sin is primarily a condition of the heart, not merely individual acts of wrongdoing. The acts of wrongdoing don't come from nowhere; they spring naturally from our corrupt hearts. The solution to our sin problem therefore requires a repaired heart, getting at the source of sin, rather than merely treating its effects.

God is not interested in finely behaved robots. He wants a love relationship with us. He loves us. That is why Christ came to save us. Relationships are built on forgiveness and mercy, not on forced compliance. If I want my wife to love me, for example, do I force her to act as though she does? If I did, I might get compliance, but I certainly wouldn't get her to actually love me. You cannot force anybody to love. You can only force people to act.

Through self-sacrifice, God has shown us how much he loves us. Through forgiveness and mercy, he has proven his great love. By suffering for our sins in our place, he has demonstrated that there is nothing that can come between us and his love (Romans 8:38). God wants children, not slaves. He wants a love relationship with us, not a world of cowering whipped dogs. He made us free beings, with real choices to make that matter to him very much. The choice he wants us to make is him.

## **Real freedom**

God gives us freedom to behave as we wish, and he forgives our failures. He does it because he wants to. He set things up that way, and he makes no apologies for it. If we have any sense, we will see his love for what it is and latch onto him like there's no tomorrow.

So what is there to stop us from sinning all we want? Absolutely nothing. There never has been. The law didn't stop anybody from sinning all they

wanted (Galatians 3:21-22). We have always sinned all we want, and God has always permitted it. He's never stopped us. He doesn't like it. He doesn't condone it. He doesn't endorse it. In fact, it grieves him. But he has always permitted it. That's called freedom, and he gives us that freedom.

## **In Christ**

The Bible says that we are righteous in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30; Philippians 3:9). We are not righteous in ourselves; we are righteous in Christ. In ourselves, because of sin, we are dead, but we are also, at the same time, alive in Christ—our lives are hid in Christ (Colossians 3:3). Without Christ, we are in hopeless shape, sold under sin, with no future. But Christ saved us. That is the gospel—good news! His salvation, if we receive it, puts us on a new footing with God.

Because of what God has done in Christ for us, including his prompting, even urging, us to trust him, Christ is now in us. For Christ's sake (he intercedes for us), we are, in spite of our sin, acceptable—righteous—before God. The whole business, from start to finish, is done, not by us, but by God, who wins us not by force, but by the power of his self-sacrificial love.

## **The law meaningless?**

Paul was plain about the purpose of the law. It shows us that we are sinners (Romans 7:7). It declares the fact of our slavery to sin so that we might be justified by faith when Christ came (Galatians 3:19-27).

Now, suppose for a moment that you enter the judgment believing you are righteous because you always tried hard to obey God. So, instead of taking the wedding garment provided at the door (the free, clean one that goes only to dirty people who know they need it), you go in by a side door wearing your striving-hard garment, reeking all the way, and sit down at your place at the table. The lord of the house will say to you, "Hey buddy, where did you get the brass to come in here and insult me in front of all my guests with your

sewage-soaked rags?” Then he will say to the staff, “Handcuff this filthy imposter and dump him in the swamp.”

We cannot clean our dirty faces with our own dirty water, our dirty soap and our dirty washcloths, and go happily on our way thinking our hopelessly filthy faces are clean. There is only one way to remedy sin, and it does not lie with us. Remember, we are dead in sin (Romans 8:10), and dead people, by definition, can't remedy their deadness. Rather, the acute knowledge of our sinfulness should lead us to trust Jesus to clean us (1 Peter 5:10-11).

### **God wants you sin-free**

God has given us indescribably great mercy and salvation not so that we feel a license to sin, but to free us from sin. That freedom not only removes our guilt from sin, but it also empowers us to see sin stripped naked for what it really is, instead of dressed up in the pretty costume it wears to fool us, and to reject its fraudulent and pretentious power over us. Even so, when we sin, which we certainly do, Jesus remains no less our atoning sacrifice (1 John 2:1-2).

God not only does not condone sin, he condemns sin. He does not like or endorse our glazed-eyed rationalizations, our comatose suspension of good sense or our hair-trigger, dive-in responses to temptations of every sort, from anger to lust to scorn to pride. He rarely bails us out of the natural consequences of the things we choose to do. However, because our faith and trust are in him (which means we are wearing the clean wedding clothes he provides), neither does he kick us out (as some preachers seem to think) of his wedding feast because of the poor choices we make.

### **Confession**

Have you ever noticed that when you become aware of sinfulness in your life, your conscience plagues you until you confess your sins to God? (Chances are, there are some forms of sinfulness that you find yourself

confessing rather frequently.) Why do you do that? Because you have committed yourself to “go out and sin all you want”? Is it not, rather, because your heart rests in Christ, and you, in tune with the Spirit who dwells in you, are grieved until you re-establish a sense of right relationship with him?

The Spirit in us testifies with our spirit, we are told, to the truth that we are the children of God (Romans 8:15-17). Two things to remain keenly aware of here:

1. You, by the testimony of the Spirit of God, are, in Christ and with all the saints, a child of God.
2. The Spirit, as the inner witness to your real identity, does not neglect to rumble your landscape when you choose to live as though you are still nothing but the dead meat you used to be before Jesus redeemed you.

Make no mistake. Sin is God’s enemy and your enemy. We need to fight it tooth and nail. But we must never think that our salvation depends on the level of our success in overcoming sin. Salvation depends on Christ’s success in overcoming sin, and that’s already been done. Sin and the death that shadows it have already been defeated in Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the power of that victory resounds through all the creation from the beginning of time and forever. The only overcomers in the world are those who trust in Christ to be their resurrection and life.

### **Good works**

God takes joy in the good works of his children (Psalm 147:11; Revelation 8:4). He delights in our acts of kindness, our sacrifices of love, our devotion to justice, honesty and peace (Hebrews 6:10). These and every good work are the natural outgrowth of the Spirit’s work in us, leading us to trust, love and honor God. They are part of the love relationship that he has

built with us through the sacrificial death and resurrection of the Lord of life, Jesus Christ. Such deeds and such work are God's own work in us, his beloved children, and as such, they are never useless (1 Corinthians 15:53).

### **God's work in us**

Our faithful devotion to do what pleases God reflects our Savior's love, but again, our works of righteousness in his name are not what saves us. The righteousness that finds expression in our words and deeds of obedience to God's commands is righteousness that God himself is behind, joyfully working in us to his glory to bring forth good fruit. For us to try to take credit for what he does in us would be silly.

It would also be silly to think that the blood of Jesus, which covers all sin, leaves any of our sinfulness uncovered. If we think that, then we still don't have a clue as to who this eternal and omnipotent triune God is—this Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who created all things, redeems us freely and magnificently with the Son's own blood, dwells in us through the Holy Spirit, and renews the whole creation, and makes us into a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) along with the whole universe (Isaiah 65:17), because of his indescribable love.

### **True life**

Though God commands us to do what is right and good, he does not determine salvation by keeping record books. That is good for us, because if he did, we would all turn up in the reject pile. God saves us by his grace, and we can walk in the joy of that salvation if we give up all our claims on life, turn to him, and trust him and him alone to raise us from the dead (Ephesians 2:4-10; James 4:10).

Salvation is determined by the One who writes names in the book of life, and he has already written everyone's name in that book with the Lamb's blood (1 John 2:2). It is a colossal tragedy that some refuse to believe it,

because if they would trust the Lord of life they would find that the life they have been scratching to save is not really life at all, but death, and that their true life, waiting to be revealed, is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3). God loves even his enemies and wants them, along with all people, to turn to him and enter the joy of his kingdom (1 Timothy 2:4, 6).

## **Summing up**

So let's summarize. You asked: "If God, for Christ's sake, has completely forgiven me for all my sins, past, present and future, then what is to stop me from just going out and sinning all I want? I mean, is the law meaningless for Christians? Does God now condone sin? Doesn't he want me to stop sinning?"

There is nothing to stop us from sinning all we want. There never has been. God has given us free will, and he values it. He loves us and desires a love relationship with us, and such a relationship comes only through free choice, rooted in trust and forgiveness, not through threats or forced compliance. We are not robots or videotaped characters in a predetermined play. We are created as real, free beings, made so by God in his own freedom, and the relationship God has with us is real.

The law is far from meaningless; it serves to make it abundantly plain that we are sinners, falling far short of God's perfect will for us. God permits us to sin, but he does not condone it. That is why he has gone to such astounding self-sacrificial lengths to save us from it. Sin hurts and destroys us and everyone around us. It springs from a corrupt heart of unbelief and selfish rebellion against the source of our life and being. It saps us of true life and being and imprisons us in the darkness of death and nothingness.

## **Sin hurts**

In case you haven't noticed, sin hurts like hell—literally, since that is in essence what it is. It makes as much sense to "go out and sin all I want to" as



it does to stick my hand into a running lawnmower. “Well, then,” I heard one man say, “If we’re already forgiven, we might as well just go out and commit adultery.” Sure, if you want to live in constant fear of being caught while you risk unwanted pregnancy and some nasty diseases, breaking your family’s hearts, discrediting yourself, losing your friends and paying alimony out the nose, not to mention a plagued conscience and the likelihood of having to deal with very angry husbands, boyfriends, brothers or fathers.

Sin has consequences, bad ones, which is why God is at work in you to conform you to the image of Christ. You can work on listening and cooperating, or you can keep feeding appendages to the law mower. We must not forget that the usual sins we think about when we say things like “go out and sin all I want” are only the tip of the iceberg. What about being greedy, or selfish or rude? What about being unthankful, or saying mean things, or not helping out when you ought? What about holding a grudge, envying someone’s job, clothes, car or house, or harboring angry thoughts about someone? What about taking home your employer’s office supplies, sharing in gossip, or belittling your spouse and children? On and on we could go.

These are sins, too, some big, some little, and guess what? We “go out” and do them all we want to. It’s a good thing God saves us by grace and not by works, isn’t it? Sin is not OK, but that does not stop us from sinning. God does not want us to sin, yet he knows better than we do that we are dead in sin, and that we will continue to be dogged by sin until our true life, redeemed and sinless, which is hidden in Christ, is revealed at his appearing (Colossians 3:4).

### **Sinners alive in Christ**

Purely by the freely given grace and limitless power of our ever-living and ever-loving God, believers paradoxically have died to sin, yet are alive in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:12; 6:4-11). Despite our sins, we no longer walk in

death because we have believed and accepted our resurrection in Christ (Romans 8:10-11; Ephesians 2:3-6), a resurrection that will find its consummation at the appearing of Christ, when even our mortal bodies put on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:52-53).

Nonbelievers continue to walk in death, unable to enjoy their life that is hidden in Christ (Colossians 3:3) until they come to faith, not because the blood of Christ does not cover their sin, but because they cannot trust Christ to raise them from the dead until they believe the good news that he is their Savior and turn to him. Nonbelievers are as redeemed as believers—Christ died for everybody (1 John 2:2)—only they don't know it yet. Since they don't believe what they don't know, they continue to live in the fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15) and the futile pursuit of life in all the wrong places (Ephesians 2:3).

The Holy Spirit transforms believers into the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). In Christ, the power of sin is broken, and we are no longer its prisoners. Even so, we are still weak and sometimes give place to sin (Romans 7:14-29; Hebrews 12:1). Because he loves us, God cares very much about our sinful condition. He loves the world so much that he sent his eternal Son that whoever believes in him would not remain in the darkness of death that is the fruit of sin, but would have eternal life in him.

There is nothing that can separate you from his love, not even your sins. Trust him. He helps you walk in obedience, and he forgives your every sin. He is your Savior because he wants to be, and he is very good at what he does.

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## **Grace: A License to Sin?**

It is a constant wonder how we guardians of the true faith can become so skilled at gumming up the greatest news in the universe. We hold in trust the Good News of all good news – God gives free grace to sinners for Christ’s sake – and then we break our necks to hide it behind a great wall of rules, regulations and laws.

“You must not take grace too far or you will turn it into license to sin!” we admonish one another, as though lack of license has ever stopped anybody from sinning.

Hasn’t anyone noticed? We are all sinners – even all we religious, God-fearing, church-going Christians. Always have been, always will be, in this life. It is only by God’s pure and unfettered grace, as demonstrated once for all through Jesus Christ, that we are made something else – righteous – and not by our efforts to avoid sin, but by trusting him.

It seems that our vigilant efforts to prevent anyone from “turning grace into license to sin” has resulted, ironically, in our managing to turn sin into a barrier to accepting grace. The church promises grace, then delivers condemnation. The church headlines the gospel, then preaches hellfire. The church disguises its moralistic hook with gospel bait, reels in the unwary catch and plops him or her into the hot greasy frying pan of salvation by works.

Consider how the gospel is plowed under by the relentless glacier of denominational “rightness,” doctrinal “exactness” and behavioral “standards.” Christian church against Christian church, warring over phraseology, terminology, dress codes, political stands, seating arrangements, music styles, architecture...the list seems endless. We all seem to have at

least a mild case of the virus of “our-way-is-God’s-way-so-die-you-heretic.”

Right doctrine is important. But we need look no farther than the Nicene Creed or the Apostles Creed for those doctrinal “issues” that really matter. Yet, many Christian churches still refuse Communion to fellow believers who don’t belong to the “right” denominational brand name or haven’t jumped through all the required theological hoops.

The underlying message of religious behaviorism, “Behave right (according to our particular standards), or go straight to hell,” buries the gospel under layer after layer of religious hair-splitting, nit-picking and measurement-taking. That isn’t the gospel. It’s religion. It holds out salvation like some phantom carrot-and-stick reached only through a lifetime of unquantifiable good deeds. It is a soul-sapping lie against the truth of God.

Jesus did not bring some “new and better” brand of religion. He brought the gospel, which is good news for sinners, which we all are. For the sake of Christ, God has thrown away all the report cards, homework records and detention notes in the world and given everybody a 4.0 GPA and a gold-plated invitation to eternal life.

Only some of us, it seems, “don’t want no charity.” We’d rather feel like we have been – or through discipline and devotion have become – the right and proper sort of person upon whom God could appropriately bestow eternal life. We have been good Christians, and we don’t want to be lumped in with a bunch of immoral losers who do nothing more than put their trust in the Christ we have worked so hard for so long to imitate and obey. (We thank you, O God, that we are not like the rest of people – greedy, dishonest, adulterous or, for that matter, like this embezzler.)

Suppose we take a challenge: give up the charade. Drop the legalism and the fear tactics. Quit pretending to be worthy and righteous, admit we are hopeless sinners without anything to our credit, and put our trust in Jesus

Christ, for whose sake God justifies the ungodly (Romans 4:5).

Drop the nonsense about how that would mean people could “just go out and sin all we want, since we’re already forgiven.” Nobody who trusts God wants to sin. When you trust God to love you and forgive you, you want to be like Jesus; you don’t want to sin. But when we do sin, in spite of the fact that we don’t want to, we have an advocate with the Father, 1 John 2:1-2 tells us (and he tells us that so we won’t sin, not so that we will, verse 1 says).

It’s like Paul told Titus:

The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11-14)

It’s *grace* that teaches us to say no to ungodliness. It’s *grace* that makes us eager to do what is good. Knowing we’re already forgiven and accepted does not lead us into the devil’s workshop, but into deeper fellowship with our Lord and Savior. The gospel is that simple. It really is good news.

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## **Fulfilling the Law**

The apostle Paul once wrote of love as a “continuing debt” to one another, saying, “he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.” He cited four of the Ten Commandments and then included all others, explaining that they “are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” He said, “Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” You can read it in Romans 13:8-10.

When we consider Paul’s teaching about the relationship between love and the law, it is interesting how we seem naturally inclined to reverse it. We seem to find ourselves more comfortable with the idea of the law fulfilling love than we are with the idea of love fulfilling the law.

### **Love and law**

When it comes to relationships, most of us like to know where we stand. We don’t feel comfortable not knowing whether others like us or don’t like us. We feel better if we have some clear evidence, some way to measure, where we stand with others. Maybe that is why we find ourselves more comfortable with the law being the fulfillment of love, than love being the fulfillment of the law.

The statement, “love is the fulfillment of the law,” does not mean the same thing as the statement, “the law is the fulfillment of love.” The first statement makes love the principal thing and the law the secondary thing. The second statement makes the law the principal thing and love the secondary thing.

In the first statement, the law is subsumed within love. In other words, love is bigger, wider, broader, deeper and richer than the law. When one loves, one has fulfilled the law, but one has also done more than that—one has loved.

Let's see how that works with the second statement, "the law is the fulfillment of love." In this case, we would be saying that love is subsumed within the law. We would be saying that the law is wider, broader, deeper and richer than love. We would be saying that when one has kept the law, one has not only loved, but one has done more than love—one has kept the law.

But that is not what Paul is saying. He is saying that love fulfills the law. A person can keep the law without loving. But one cannot love without the law being fulfilled in them. The law gives instruction in the ways that one who loves will live. But the difference between the law and love is that love works from the inside and the law works from the outside.

### **Different motivation**

A person motivated by love does not need to be told to behave in a loving way; a person motivated by law does. Maybe that is why we tend to get uncomfortable with the idea that faith in Christ has superseded the law. We fear that unless there is an outside agent, the law, compelling us to behave rightly, we probably won't. We know our love is weak, so we don't trust ourselves to behave with love without a threat of unpleasant consequences as motivation.

The problem with that is obvious: Love cannot be compelled, forced, coerced or threatened into being. Love is freely given and freely received, or it isn't anything at all. Love is unconditional; anything short of unconditional is something other than love. It might be acceptance, it might be approval, it might be pleasure, it might be happiness, but it is not love, because love has no conditions. That is why our "love" is so easily strained when the people we love fall short of our expectations and demands—as they invariably do.

We fall short of theirs, too. But we usually expect them to overlook and understand the ways we fall short of their expectations. In either case, what we call love is often stretched thin by the failure of either party to measure up

to what the other feels is appropriate behavior.

### **Conditional love**

When we allow the demands and expectations of the people we love, however unreasonable they may be, to dictate our lives, we are not free, but imprisoned. Likewise, if we withhold our love from others, making it conditional upon whether they are at any given moment pleasing us or doing what we want them to do, then we are being manipulative, not loving.

When we love others, we love them for who they are, not for what we want them to be. More precisely, as Christians, we love others for who God has made them to be in Christ, not for who we want them to be for us. It is only when we drop the selfish habit of withholding love from others until they adequately please us, that we can also free ourselves from the prison of striving to please others in order to win or retain their love.

If someone loves you, they do not have to remake you into their image. And you, just as surely, do not have to make someone into your image in order to love them, either.

### **Unconditional love**

“Love is blind” is an old saying that illustrates how silly the common understanding of love is. It is usually taken to mean that love does not see the flaws, problems and warts of the object of love, and is therefore naïve. That is a good description of infatuation, but it is a terrible description of love.

Love is honest. It sees things as they really are, and loves what is real, not some image. A good marriage, for example, is one in which each partner, in love, puts up with the various selfish, immature and obnoxious behaviors of the other. The partners do not waste their emotions and energies trying to manipulate and manage each other through the typical shame games, guilt-trips and favor withholdings that plague so many marriages. We ought to expect that people will not measure up to the silly, grand ideals we hold out



for them, and wise people, people who love, know that.

When love is unconditional, then iron can truly sharpen iron (Proverbs 27:17) without the accusations, resentments and recriminations that usually go hand in hand with our typical selfish efforts to “correct” one another.

It would be comical, if it were not tragic, how we can say to each other, “If you loved me, you would not have... (fill in the blank: said that, embarrassed me, done that, forgot that, bought that, sold that, asked that, ruined that, etc.) or “If you loved me, you would have... (been nice to my mother, ironed my pants, stood up for me, known what I meant, etc.).

Maybe an actor in the movies, following a script, would do all the things we wish others would do, at least while the camera is on, but real people in real life don't—and neither do you.

All of us, in every relationship we have ever had or will ever have, at some point along the way, in one way or another, experience disappointment, if not betrayal. That is a two-way street. We eventually, in one way or another, disappoint, if not betray, the people we care about, too. But to love is to know full well what you are dealing with—one flawed, imperfect and weak human being relating to another—and to love in spite of it all.

The point is: Love is not based on whether the one being loved measures up. Love travels in a different universe from that, and its chariot is forgiveness.

### **Forgiveness: root and fruit of love**

Jesus was once invited to dinner by a Pharisee. During dinner, a woman who was well known as a sinner came in and started anointing Jesus' feet with perfume. Standing behind him at his feet (in those days, people ate by reclining on a backless couch at the table, so their feet were directed away from the table), she wet his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.

Naturally, the Pharisee thought this intrusion irregular, but said nothing.

He simply thought to himself: “Good grief. If Jesus were really a prophet, he would know what kind of big-league sinner this woman is.” The implication being, righteous men don’t truck with sinners, especially woman sinners.

Jesus knew his thoughts, though, and asked him this:

Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?

Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said. (Luke 7:41-43)

Then Jesus turned to the woman and said to Simon: “Look, Simon. You didn’t show me any particular love when I got here, but this woman certainly did, and big time. Do you know why? Because she is a big-time sinner who needs her sins forgiven, and she trusts me to do it, so she loves me big time. But you? Well, Simon, you don’t think you need much in the way of forgiveness, at least not from me, so you don’t show me much love. It’s like that with people who think they are reasonably righteous—they don’t love much, but people who know they are sinners and want my forgiveness, well, my grace inspires them to great love.”

The more we understand how much we’ve been forgiven, the more we love God who forgives us. And the more we love God who forgives us, the more we forgive our neighbor who wrongs us. Forgiveness generates love, and love generates forgiveness.

Love comes from God. He loved us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:6-8), and in Christ he demonstrated his love for us by forgiving us.

## **Love defined**

Paul describes love in 1 Corinthians 13. He begins like this:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. (verses 1-3)

The only real value, in anything at all, is love. Doing good things, following the rules, keeping the law: these are not the same thing as love, and they can be done without love. Paul continues:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (verses 4-7)

Paul never says of love: “It keeps the law.” Meditating on these beautiful characteristics of love ought to make it plain that love is on a vastly higher and deeper level than merely keeping the law. He goes on:

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (verses 8-13)

Everything is temporary—from prophecies to knowledge to childhood to the spiritual manifestations we put so much stock in—except faith, hope and

love, which never fail.

### **Law rooted in love, not vice versa**

The law, contrary to what many well-intentioned Christians believe, does not define love. The law and love may intersect at many points, but they are definitely not the same thing. The law is rooted in love, but love is not rooted in the law.

Just as the law does not define love, so love does not define law. It transcends the law. The law exists only because God loves. I doubt anyone would want to say that God loves only because he first had a law.

Even though the law is a product of love, the law can be misused and turned into something that harms, rather than helps, when it is administered by cruel and pitiless people. But love, from which law springs, cannot be misused.

In his love, God tempers justice with mercy. Regarding the way God views the law and justice, James wrote: “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (James 2:12-13).

Now here is a curious thing! Many religious people have the idea that God’s spiritual blood is constantly at a furious boil at the sinning masses, and that he is first and foremost the God of justice who is itching to blast the evildoers. So naturally, most people who believe this caricature of God go around either worried about or resigned to their obvious toboggan slide to hell.

But James, the biblical writer who is a hands-down favorite of works-oriented Christians, says two remarkable things in the just-cited passage: 1) people are judged by the law that gives freedom, not the law that condemns, and 2) the only kind of people who will get judgment without mercy are

people who have not been merciful, because mercy triumphs over judgment!

This ought to be no surprise, because like Zechariah reported, “This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another’” (Zechariah 7:9). In other words, in God’s view, there is no other kind of judgment but the kind that is tempered with mercy and compassion. When God talks about judgment, he is talking about something quite different from what a lot of religious people are talking about.

God loves. And because he loves, he gave the law. Because he loves, he judges. Because he loves, he judges us all guilty, since we are. Because he loves, in judging us guilty, he has mercy on us. It is because he loves that he sent Jesus. It is because he loves that he sent the Holy Spirit. It is because he loves that he moves us to turn to him (repent), to trust him (have faith), and that he saves us from sin and death (salvation).

When we love, we are behaving like God. Jesus said, “In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). Psychologists say that at the most fundamental level, what all human beings need and want is to be loved. If we want to be loved, then Jesus says we need to love, and that, he says, sums up the Law and Prophets.

## **Released from the law**

The law, which justly brings all human beings under condemnation and death, has been replaced by the Spirit, which brings life through Jesus Christ (compare Romans 7:6 and 8:1-4).

Through faith in Christ we are no longer under the condemnation of the law. The law has no claim on us, because we stand in Christ, not under the law. In Romans 6 and 7, Paul uses the analogy that we die with Christ and are raised with Christ. The point of his analogy is that the law, which had a claim

on us until death, has now lost that claim, because we have died. Our new life is in Christ, and is not under the law.

It is in this condition, the condition of belonging to Christ and being released from the law, that we bear fruit to God (7:4). Our sinful nature, which would use the law to destroy us if it could, can no longer do so, because we are no longer under the law. Instead, we serve God in a new way, the way of the Spirit, not in the old way, the way of the law.

What does this mean in practical terms? At least this: There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. To repeat, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Warning: Your natural defenses might not let you believe this at first. It might help to repeat it a couple of more times. If that doesn't help, you could try looking up Romans 8:1 and reading it slowly. It is hard for us to believe, but it is the gospel.

Those who are in Christ take their stand against their sinful nature on the basis of faith in Christ and life in the Spirit (which are the same thing), not on the basis of the law. On the basis of the law, we lose. On the basis of faith, however, we win. That is not because we ourselves win, but because Jesus is our victory.

We do not need to worry that God has rejected us, or that he will not listen to our prayers, or that he won't save us, or that he won't forgive us, or that he doesn't love us or even that he doesn't like us. God's relationship with us is not based on the law; it is based on his Son. If it were based on the law, we'd be sunk. But, thank God, it is not. It is based on his Son, whom he sent to save the world because he loved it, you included (John 3:16-17).

In the Son of God, who became human for us, all the barriers to love have been broken down, whether those were between Jew and Gentile, between enemies, within families, between nations, or between anybody else (Ephesians 2:14-18; Matthew 5:44; Ephesians 5:25; Isaiah 2:4; etc.). Because

we trust in Christ, who loves us and makes us into a new creation in his own perfect humanity, we are free to love others in spite of all the reasons humans have to hate others.

### **Sin not our master**

The reason sin shall not be our master is because we are under grace and not under the law (Romans 6:14). If we were under law, sin would be our master. But since we are not under the law, but under grace, sin cannot be our master.

You would think that if we were not under the law then sin would most surely be our master. But that is not how it works, according to Paul. Only grace frees us from sin; the law does not. The law only perpetuates the problem by keeping us enslaved to sin. Sin is overthrown only by grace.

“So you’re saying we can just sin all we want!” someone wants to say.

But I didn’t come up with this stuff—Paul did, and Christ made him do it.

And yes, we sin all we want. We always have, and always will. And that is just the point. The grace of God changes what we are inside so that we no longer want to sin. At least not in the same way we did before. We might still succumb to temptation, but we don’t want to, we don’t like it, and we fight against it. If we do succumb, we don’t pretend it is OK, and we don’t make excuses for it.

We see our sins as sins, we confess them to God, we trust him for the forgiveness he says we have in Christ, we thank him for his indescribable grace, and we get up and get back in the fight against our sinful nature and keep on striving to live godly in Christ.

We can do that because we trust God to never stop loving us. John tells us in 1 John 4:16, “We know and rely on the love God has for us.” In verse 19, he continues, “We love because God first loved us.”

Think about that. It is God at work in us—God who makes us into a new

creation in the perfect humanity of his Son—who turns us into the kind of people who love. This is not something we bring into being by our will, by setting our mind to it. We do not bring it about through our own reason and effort.

We love because God did something for us through Christ that we could never do for ourselves. He became human for us, and he was perfect—he loved and kept the law for us—so that when we are attached to him through faith (which is the only way we can be attached to him), we become something new, a new creation in him.

His atoning reconciliation on our behalf is what makes us into something different from what we are, not our actions, attitudes, emotions or willpower. Through faith, through trusting him, we participate in his perfect love. Don't ever think that we actually love with perfect love ourselves, because we don't. Our salvation from sin and death and our new selves, our new lives in Christ, come only from him and by him and of him, and he gives all this simply because he loves us.

Christ, and Christ alone, is our righteousness (Romans 3:22; 1 Corinthians 1:30; Philippians 3:9; etc.). It is his humanity that God accepts as righteous on our behalf. All religious ideas of human “measuring up” are worthless, because such a thing is impossible. Humanity is saved only because Christ became the perfect human for us, and we partake of that salvation and become a new creation only in him and only through faith in him. There is no other way.

Paul wrote: “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13). We cannot trust ourselves to do that, but we can trust him to do it.

## **Final thoughts**

When Christians say the law is superseded by faith in Christ, they are not



saying something has been lost. They are saying that something has been gained—something that so transcends the law as to make it obsolete.

Remember the telegraph? It was a wonderful boon to communication. But today, it makes much more sense to give your mom a phone call on Mother's Day than to have someone tap her out a message at the telegraph office. The telegraph network as a delivery system, as great as it was at the time, is obsolete because communication technology has transcended it. (It's only an analogy. If it helps, use it. If not, toss it.)

Christ's command that we walk in love (2 John 4-6; John 13:34) transcends the Ten Commandments. It goes beyond them. Those who walk in love fulfill the law. The one transcends the other, and they are not the same thing. As John wrote in John 1:17, "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

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# **The Gospel Really Is Good News**

When people gather in churches after a disaster, they come to hear words of comfort, encouragement and hope. Yet, try as they might to bring hope to a grieving people, some Christian leaders unwittingly proclaim a message that amounts to despair, hopelessness and fear for people whose loved ones died without having first professed faith in Jesus Christ.

Many Christians are convinced that everyone who did not profess Christ before death, even those who never so much as heard of Christ, are now in hell, being tortured by God—the God the same Christians ironically proclaim as compassionate, merciful, loving and full of grace. “God loves you,” some of us Christians seem to be saying, but then comes the fine print: “If you don’t say the sinner’s prayer before you die, then my merciful Savior will torture you forever.”

## **Good news**

The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news. It remains forever, good news, the best news imaginable, for absolutely everybody and everything. It is not merely good news for the few who came to know Christ before they died; it is good news for the whole of creation—even for all who died before they ever heard of Christ.

Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice not merely for the sins of Christians but for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). The Creator is also the Redeemer of his creation (Colossians 1:15-20). Whether people know that truth before they die is not the thing that determines whether it is true. It depends entirely on Jesus Christ, not on human action or human response of any kind.

Jesus said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”

(John 3:16, New Revised Standard Version in this article). It is God who loved the world and God who gave his Son, and he gave him to save what he loved—the world. Whoever believes in the Son whom God sent will enter into eternal life (better translated “the life of the age to come”).

The verse does not say that belief has to come prior to death. In fact, it says that believers will not perish, and since even believers die, it is obvious that “perish” and “die” are not the same thing. Belief keeps people from perishing, but it does not keep them from dying. The kind of perishing that Jesus is talking about here, translated from the Greek word *apoletai*, is a spiritual death, not a physical one. It has to do with utter destruction, with being abolished, put an end to, or ruined. Those who believe in Jesus will not come to such a final end, but will, instead, enter into the life (*zoe*) of the age to come (*aeonion*).

Some enter into the life of the age to come, or kingdom life, while they still live and walk on the earth, but in the grand scheme of things, this happens to only a small percentage of those who make up the “world” (or “*kosmos*”) that God loves so much that he sent his Son to save it. What about the rest? This verse does not say that God cannot or won’t bring to faith any of those who die physically before believing.

The idea that death is a barrier to God’s ability to save, or to his ability to bring a person to faith in Christ, is a human interpretation; the Bible states no such thing. We are told that everyone dies, and then they are judged (Hebrews 9:27). But let us remember that their Judge, thank God, is none other than Jesus, the slaughtered Lamb of God who died for their sins—and that changes everything.

## **Creator and Redeemer**

Where do people get this notion that God is only able to save live people and not dead ones? He conquered death, didn’t he? He rose from the dead,

didn't he? God doesn't hate the world; he loves it. He didn't create humanity for hell. Christ came to save the world, not to condemn it (John 3:17).

One Christian teacher (and probably many others as well) said that God is perfect in hate as well as perfect in love, which accounts for why there is a hell as well as a heaven. He went on to explain how dualism (the idea that good and evil are equal and opposite forces in the universe) is a false doctrine. But doesn't he realize he posited a dualistic God with his explanation of God holding in tension perfect hate and perfect love?

God is absolutely just, and all sinners are judged and condemned, but the gospel, the good news, lets us in on the mystery that in Christ, God took that very sin and its judgment on himself for our sakes! Hell is real and horrible. But it is precisely that hell, the hideous hell reserved for the ungodly, that Jesus bore in humanity's stead (2 Corinthians 5:21; Matthew 27:46; Galatians 3:13).

All humans are under condemnation because of sin, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ (Romans 6:23). That's why it is called grace. In Romans 5:15, Paul puts it like this:

The free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass [this "many" refers to everybody; there is no one who doesn't bear Adam's guilt], much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many [the same "many"—absolutely everybody]. (Romans 5:15)

Paul is saying that as bad as our condemnation for sin is—and it is bad (it deserves hell)—it can't even hold a candle to the grace and the free gift in Christ. God's word of reconciliation in Christ is incredibly louder than his word of condemnation in Adam—the one completely eclipses the other ("much more surely"). That is why Paul can tell us in 2 Corinthians 5:19 that "in Christ God was reconciling the world [that's everybody, the "many" of

Romans 5:15] to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...”

So, then, what about the family and friends of those who die without having professed faith in Christ? Does the gospel offer them any hope and encouragement about the fate of their dead loved ones? Indeed, the Gospel of John records Jesus declaring, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). That’s good news, the gospel truth. Jesus didn’t lay out a timetable, but he said that he would draw everybody to himself, not just a few who find out who he is before they die, but absolutely everybody.

Then it is no wonder that Paul wrote to the Christians in the city of Colossae that in Jesus Christ, God was pleased, *pleased*, mind you, to “reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:20). That’s good news. It is, like Jesus said, good news for the whole world, not just for the limited few.

Paul wanted his readers to know that this Jesus, this Son of God raised from the dead, is not just some exciting leader of a new and improved religious concept. Paul is telling them that Jesus is none other than the Creator and Sustainer of all things (verses 16-17), and more than that, he is God’s way of fixing everything that has gone wrong with the world from the beginning of history (verse 20)! In Christ, Paul was saying, God has moved once and for all to make good on all his promises that he made to Israel—promises that he would one day act in pure grace to forgive all sins everywhere and make everything new (see Acts 13:32-33; 3:20-21; Isaiah 43:19; Revelation 21:5; Romans 8:19-21).

### **Only for Christians**

“But salvation is only for Christians,” some people howl. Yes, of course it is. But who are “the Christians”? Are they only the people who repeat the

sinner's prayer? Are they only those who are baptized by immersion? Only those who belong to the "true" church? Only those who are absolved by a duly ordained priest? Only those who have ceased sinning? Only those who come to know Jesus before they die?

Or does Jesus himself, the one into whose nail-pierced hands God has given all judgment, decide who is and is not ultimately to be included among those upon whom he will have mercy? And while he is at it, does he, the one who conquered death and gives eternal life to whomever he wants, decide when he might bring a person to faith, or do we, the all-wise defenders of the true religion, make that determination for him?

Every Christian became a Christian at some point, that is, was brought to faith by the Holy Spirit. But the common assumption seems to suggest, however, that it is impossible for God to bring a person to faith after that person has died. But hold on, Jesus is the one who raises the dead, and he is the one who is the atoning sacrifice, not for our sins only, but for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

### **Great chasm**

"But the parable of Lazarus," someone will argue. "Abraham says that there is a chasm fixed between his side and the rich man's side" (see Luke 16:19-31).

Jesus did not give this parable as a textbook on the afterlife. After all, how many Christians would want to describe heaven as "Abraham's bosom" with Jesus nowhere in sight? The parable was a message to the members of the first-century Jewish privileged class who rejected their Messiah, not a portrait of the resurrection life. Before we take that further than Christ intended, remember what Paul wrote in Romans 11:32.

In the parable, the rich man was unrepentant. He still saw himself as Lazarus' superior. He still saw Lazarus as existing only to serve his personal

needs. Maybe it is not unreasonable to think that the rich man's persistent unbelief is what kept the gulf fixed, not some arbitrary cosmic necessity. Remember, Jesus himself bridges the otherwise impassable chasm from our sinful condition to reconciliation with God. Jesus underscores this point, the point of the parable—that salvation comes only through faith in him—when he says, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

God is in the business of saving people, not torturing them. Jesus is Redeemer, and whether we believe it or not, he is awfully good at what he does. He is the Savior of the world (John 3:17), not the Savior of a fraction of the world. “God so loved the world” (verse 16)—not merely 20 percent.

God has ways, and his ways are higher than our ways.

Jesus tells us, “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:43). Surely we believe he loves his own enemies. (Or do we believe that Jesus hates his enemies while he calls on us to love ours, as if we are supposed to be more righteous than he is, and that his hatred accounts for why there is a hell?) Jesus asks us to love our enemies precisely because *he* loves them. “Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing,” Jesus prayed of those who murdered him (Luke 23:34).

Those who continue to refuse Jesus' grace even after they understand it receive the fruit of their own stupidity. There is no place left for people who refuse to enter the Lamb's banquet, except outer darkness (another of the metaphors Jesus used to describe the state of alienation from God; see Matthew 22:13; 25:30).

## **Mercy to all**

Paul makes the amazing assertion in Romans 11:32 that God “has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.” The Greek words here mean *all*, not some, but *all*. Everyone is disobedient, and in Christ

the same everyone is shown mercy—whether they like it or not; whether they take it or not; whether they know it before they die or not.

What can you say to such a marvelous thing, but what Paul says in the next verses:

O, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (verses 33-36)

It seems that his ways are so unfathomable that many of us Christians simply cannot believe that the gospel can be that good. Some of us think we know the mind of God so well that we just *know* that everybody goes straight to hell if they aren't Christians yet when they die. But Paul's point is that the extent of God's mercy is beyond our understanding—a mystery revealed only in Christ: God has done something in Jesus Christ that nobody would ever have guessed in a million years.

In his letter to the Christians at Ephesus, Paul says that this is what God had in mind all along (Ephesians 1:9-10). It was the whole point of God's calling of Abraham, of his choosing of Israel and David, and of the covenants (Ephesians 3:5-6). God is saving even the aliens and strangers (2:12). He is saving the ungodly (Romans 5:6). He really does draw all people to himself (John 12:32). The Son of God has been at work underneath all of history from the very beginning, bringing about the redemption, the reconciliation of all things to God (Colossians 1:15-20). God's grace has a logic all its own, a logic that often seems illogical to religious-minded people.

### **Only path to salvation**

Jesus Christ is the only path to salvation, and he draws everybody to himself—in his way, in his time. There isn't anywhere in the universe except



in Christ, since as Paul said, nothing exists that isn't created by him and upheld by him (Colossians 1:15-17). Those who finally reject him do so in spite of his love; it's not that he refuses them (he doesn't—he loves them, died for them and forgave them), but that they refuse him. C.S. Lewis put it this way:

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done" and those to whom God says, in the end, "THY will be done." All that are in Hell choose it. Without that self-choice, there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek, find. To those who knock, it is opened. (*The Great Divorce*, chapter 9)

## **Heroes in hell?**

As I listened to Christians preach about the meaning of September 11, 2001, I thought of the firefighters and police officers who sacrificed their lives trying to rescue victims of the attack on the World Trade Center. How can Christians call these people heroes and applaud their self-sacrifice on one hand, but on the other hand declare that unless they confessed Christ before they expired, they are being tortured in hell? Their good works cannot save them, but Christ can.

The gospel declares that there is hope for those who died in the World Trade Center without yet having professed Christ. They will encounter the risen Lord on the other side of death, and he is the Judge—the one with nail marks in his hands—eternally ready to embrace and receive all his creatures who will come to him. He forgave them before they were born (Ephesians 1:4; Romans 5:6, 10). That part is done, just as it was done for us who believe now.

All that remains for them now is to throw down their crowns before him and receive his gift. Maybe some won't. Maybe some are so committed to loving themselves and hating others that they will see their risen Lord as their

archenemy. That would be a shame — no, more than that; it's a disaster of cosmic proportions, because he's not their archenemy. Because he loves them anyway. Because he would gather them into his arms like a hen gathers her chicks, if they would only let him (cf. Luke 13:34).

It is safe to say, if you believe passages like Romans 14:11 and Philippians 2:10, that by far most of the people who died in that attack will jump into Jesus' forgiving and merciful arms like a puppy runs to its mother at mealtime.

### **Jesus saves**

“Jesus saves,” Christians put on their posters and bumper stickers. It's true. He does. He is the author and finisher of salvation, the beginning and goal of all creation — including all dead people. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, Jesus said. Rather, he sent his Son into the world to save it (John 3:16-17).

Regardless of what some people say, God is out to save everybody (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9), not just a few. And guess what? He never gives up. He never stops loving. He never stops being who he is, was, and will always be for humanity—their Creator and their Redeemer. Nobody falls through the cracks.

Nobody was created for the purpose of sending to hell. If anybody winds up in hell—the tiny, meaningless, dark, nowhere corner of the eternal kingdom—then what causes them to stay there will be nothing but their own stubborn refusal to receive the grace God has for them. It will not be because God hates them, because he doesn't. It will not be because God is vindictive, because he isn't. It will be because 1) they hate the kingdom of God and refuse his grace, and 2) God won't let them spoil the fun for everybody else.

### **Positive message**

The gospel is a message of hope for absolutely everybody. Christian

preachers don't have to resort to threats of hell to coerce people to turn to Christ. They can proclaim the truth, the good news:

God loves you. He isn't mad at you. Jesus died for you because you're a sinner, and God loves you so much he has saved you from everything that is destroying you. So why should you keep on living as though this dangerous, cruel, unpredictable and unforgiving world is all you've got? Why don't you come and start experiencing God's love and enjoying the blessings of his kingdom? You already belong to him. He's already paid for your sins. What are you waiting for? He'll turn your sorrow into joy. He'll give you peace of heart like you've never known. He'll bring meaning and purpose to your life. He'll help you improve your relationships. He'll give you rest. Trust him. He's waiting for you.

This message is so good that it bubbles out of us. Paul wrote in Romans 5:10-11: "If while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

Talk about hope! Talk about grace! Through Christ's death, God reconciles his enemies, and through Christ's life, he saves them. No wonder we can boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ—we are already experiencing in him what we are telling others about. They don't have to keep on living like they have no place at God's table; he's already reconciled them, they can come on home. Christ saves sinners. It really is good news. It's the best news anybody can hear.

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## **Only One Name**

Many Christians believe that all people who do not accept the gospel before they die are eternally lost and without hope.

On one hand, Christians believe that by the Son of God all things were created (Colossians 1:16), by the Son's word all things are held in existence (Hebrews 1:3), and that through the Son's human birth, death and resurrection all things are reconciled to God (Colossians 1:20). Yet, on the other hand, many have the idea that the blood of Christ cannot reconcile humans who die before coming to faith.

Before we start, let's be sure we understand that the Bible is very plain that only in Jesus Christ is there salvation at all (Acts 4:12). Human religions do not lead to salvation. Only in the Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who creates, redeems, sustains and rules all things—is there forgiveness of sin, healing of minds, redemption and eternal life.

The question we are dealing with in this article is whether the Bible says that people must confess Christ before they die, or else be automatically damned.

### **Lazarus and the rich man**

Two passages in the Bible are sometimes interpreted as proving that all who die without having come to faith are automatically damned. We'll look at both of them. The first is the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man, in which Abraham tells the rich man there is a great gulf fixed, a gulf that keeps those in Hades separate from those who are with Abraham.

It is found in Luke 16:19-31. Before the story begins, however, we can back up a few verses to get an idea of the context. Who were the people Jesus was talking to when he told this story? What was the subject that prompted him to tell it?

In verse 14, we read: “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him” (New Revised Standard Version throughout). Jesus was talking to a group of Pharisees, and what Luke wants his readers to know about the Pharisees in connection with this passage is this: the Pharisees were lovers of money. Now we are getting the context of the story. A group of Pharisees who were lovers of money were ridiculing Jesus because of what he was saying.

We have to go back to the previous chapter, to Luke 15, verse 1, to get the whole episode. Here we read: “All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So he told them this parable...”

Then Jesus proceeds to tell them three parables in a row: The Shepherd Who Rejoices Over Finding His Lost Sheep, The Woman Who Rejoices Over Finding Her Lost Coin, and The Father Who Rejoices Over Finding His Lost Son. Jesus tells these three parables specifically in response to the Pharisees and scribes who were disgruntled over the fact that he welcomes sinners and eats with them. These parables push God’s grace toward sinners right up the Pharisees’ and scribes’ disgruntled noses.

Jesus wants them to know that “there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (verse 7). The remark is not lost on the Pharisees and scribes—they consider themselves righteous and not in need of repentance. Jesus (knowing they are not really righteous) is telling them that heaven is not singing their song.

## **Money vs. God**

If the first two parables irritate the Pharisees and scribes, the third one, The Father Who Rejoices Over Finding His Lost Son (commonly known as

the Parable of the Prodigal Son) takes the cake. Here is a father who gives unbridled love and unconditional forgiveness to a son who dishonored him, wasted half his assets and dragged the family name through the mud. It was a scandalous story that trampled on any sense of common decency, dignity and honor. When Jesus finishes telling it, he turns to his disciples and addresses them with yet another story (Luke 16:1). But the Pharisees are still listening (verse 14).

The moral of this story, Jesus says, is that you cannot serve both money and God; you will find yourself devoted either to the one or to the other, not both (verse 13). If you love money, you will not love God.

The Pharisees heard everything, but learned nothing. Instead of repenting so that there might be joy in heaven, they ridiculed Jesus. His words were utter foolishness to them, because they were lovers of money (verse 14). Responding to their ridicule, Jesus says, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God” (verse 15).

He goes on to point out that the law and the prophets stand as witnesses that the kingdom of God has arrived and that everyone is urgently piling into it (verses 16-17). His implied message: “Because you value the things that other people do, not the things of God, you are rejecting God’s urgent summons to enter his kingdom, which can be done only through me.”

Now, as the coupe de grace, he tells the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man.

### **A tale of unbelief**

There are three characters in the story, the rich man (representing the Pharisees who love money), the miserable beggar Lazarus (representing a class of people despised by the Pharisees), and Abraham (whose bosom or lap was a Jewish figure of comfort and peace in the afterlife).

Jesus uses the story to make a point—the same point he has been making all along: “You consider yourselves the high and mighty blessed of God, but the truth is that you love money and hate God. That is why you are so rankled that I spend my time in fellowship with unvarnished sinners; this is why you despise other people and will not humble yourselves and believe in me and find true riches.”

Back to the story. The beggar dies. Without missing a beat, Jesus again pokes the Pharisees in the eye by saying, “... and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham” (verse 22).

As usual with Jesus’ stories, this is exactly the opposite of what the Pharisees expected would happen to a man like Lazarus. Such people were poor and diseased beggars because they were under God’s curse, they assumed, and therefore it is only natural that such people go to be tormented in Hades when they die. “Not so,” says Jesus. “Your worldview is upside down. You know nothing of my Father’s kingdom. Not only are you wrong about how my Father feels about the beggar, but you are wrong about how my Father feels about you.”

Jesus completes the turnabout by telling them that the rich man also died and was buried, but contrary to their expectations, he is the one who finds himself tormented in Hades. And Jesus draws it out. From his torments in Hades, the rich man looked up and saw Abraham far off, with none other than Lazarus by his side. He cries out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames” (verses 23-24). But Abraham tells him the way things stand. “All your life you loved riches and had no time for the likes of Lazarus. But I do have time for the likes of Lazarus, and now he is with me, and you have nothing.”

Now comes the out-of-context proof-text: “Besides all this, between you

and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us” (verse 26).

Have you ever wondered why anybody could possibly want to pass from “here to you”? It is obvious why someone might want to cross from “there to us,” but from “here to you” makes no sense. Or does it?

### **The Bridge across the chasm**

There is someone who crosses chasms for the sake of sinners. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). God gave his Son for sinners, not just for sinners like Lazarus, but for sinners like the rich man, too. But the rich man doesn’t want the Son of God. The rich man wants what he always wanted — his own comfort at the expense of others, which is exactly the opposite of what the Son of God wants.

In this story, Jesus is condemning the unbelief of the Pharisees. Near the end of the story, the rich man says that if someone would warn his brothers, they would not go to the place of torment. But Abraham tells him, “They have Moses and the Prophets; they should listen to them.” (Remember Jesus’ statements in verses 16-17? The Law and Prophets are a testimony to him. See John 5:45-47 and Luke 24:44-47.)

The rich man protests that Moses and the Prophets are not enough: “No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent” (Luke 16:30).

Abraham replies, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (verse 31).

And they didn’t. The Pharisees conspired with the scribes and the chief priests to have Jesus crucified. But even after he rose from the dead, they conspired to have soldiers lie about his resurrection (Matthew 27:62-66), and



proceeded to persecute and kill those who became believers.

There is a bridge across the chasm, the bridge across all chasms. The bridge is Jesus. But the rich man (the Jewish religious leaders who constantly oppose Jesus) is not interested in putting his faith in Jesus. Permit me to paraphrase Abraham's reply to the rich man.

Look, friend, you refuse to come to Christ, so there is no place left for you but right where you are. You won't even admit that you need forgiveness. You still want exactly what you always wanted — everybody else zipping around waiting on you hand and foot. You can't get over here because you won't go anyplace where you're no better than old Laz the bum. We can't get where you are to help you because you are precisely nowhere. You made your own chasm to separate yourself from who you are in Christ because you won't come to him to have life.

You still think like you always thought — that you are something special and Laz here is a nobody, the dirt under your sandals. And now you're still so convinced you've got it all together that you can't even see that you've been the nobody all along and Laz is the one who's in with me. Well, pal, you've still got just what you've always had — nothing, nothing that matters anyway.

What's that? Now you want Laz to run some errands to warn others like you? Are you kidding? They won't listen. They've got Moses and the Prophets who told them Messiah would come. If they won't listen to them, you think they're going to listen to Laz? Forget about it. What's that? If someone comes back from the dead they'll listen to him? Oh really? Well, guess what? That's just what Jesus did, came back from the dead, and yet there you are, over there in Nowhereland because you won't put your trust in him.

Even if you don't like my interpretation of this passage, you still have to admit one thing: it is bad business to base a doctrine on one verse alone, and

especially on one in a story designed to make a different point altogether. This story is primarily about the refusal of the Jewish leaders to believe in Jesus and the willingness of others to do so, and secondarily about the reversal of common assumptions about riches being a sign of God's favor.

It is not there to paint us a portrait of heaven and hell, or about how easy it is to have conversations between the two places. It is a parable of judgment against the unbelieving Israelite leaders and the unkind rich, using common Jewish imagery of the afterlife (Hades and "being with Abraham") as a literary backdrop to make the point. Jesus was not commenting on the validity of Jewish imagery of the afterlife; he was simply using that imagery as scenery for his story.

Jesus was not in the business of satisfying our itching curiosities about what heaven and hell must be like. He was in the business of filling us in on God's secrets (Romans 16:25; Ephesians 1:9, etc.), the mystery of the ages (Ephesians 3:4-5)—that in Christ, God has always been reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). Our preoccupation with otherworldly geographical trivia leads us away from the point missed by the rich man in the story: Believe in the One who came back from the dead.

### **Who is lost?**

None are lost except people who will not trust in Christ. Since God made the world and called it good (Genesis 1), and calls humanity "very good" (verse 31), and since God loves the world and sent his Son that whoever would believe in him would enter into life (John 3:16), it is not unreasonable to conclude that God will provide an opportunity for every person to respond to the gospel. Further, since most people die before they hear the gospel, it is not unreasonable to conclude that God will also provide such an opportunity for them even if it is after they die.

"Maybe it is not unreasonable, but that does not make it true."

You are right about that. But the Word of God is true. The Word of God is good news for humanity, not bad news. And what is good for humanity is whatever is God's will for humanity. God has demonstrated his will for humanity by sending Jesus Christ. His will is not that the world be condemned, but that it be saved (John 3:17).

"I admit it doesn't seem fair that people who don't hear the gospel before they die are damned, but just because something doesn't seem fair to us doesn't mean it isn't fair in God's sight. If God wants to save only a few, that is his prerogative. After all, the damned are only getting what they deserve!"

We don't argue with that. Certainly, if God wanted to, he could do things that way. We simply argue that the Bible does not reveal God that way. It reveals God in Christ as 1) graciously and faithfully procuring the reconciliation of all people (1 John 2:2), and 2) graciously desiring the salvation of all people (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

### **Deep current of Scripture**

The deep current of Scripture is nothing other than the gospel. Scripture exists, we could even say, as testimony to the gospel. The Bible, in other words, is the Spirit-inspired revelation of God's Word of redemption and salvation by his grace through faith in his Son made flesh for our sakes, Jesus Christ.

The Bible, this testimony of God's good news to humans, reveals God the way he really is: the God of creation, redemption and salvation. The Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit, shows us that God loves his creation, a creation over which he is sovereign and almighty, and that he loves the people he has created. He made his creation, including humanity, very good (Genesis 1:31). Because humanity botched itself by going into its own God business, he also reconciled his creation to himself through Christ, even from the foundation of the world (1 Peter 1:20; Romans 5:10).

The Bible tells us that God longs for humans to repent and to turn to him (Acts 17:20; 2 Peter 3:9). He wants them to know him and experience him for who he really is as their Creator, Deliverer, Redeemer, Father and Friend. He wants them to dwell eternally in him and with him.

The apostle Peter wrote: “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). This is how the Spirit consistently reveals God as feeling and thinking about the people he has made. He made them in his image; they became sinners, alienated from him, and he, loving them intensely even in their sins (Romans 5:6-8), has forgiven and redeemed them through the blood of his Son (John 12:32; 1 John 2:2).

### **The Judge is the Savior**

“You said there is another passage that is often used to prove that those who die without knowing the gospel are automatically damned.”

Thanks for the reminder. The second passage is this: “Just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:27-28).

The only way to read into this passage the idea of automatic damnation for all who die without the gospel is to begin with that very assumption.

In other words, the passage doesn't say that. It doesn't even address that question. It simply says that judgment follows death. It says nothing about what that judgment might include, nor anything about whether God will allow people to trust in him after they die. This passage proves nothing one way or the other about whether the dead are given the gospel.

Let's move on. We are told in Acts 17:30-31: “While God has overlooked

the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Not only will the whole world be judged in righteousness, but the Judge will be none other than the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. God doesn't only command all people everywhere (that's everyone) to repent, he does so because he has appointed Jesus, who died for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2), to be Judge.

If anybody wants assurance that God is serious about all this forgiving and reconciling of all people, all they have to do is notice that he raised the Judge from the dead after the very people who need redemption (that is, all of us) killed him. God will not be thwarted in his faithfulness to his covenant to be our God and we his people.

Revelation 20 depicts the Judgment this way:

Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened.

Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

When the judging is over, every person is either saved or condemned. But first, before any distinction is made, to everyone's surprise, death and hell themselves are thrown into the lake of fire. If I might be allowed to personify

death and hell for just a moment, just imagine them sitting there in the heavenly courtroom, barely able to contain their grins, knowing that everybody on trial is guilty as sin. Waiting for the verdicts, their thoughts are delightfully occupied with the cruelty and torture they have in store for this innumerable multitude of sure-to-be-condemned wretches.

Then suddenly, their wicked daydreams are rudely interrupted as strong angels grip their arms and muscle them out of the courtroom to the Judge's own furnace and hurl them screaming into oblivion. A hush falls on the court. What can this mean? With death and hell destroyed, how can anybody remain their slaves?

### **All are judged**

The Bible teaches that there is one and only one way to be saved — by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). As we see from Revelation 20 and other passages, such as Matthew 25:31-33, there are only two kinds of people in the final judgment, the saved and the condemned.

So what about the people who die before the gospel is presented to them? Some conclude that such people are automatically doomed eternally, simply because they died before anyone told them about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Consider Paul's statements in Romans 10:14-21. Paul highlights the unbelief of Israel by citing the words of the Psalms and of Isaiah. First, he asks a question regarding the hearing of the word of Christ (Romans 10:17): "But I ask, have they not heard?"

His answer: "Indeed they have; for [quoting Psalm 10:18] 'Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world'" (Romans 10:18).

Next, Paul quotes Isaiah to illustrate the irony of Israel's unbelief in light of the salvation of the Gentiles: "I have been found by those who did not seek

me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me” (Romans 10:20, quoting Isaiah 65:1).

God’s word is the decisive word for all time to all humanity; it is not merely the word to those who are contacted by Christian missionaries and evangelists. Jesus is the incarnate Son of God and Word of God—the supreme Good News for all time past, and all time future, and extending to every corner of the cosmos.

It is strange that we should be asked to believe that God is incapable of confronting humans with the gospel in ways we do not understand and by means in which we have little or no role. Through his superintendence of Scripture, the Holy Spirit presents the atonement of Jesus Christ as thoroughly sufficient for the redemption of the whole cosmos—the cosmos Christ holds in the palm of his hand for his Father and to which he gives life and existence every moment. Yet, we are asked to believe, as one preacher put it, that “millions are going to hell this week because nobody is getting to them with the gospel!”

God is consistent with his word—he does not want any person to perish. Jesus said he will draw all people to himself. Since salvation comes by no means other than trusting in the word of God’s grace through Jesus Christ, this means God does, in ways and at times to which we are not privy, give every person the freedom to accept God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Righteous Judge**

Returning to Revelation 20:11-15, we find the two great truths of human destiny, attested continually in Scripture, jumping out at us: 1) Everyone gets judged, no exceptions, and 2) Jesus is the judge.

Now let’s sit down and give a little serious thought to that.

What sort of judge is this Jesus? Well, for one thing, he is not like any human judge we’re ever going to meet. No human judge takes on himself

every criminal's punishment and then declares the criminal "not guilty!" But this one does. In fact, he already did. He did it from the foundation of the world. Which means that the power of his redemption came before even the very first salivating of Eve's mouth for the forbidden fruit.

This is no ordinary judge. This judge holds all the universe every moment in the miraculous dance of existence, holding it all simply by the word of his mouth. This judge not only gives existence to every single human, he became one of us for the express purpose of forgiving all our crimes against him and giving us eternal life in himself. This judge draws all men, women and children to himself in his death and resurrection from the dead. This judge is no ordinary judge.

He is perfectly fair and just — but not just fair and just, because that would leave every one of us dead. His perfect fairness and justice are overpowered by his perfect mercy (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13; 12:7; James 2:13). He has gone to extraordinary lengths, through his own incarnation, to see to it that people are saved. He took all our sinfulness upon himself and by doing that, he destroyed sin in the flesh (Romans 8:3). This is no ordinary judge.

This universe springs from the gracious freedom of the triune God to be who he will be. By his grace the worlds exist. By his grace every person exists. And by his grace the eternal Son of the Father became flesh for us, atoning for the sins of the whole world, that God's gracious purpose for us might be fulfilled in him, the eternal Son, Jesus Christ.

When all the people of the world, the great and the small (Revelation 20:12), including all the dead (verses 12-13), stand before the judgment seat, they are facing none other than Jesus Christ. Imagine the scene. Their judge, the one who holds their eternal fate in his hands, is none other than the Lamb of God, the atoning sacrifice not only for our sins but also for the sins of the



whole world (1 John 2:1-2). They are in the hands, the spike-pierced hands, of the risen Son of God, the crucified and glorified Christ. They are at his mercy—at the mercy of the Author of mercy.

## **Judgment day**

Imagine you are sitting in the Court of the Universe, waiting with pounding heart for the Judge of All Things to walk in and pass judgment on you. You had never really taken seriously the idea of a final judgment. You had heard people talk about God and such, but it never really meant anything to you.

Now you realize that there really is an accounting to be given. The piper is going to be paid, after all. You are heartsick. Your breathing is shallow, rapid. Sweat is trickling down your spine. Your eyes focus on the signs above two doors behind the bench. One reads, Exit for Perfectly Sinless and Righteous Saints. The other reads, Exit for All Others. Flooding through your mind is a hideous collage of your lies, lust, meanness, betrayals, selfishness, greed. And now this is it, the day of reckoning. You feel numb. You know you've got no hope. You hear yourself groan.

Then the Judge walks in and takes his throne. His presence overwhelms you. He is like nothing you could have expected. The whole courtroom seems to come alive in response to him. He is the definition of power and of authority, yet he radiates peace, serenity and love. He is so compelling that your thoughts are no longer on yourself and your dread. Your body relaxes, an unexplainable joy bubbles up from the center of your being. As awesome as he appears, you suddenly feel you would rather be smothered in his embrace than live another moment without him. You know that whatever his verdict, it will be good, and you are no longer afraid of anything.

“How do you plead?” the Judge asks. His voice seems to draw the truth from your lips. “Guilty,” you respond, and as you do, you realize two things

at once, that you are deeply ashamed of your sinful life, and that the Judge has already dropped all charges against you. Your shame melts into grateful tears of joy and peace of heart as you receive his life-giving gaze into the depths of your soul.

“Guilty of what?” the Judge asks, with a playful smile. “There doesn’t seem to be any record against you. Are you ready to join the celebration? Good. Let’s go eat.” He holds open the Exit for Perfectly Sinless and Righteous Saints and beckons you to go through it with him.

You could plead not guilty and try to argue your case, demanding to demonstrate that you really are a right decent sort of fellow most of the time, and you should be counted among the saints because of the quarters you put in that donation jar in the grocery store line. Or you could try to argue that you should be let off the hook because God has no right to impose his arbitrary rules on you in the first place.

Or you could tell God to leave you alone: he can keep his gospel, you don’t need it, you want none of his lovey-dovey stuff, you’d rather keep what works for you, your survival of the fittest, dog-eat-dog, fend-for-yourself way of life—at least you’re the master of your own domain. All these avenues allow you to exit with your nose in the air through the All Others door and find yourself where you like it best, in the dark, free to stew in your own self-satisfied juice.

### **No need to worry**

Even if you don’t like my little tale of the heavenly courtroom, the point is that there is no need to worry that our departed loved ones, nor any of the rest of the masses of humans who have died, are consigned to the eternal flames simply because no missionary reached them with the gospel message before they died. Jesus knows the gospel, too, and yes, ladies and gentlemen, he can present it even better than we can.

Sad to say, the Bible tells us that some will not accept the grace of the Creator and King (Matthew 25:46; Revelation 19:20; 20:15). They will not trust the Son of God and his Father. There could be no greater tragedy, indeed, no greater stupidity, than for guests invited to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb to reject God's free gift of grace in favor of their own pitiful and miserable attempts to make life worthwhile. But that is exactly what our broken human nature is bent toward doing.

We often think that people should get what they deserve. In this frame of mind, we find it distressing to put all our eggs in the one basket of the Father's outrageous grace. Such a deal would mean not only that our hard work at being good didn't really matter in the end, but worse yet, that some pretty unsavory types might be allowed to stroll into the kingdom alongside us as well—by nothing more than believing in God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

There must be some way to distinguish the deserving, like us, from the undeserving, like that weed-smoking pimp on the corner. There must be some way the good, decent people will get a better deal than the blatant sinners will get. Free, undeserved grace has too many question marks around it for us to be entirely comfortable with it. It is the Judgment of God's grace, and it works off its own logic, a logic as high above ours as heaven is above earth (see Isaiah 55:8-9 and Psalm 103:11-14).

## **Two sets of books**

A remarkable thing takes place during this heavenly judgment sequence of Revelation 20. First, all the dead are gathered and some books are opened (verse 12). Then, another book is opened—not the “books” just mentioned, but “another book,” distinct from them. This book is called the Book of Life. The dead people are judged “according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.”

These “books” contain the record of their works, all the evidence needed to judge them, and on the basis of the evidence, where do you suppose it leaves them? It leaves them in the same spot you and I are in—red-handed guilty. That is the hideous predicament of every one of these people, and the predicament of all people who have ever lived.

“There is none righteous, no not one,” God says. “All your righteousness is as filthy rags,” is his assessment of where we humans stand in terms of judgment. “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God,” just in case anyone is still wondering who “made it” and who didn’t.

Just to be sure we understand that no one is left out of this judgment, we are again told that everybody who has ever died is there: the sea gives up the dead in it and Death and Hades give up the dead in them (Revelation 20:13). Don’t get the idea that anybody has slipped through the cracks. Everybody stands before this judgment seat. All are judged “according to their works.”

At this point, things seem to have taken an ugly turn. There is not one righteous. Everybody who has ever lived and died is condemned by their own actions as recorded in the books. They have to stand there and wait their turn while Death and Hades get tossed into the ultimate incinerator (verse 14).

But wait! What is this? That “other” book turns up again. The judgment according to their works by what was written in the books is not the end of the story! There is another book, the Book of Life, and the only ones who wind up in the lake with Death and Hades are those whose names don’t appear in this Book (verse 15)! It was sitting there all along. Everybody whose name is in it gets a full pardon. How do names get in it? By the atoning blood of Christ. The great mystery is that through Christ’s atonement, everybody’s name is in it. Believers simply receive what was there for them all along.

“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent

me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). Those who will not believe, on the other hand, are unable to make the leap. This has been the message of Scripture all along, Old and New Testaments alike—a testament to Jesus Christ. “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40).

There is only one way to be saved — faith in Jesus Christ. The Law brings condemnation by our failure to keep it. The very same Law also brings salvation through its proclamation that God would send his Messiah to rescue us from our sins. The curse of death does not have the last word! In Christ, all things are made new. The Word of Life is himself the final word for humanity!

### **Sinners welcome**

In Matthew 25:31-46, all people come before the judgment seat of Christ. On what basis does Christ separate the sheep from the goats? The Bible gives only one basis for salvation—either accept God’s gift or reject it. One of the fascinating things in this parable is that the people who have been displaying the self-sacrificial love of Christ do not even realize they have been doing so. They have no personal sense of having been particularly good or holy or righteous. “When did we do all these things?” they ask, surprised.

Ironically, those who are rejected are also surprised, surprised that the judge would think they have done nothing worthwhile for God. “When did we fail to do all these things?” they ask, incredulous. They have no need, they believe, for this free and undeserved grace reserved for dirty sinners. They have a stack of good report cards and a pocket full of merit badges, and if that is not good enough for this so-called judge, then they want no part of his kingdom of losers.

## **It's about grace**

Who will love Jesus more—the one who is forgiven much or the one who is forgiven little? Jesus poses the question in Luke 7:41-50. The point? People who think they are decent moral folks don't seem to be looking for grace. People who know they are big sinners tend to be hungry for grace. Big sinners will get into the kingdom ahead of some big righteous people, Jesus says (Matthew 21:31). A friend of sinners, he was called, and that is just what he is (Luke 7:34). He is your friend and mine, after all.

Religious people tend to think they have an inside track on who is going to be saved and who is not. The rule keepers, the good boys and girls and the holy people are “in,” and the troublemakers, the stinkers, the porn stars, the lowlifes, the unwed mothers and the like are “out.”

“Don't count on it,” Jesus says. “You think you know about righteousness? Why won't you trust me to be your righteousness, because you can't even see you're nothing more than a dolled up corpse, so rotten your nose can't smell your own stink. I will have mercy on whom I want to, pal, so take what you've earned and get out of here” (forgive my loose paraphrase of Matthew 20:13-15).

How many sinners have died longing for justice, for righteousness, for peace, for hope, for truth, for freedom, but having no clue where to find it? In Christ, and in Christ alone, these ageless quests are finally ended. “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

Remember what happened when Jesus touched the lepers? Everybody else stayed as far from lepers as possible. But not Jesus. Not only was he unafraid to touch lepers, but when he touched them, the lepers got healed. Our minds are like lepers' bodies, hopelessly deformed and rotting. But when Jesus took human nature upon himself, not only did his mind not catch

corruption from our minds, he healed the human mind.

That healing is open to everyone. All it takes to receive that healing, to begin to experience the joy of that healed mind, to enter the kingdom of God, is accept his free gift—to trust that in Christ's death and resurrection the astonishing almighty God of lavish love has done everything that needed to be done to secure our place at his table.

### **The will of the Father**

In the last book of his Narnia Chronicles series, *The Last Battle*, Christian author C.S. Lewis presents a symbolic picture of the final judgment. A man who was well acquainted with the intimate love of our Savior, Lewis was not afraid to depict the gracious salvation of a soldier who died having never believed in the only name under heaven whereby people must be saved. When Emeth, the Calormen soldier, came face to face in the final judgment with Aslan, the Christ figure in the story, he immediately loved Aslan, knowing Aslan was the true longing of his soul.

Is this concept so far-fetched? The Lord who died for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8) knows those who are his (2 Timothy 2:19). Jesus tells us that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:17). John tells us that Jesus died not only for our sins but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). Is this same Jesus not the Lord of all space and all time?

Perhaps Lewis' depiction is not far off. In Matthew 25:31-46 we learn that Jesus lives in those who are his and that his works are accomplished in them even though they are not entirely aware of it. Is it too much to say that by God's grace such people might know and love the glorious risen Lord as the deepest longing of their souls?

And is it too much to say that those whose hearts have become fully committed to whatever opposes the kingdom of God—some to the egotistic

pursuit of their own ends, some to cruelty and hatefulness, some to evil and rebellion against whatever is good and pure—those people will be filled with terror and hate for him?

Even so, there is still the element of surprise, of supreme reversal, in which even the blackest human heart can be melted and transformed by the radical grace of our radically gracious God. “There are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last,” Jesus declares (Luke 13:30).

Human expectations of justice and fairness are knocked on their ear when God’s Son starts shelling out the fabulous grace of his Father. Witness the parable of the workers in the field (Matthew 20:13-15). He is dangerous, this One, because he forgives where we can’t muster forgiveness, and he blesses where we can’t see any justification for blessing. He saves the undeserving, the “deserving” get mad about it, and he tells them to shove off.

What is God’s will? Jesus said, “This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day” (John 6:40). Some argue that God’s will is also that a great many *not* see the Son and not believe in him and not have eternal life so that he will *not* raise them up at the last day. But let them take their rain cloud somewhere else. That is not what the Bible says.

### **Other objections**

Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). Through Jesus Christ, God is pleased to reconcile all things to himself whether on earth or in heaven by making peace through Jesus’ blood on the cross (Colossians 1:20). The vast majority of humans died without ever hearing the gospel. Therefore, we must take into consideration the possibility that their decision of faith, or decision of non-faith, may be one that takes place in the realm of death.

Objections to this suggestion include the idea that the church is a little



flock, so God intends to save only a few. The church may be a little flock in this age, but we are not talking about the church of this age. We are talking about those who have not known the gospel before they die. We are talking about the new creation in its full flower.

Another objection is that such trust in the grace of God for all humans would destroy motivation for spreading the gospel. To that, I can only say Nonsense. Jesus our Lord commanded us to spread the gospel, and that should be sufficient motivation for any of us. Besides, a person who possesses, by God's grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit, such good news cannot help but spread it. How can forgiven sinners like us want the rest of the world to continue living in the misery of not knowing that God loves them and has reconciled them to himself through the blood of his Son? As the Spirit dwells in us, how can we not care whether others continue to live hopeless in their sins without the healing balm of the Savior?

But to say that God depends on our puny and often destructive efforts is to limit God. God loves us so much that he grants us the grace to participate with him in his joy of bringing people to faith, but surely we can admit that our track record is such that he has to do more clean-up after us than we are of actual help to him.

Universalism? No. God gives humans freedom to trust him and also allows them not to trust him. Relationships are built on trust, and those who finally will not trust God will remain alienated from him. The Bible indicates that some people will not trust God to forgive them, but will instead by their own choice, in spite of their God-given freedom to believe, remain his enemies.

On that topic, though, let's never get the idea that hell is on any kind of par with heaven. Hell is only a tiny weed bed in a dark corner under a porch on a little street in the outskirts of the vast immeasurable expanse of all things

made gloriously new in Jesus Christ. Those who choose to cower there in the dark do so not because that is where God wants them, but because God, in his free grace, allows them to trample on his love, and to huddle in the nowhere place they have “created” for themselves in their darkened minds.

I have received letters from some readers who strongly disagree with what I have written on this topic. Nearly every letter that disagrees also grants in essence that the Scriptures lead us to trust that God will indeed deal righteously with those who die without knowing the name of Jesus. I offer that he will deal with them in no other way than in accord with his eternal faithfulness and mercy as demonstrated supremely in Jesus Christ, the great Judge.

### **Not a ‘religion’**

An amazing thing about the kingdom of God is that it is nothing like a religion or an exclusive society or club or institution. The religions and institutions of this world erect barriers and rules to keep the riffraff out. But the kingdom of God is designed to encompass everybody—everybody whom God has created.

Everybody is born, because of Jesus Christ, with a golden invitation to his kingdom—they just don’t know it yet. Some, upon finding out about this invitation, don’t want it. They have better things to do, more important fish to fry. Others figure they have better ways of getting in, working for it instead of taking charity. Others don’t want to be in a kingdom that lets in so many losers. When all is said and done, the only people who will be excluded from the kingdom of God are those who refuse to accept it on the terms it is offered—absolutely free to the completely undeserving by simply trusting in the grace of the Giver.

It is not hard to be a Christian. There is no secret handshake, no riddle or maze to figure out. And thank God, it certainly doesn’t depend on how

competent the church is as spreaders of the gospel, even though our Father in his grace has blessed us with a role in that wonderful task. Jesus says simply, “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). He doesn’t say when. He doesn’t say, “Oh, by the way, beat the deadline or you’re burnt toast.”

This Savior has all the ends sewed up. The final judgment is rigged. Not only did the Father send his Son into the world that whoever believes on him would not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16), indeed, not only did he send his Son into the world precisely not to condemn the world but so that the world might be saved through him (verse 17), he also committed all judgment to him—he made his Son the supreme presiding Judge of the final judgment.

This is not the God of popular imagination! This is not the God people grow up on, the stern stone-face God who blows away the sinners and sends winning lottery tickets to the pious and obedient. This is the God of the Bible, the one who can’t be stopped from lavishly dishing out his grace to anybody and everybody who will accept it.

God is not a “butterfingers.” No one is going to slip through the cracks. Jesus Christ has a personal and intimate interest in every person who has ever lived, and he has gone to incredible lengths to see to it that they will take their place at his Father’s table. He will not force anyone. But neither will he consign anyone to condemnation simply on the basis that one of us Christians did not get to the poor unfortunate wretch with the gospel message before he or she died. God’s grace is not geared to our level of competence in evangelism.

When people die they get judged (Hebrews 9:27). It is a final judgment. But the one who sits on the judge’s bench is none other than the One who bore the marks of slaughter for them, and boy, has he got good news! You will find no teaching in the Bible, regardless of what many Christians

believe, that Jesus is powerless to confront and save people when their physical life has ended.

In the words of the finale from the musical *Les Miserables*: “For the wretched of the earth, there is a flame that never dies. Even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise.”

Whatever the author of the verse intended, this is not just a lovely sentiment. It is God’s own truth. Jesus is that eternal Flame, and even the darkest night has found its end in the rising of the Sun of righteousness (Malachi 4:2), the only name under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

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## About the Author...

J. Michael Feazell served for many years as Vice-President of Grace Communion International, as Executive Editor of *Christian Odyssey* magazine, and host of the *You're Included* video series. He earned his Doctor of Ministry degree from Azusa Pacific Seminary in 2000 and has written:

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*Exploring the Word of God: Lessons From the Gospel of Mark*

*The Christian Sabbath: Divine Rest in Jesus Christ*

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Cherith Fee Nordling, Antioch Leadership Network  
Andrew Root, Luther Seminary  
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