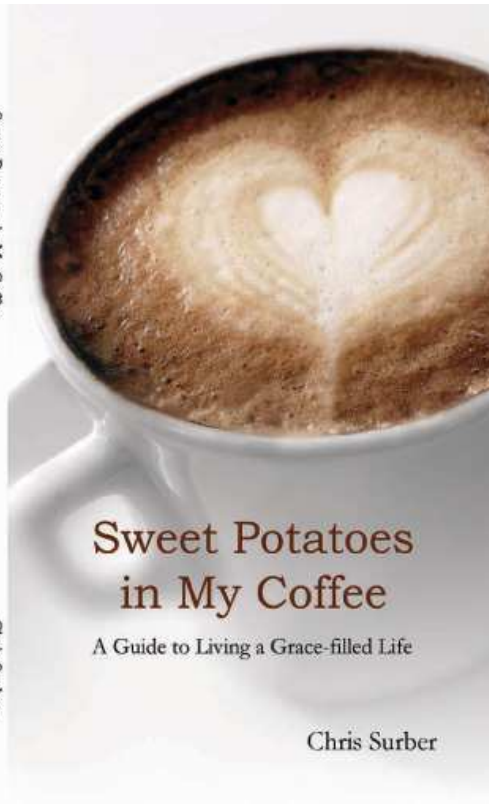


Sweet Potatoes in My Coffee

Chris Surber



Sweet Potatoes in My Coffee

A Guide to Living a Grace-filled Life

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To Christina, thank you for sharing the journey through the valleys and the high places of this life with me. You are my best friend—God's greatest gift in my life!

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INTRODUCTION

Sweet Potatoes in My Coffee is the result of my longing and searching to understand the character of God. Indeed, this journey is not over and in many ways, it has only just begun. The grace-filled life, as I refer to it time and again in this book, is the life I am convinced God is calling us to live. Delivering the sermons that make up the chapters in this book has given me a great deal of insight into my own understanding, both right and wrong, of God's character.

Many of us long to know God in a deeper and richer way. We long to experience His presence, but how can we be in a relationship with someone we do not know? How can we seek someone who we cannot comprehend? We are pilgrims in this life and it often seems as though we are searching for something elusive, only the shadow of which we comprehend. Some are searching for peace, some for wealth, some for happiness, and others for

contentment. All the while, it is the grace of God alone that has the power to satisfy us. In all of our pursuing, we seem always to come up short because we are pursuing the wrong things.

In this life of fleeting contentment and passing hope, there is no greater pursuit, no greater passion—no greater task than knowing the one who created us to be in a relationship with Him. The grace-filled life is life as a pilgrim. It is a sojourner's life that is spent learning to see God for who He really is, seeing ourselves in the light of His grace, seeing others as God sees them and us, and then participating in that grace!

I trust that what you find in the following pages will aid you along your journey toward living the grace-filled life!

CHAPTER 1

Sweet Potatoes in My Coffee

Luke 13:1–9

The memory of one particular evening, when my wife and I lived in Florida, remains fresh. We were invited by some friends to listen to their children's contemporary Christian band play some of their new songs at the "Coffee Spot" in New Port Ritchie, Florida. It's a little coffee shop with a stage for live bands and Christian performers. We would later question the wisdom of having brought our then eighteen-month-old son, Sebastian.

Sebastian has always been an active boy. Before he grew to be over twenty-four inches, I would often say that he was very much like a two-foot-tall tornado! The evening started out fine. Sebastian was entertained by our friend's youngest daughter for a while and then he took a few bites of his dinner. When the opening act

started, everything fell apart. The opening act was a miming evangelist who garnered an unfavorable amount of attention from my son. The “Coffee Spot” is a fairly intimate place; its setting did not work in our favor. When the mime was introduced, everyone in the room got quiet—everyone except for Sebastian that is. He spent the first ten minutes of the mime’s performance doing everything he could to escape my hold and place that mime within his grasp!

After I realized that my little boy was gaining ground in his attempts to escape, I looked for a fast getaway. I found relief in the form of a back entranceway several feet away from the mime. It was at this point that I realized my only recourse was to tickle Sebastian into submission, and that is exactly what I did. His laughter was probably as distracting to the audience as it surely was to the mime, but at least this stopped him from attacking the entertainer!

I wish I could say that this was the end of the affair and that after the mime finished his act sanity resumed. Unfortunately that was only the beginning. Wrongly assuming Sebastian would sit in our laps and listen to the music, we sat down at a table in front of the stage. I ordered one of my favorite treats in the entire world: a frozen-blended-vanilla latte frappuccino with whipped cream and a straw.

I placed Sebastian on my lap as his mother prepared to feed him from a jar of delicious-looking sweet potato baby food. Eating his dinner was not at all what Sebastian had in mind. The activity of the evening had placed him on sensory overload, and he surely did not have time to stop for food!

With each spoonful of sweet potato placed to his lips came a snapping shut of his mouth and a quick twist of his head, resulting in a splash of sweet potatoes landing near, around, and very often, on

me! By this time, the mime had left and our friends' group, "Truth Bomb," had begun to play. Sebastian now wanted their guitars and laughed hysterically each time he believed himself to be close to freeing himself from my grasp. This went on for some time with moments of peace, while this child regained his strength for the next attempt at freedom from his father's embrace.

Finally the show was over and I realized that I had yet to take a sip of the wonderful frozen-blended drink I had purchased only an hour ago (though it felt as though much more time than that had actually passed). I picked up my cup to take a drink. Much to my surprise, the whipped cream that topped my coffee was entangled with a dollop of sweet potatoes. There I sat, Sebastian on my lap looking up at me with his infectious smile, and sweet potatoes in my coffee.

As I sat there in this moment that seemed to last forever, I realized that I had

a decision to make as a father. On the one hand, I could have chosen to be upset that Sebastian had caused so much turmoil that evening. Oh, I could have sulked over the sweet potatoes that had found their way into my coffee; I could have even become angry. On the other hand, how could I allow any form of anger to flood my spirit when this precious little child was looking at me with a truly rare and beautiful smile, which pours out from not only his facial expression, but also from his eyes and indeed his very soul?

It occurred to me in that moment that God is very much like a loving father with sweet potatoes in *His* coffee. I make no claims to comparisons of my love as a father with that of God's, nor do I mean to trivialize the reality of God's love. I mean only to suggest that the God of the Bible is not merely a vengeful, wrath-filled God of destruction and judgment, inasmuch as He is a loving Father who cares for His creation

and is intimately concerned with every one of His children.

Promise of Grace

Our minds have been filled with a picture of God that is at odds with His truly loving nature. The greatest culprits are “finger-wagging” preachers who terrorize us from pulpits with images of Sodom and Gomorrah. In our times, just as in the days of old, finger-waggers abound! We all know the type. They may sit in rocking chairs, stand in pulpits, or sit next to us at work. Regardless of their station in life, their message is the same; if we are not good enough then God will not love us.

These finger-waggers come in a variety of shapes and sizes, but they all have one thing in common: in an effort to honor the holiness of God they forget about His loving nature. In an effort to please God and encourage us toward the same, they have told only a part of God’s story. God is holy and just. He does

demand holiness in us, but that is only half of the story! In the Old Testament we often see God revealed as a God of wrath and vengeance. In God's interaction with humanity, He frequently deals with man's sin.

For example, in Genesis chapters 18 and 19, God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of the grievous nature of the inhabitants' sin. Ultimately God, in this account, does destroy these rebelling people by raining down what was likely burning sulfur upon the cities.

Though finger-waggers use passages of the Bible like this to justify their conviction that God is primarily or even mostly vengeful, when read in the full context of what God has spoken to humanity, that is not what this passage or others like it are saying at all. The message from this passage is twofold. First, God is holy and He cannot look upon sin with a passive eye. Second, God loves His creation so much that He is willing to get involved

with it, *even its ugly parts*. In the Old Testament we see God dealing with the sin of His creation and in the New Testament we see Him doing the very same thing.

In the Old Testament, God dealt with sin on an individual basis as He interacted, often as divine judge, with humanity. In the New Testament, God reveals the fullness of His gracious character as redeemer, offering His son, Jesus Christ, as a final expression of His willingness to deal with his creation, *even its ugly parts*.

Manifestation of Grace

In the first half of Luke 13:1–9, Jesus is questioned about the nature of the truth about what happened to some Galileans who were killed by Pilate when they were offering sacrifices. As Jesus answers those who questioned Him, He goes on to teach about eighteen people who were accident victims when a tower fell on them. In this passage of Scripture

Jesus deals with two very practical questions that are asked of and by Christians every day. When someone is the victim of maliciousness or when someone is the victim of a terrible accident, is their sin to blame?

Do terrible things happen to people on the basis of the degree to which they have sinned in this life? These are good questions that proceed from the depths of our hearts, often in our times of greatest need. These questions deserve honest consideration. Jesus' answer on both accounts is sobering and compelling. During his earthly ministry, Jesus never shied away from a difficult question. Nowhere in the New Testament do you see Jesus saying, "Whew, gonna have to get back to you on that one!" What Jesus reveals is the truth that in this life anything can happen at any time. This is not because of God's judgment, but simply because that is the nature of the world we live in.

All of us have a sense that the world isn't quite all that it should be. That's because it is not! We live in a world which is decaying and dying, where sin, pain, and weakness are the order of every day. Sin has corrupted this world. While we look forward to the day when God will restore His creation, that day has not yet come. In the meantime, we live in a world without absolutes. In this life, every day matters given that we do not know what tomorrow will bring.

Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them--do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." (Luke 13:2-5).

Given this reality, Jesus explains that it is best to repent today, to live for God today. It is better to get things right with God and with each other sooner rather than later. So many people put off making things right, but we don't know what tomorrow will bring. The best day to make things right is today. The best day to seek and offer forgiveness is today. *Right now is what we have.*

In the second half of this passage, Jesus explains to us the depth of God's patient grace. God is like the gardener in the story who, rather than destroy the fruitless fig tree, refuses to see it cut down. He will help it grow into what it was meant to be. God is a God of grace. He doesn't give up on us in spite of our inadequacies, our sin, and our shortcomings. As our loving father, God keeps at it; He continually offers us His love, though very often we cannot or will not accept it.

In Matthew 11:28–30 Jesus says, "Come to me, 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." The central theme of the New Testament is the forgiveness that is found only in Christ. In Christ we receive forgiveness for our sins and as we are in Christ *we find the ability to forgive ourselves and others.*

You and I have largely been conditioned by the finger-waggers in our lives to carry the burden of sin and guilt alone. We have been told that God will love us only to the extent that we can work to please Him, but that is not the message of Christ because that is not the message of the cross. In John 14:7 Jesus says, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

I grew up in northern California and to this day one of my favorite places in the entire world is the Yosemite National Park

and surrounding mountainous area. Inside of Yosemite is a body of water called Mirror Lake. It is an amazing thing to see Mt. Hood reflected in Mirror Lake as your senses are flooded with the smell of pine and the sounds of wildlife, and as your soul is filled with the wonder of God's creation.

We are given a very similar picture of God in Christ. In Jesus we see reflected the beauty and depth of God's grace. In Jesus we see the fullest expression of God's willingness to get involved with human sin and imperfection. In the Old Testament we see God judging humanity because of its sin, while in the New Testament we see God's glorious nature fully expressed as Jesus lays down His own life before us. If you want to know what God's love looks like, you need look no further than the life and work of Jesus Christ. That is the message of the cross! Stop carrying your heavy burden of guilt and shame.

You and I have been invited to lay down the heavy yoke of bondage and

condemnation and pick up the radiant yoke of freedom and forgiveness. At the cross, God highlighted the ugliness of the domination systems of this world, the ugliness of human sin, and also the beauty of His willingness to deal with all of it. Galatians 4:4–7 says, “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.”

Abba is an Aramaic term that compares to our word for Daddy, a term used to describe a very personal and loving relationship. I am convinced that the major theme in the Scriptures is that of God as Father in His relationship to his son Jesus and in His relationship with humanity. Though God is infinite in power and love,

infallible in wisdom and holiness, exalted in honor and majesty, He chose to reveal himself as Abba, Father, Daddy!

I once heard the story retold of a blind girl, whose eyes had been opened by a surgical operation. After gaining her vision, she delighted in the sight of her father who had a noble appearance and presence. His every look and motion was watched by his daughter with the keenest delight. For the first time his constant tenderness and care seemed real to her. If he caressed her or even looked upon her kindly, it brought tears of gladness to her eyes. "To think," she said, holding his hand closely in her own, "that I have had you for a father all these years, and never really knew you.

How many of us are the same as this little girl in the story? Do we really know our heavenly Father? How many of us are like those in Luke chapter 13, seeing God as a God of vengeance and wrath, having never learned to truly experience the grace of God in our lives? God has

already dealt with our sin at the cross. Why do so many of us live as though we must carry the burden of our sin with us day in and day out? Why is it that so often we hold onto guilt and condemnation for which God has already forgiven us?

Application

Allow me to encourage you to see God for who He really is, and in the process learn to see yourself the way that God sees you. When God looks at you He does not see a defeated person, full of doubt and discouragement. He sees the wonder of His creation! He sees your infectious smile as you gaze into His eyes with childlike wonder at the power of His love for you.

Seldom, if ever, do we take the time to consider just how magnificent we are to God. Imagine, the God who created the universe created you. The God who created the butterfly and the diamond created each of us. The God, who created the universe with just a word, calls you precious child

with the same breath of life through which
He created everything. The God who is all-
powerful and all-knowing invites you to call
him Abba! Daddy!

CHAPTER 2

The Heart of the Matter

Luke 10:38–42

My first staff position in a church was as the Associate Pastor of The Kirk of Dunedin Community Church in Dunedin, Florida. I normally arrived at church early, but on this particular morning my wife and I had arrived just a few minutes before the worship service was to begin. As my wife, Christina, unbuckled the baby from his car seat, I straightened my tie in the mirror and watched something rather commonplace in a rather uncommon way.

I have seen people go in and out of church many times. That morning though, it was as though a veil had been removed. It was one of those moments when something that has always been right in front of you finally comes into focus. Were I an artist, I would love to paint this image the way it appeared to me that day. I

would paint a portrait of people walking, posture as if unencumbered, yet clearly overloaded with piles of clutter and hollow debris on their shoulders.

It was as though God was allowing me to see the burdens that we carry with us every day and bring with us into the doors of the church every Sunday. It was as if He wanted me to know just how heavy and cumbersome those burdens are. As I watched the people filing into the church building from their sedans, trucks, and minivans, it occurred to me that each person carried his own invisible burden.

Some carried the burden of guilt for past sins. These people hoped that by regularly attending church they would convince God to forgive them. Some of them carried the burden of fear, depression, and anxiety. These people came to into the church hoping to find peace—even if only for an hour on Sunday morning. Whatever their burdens were, one thing became clear to me; most of us,

all of us, carry burdens that we were not intended to carry alone.

As I sat watching all of these people making their way into the church that Sunday, I was struck with the sense that so many of us come to church and generally live our Christian faith out of what is largely a sense of obligation rather than of love. We fill our lives with repetitious, albeit well-intentioned, deeds in order to fulfill our obligations rather than live a life that flows from the love of God working in and through us. Imagine the folly of a man who chooses day in and day out to hoard and heap burdens upon his shoulders that are not his to carry alone. Imagine the woman who works diligently to earn the forgiveness she has already received.

Dear saints of God, if we are ever to learn to live lives filled with the grace of God, if we are ever to live the grace-filled life, we must let go of obligation and embrace love. We do not do good works to earn God's favor; we do good works

because we have received His favor. Good works, duty, stoic obligation are not what is pleasing to God. While people tend to be mostly concerned with the outward appearance of things, God is concerned with our hearts (1 Samuel 16:7).

Obligation or Love?

Luke 10:38–42 records the dichotomy between the service of Martha and the worship of Mary. Martha is busy serving Jesus and His disciples while her sister Mary sits at the feet of Jesus with the rest of His disciples. This in itself gives a great deal of insight into the nature of the kingdom of God. Unlike other rabbis of His day, Jesus not only allowed women to follow Him, but according to Luke's record in this passage, He even allowed them to sit at His feet and receive teaching.

In the ancient near-eastern culture, it was only the disciples of a teacher, and most notably a disciple who was training to be a teacher himself, who was allowed to

sit at the feet of the master. Even allowing Mary to sit at his feet while He taught was a display of the radical nature of the kingdom of God. While the world maintains a rather ugly status quo of domination, Christ sets captives free. While the world of Jesus' time saw women as second-class citizens and even as the property of men, Jesus thought Mary worthy to receive and pass on the message of redemption and grace.

The main thrust of this passage is Martha's anxiety over her having been left alone by Mary to complete all of the duties of cooking and serving Jesus, His disciples, and perhaps others who followed Jesus into their home. In the ancient near-eastern culture a high premium was paid on showing proper hospitality to guests, and Martha had been abandoned by her sister to do all of the work herself.

Jesus is very gentle with Martha when He tells her that Mary has chosen "what is better" (Luke 10:42). Some have wrongly used this passage of Scripture to

justify an ascetic, purely spiritual, Christian lifestyle. They skew the words of Jesus to justify a disconnected Christianity that sees engaging the world's here-and-now problems as unspiritual and even idolatrous. While the words of Jesus do leave room for this kind of interpretation, when they are taken within the full context of Jesus' overall message, it seems clear that this is not at all what Jesus is saying.

Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus is seen running the money changers out of the Temple rather violently because they were corrupt. Clearly, Jesus' message in this passage is not that duty and obligation are bad things. The message is not that Martha is an unspiritual busybody while her sister Mary is a spiritual giant. The real issue at hand is *attitude*. Mary had chosen to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to the master. She loved Jesus and she wanted to be near Him while Martha, on the other hand, was distracted by her many legitimate obligations.

The message is not that it is wrong to handle our obligations. Jesus never denied the Scriptures, and they teach us to be diligent in the work that God has given to us. Proverbs 18:9 says, "One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys." Working to feed Jesus and the disciples was not the problem Jesus addressed with Martha. Jesus is making it plain that our attitude is as important as our actions. Obligation is good, but love is better!

Consider the emptiness of the work of the man who awakes, goes to work each day, then returns to his wife only to lay down to sleep, content to have merely met his obligation, though he has done it not out of love but out of a stoic desire to do what is right. Consider, on the other hand, the man who does the same thing but whose heart is fueled by love rather than by mere obligation. What of the mother who meets all of the physical needs of her children yet never shows them love or

compassion? Obligation is good, but love is oh so much better!

Invitation to Participate

If we do the right things but complain, is that pleasing to God? If we work diligently in our Christian life, does that alone bring honor to God? Certainly not! The invitation of Christ is an invitation out of dry religious or ceremonial obligation and into a vibrant experience of knowing God and being known by God. He wants to show the world, through us, the beauty of His love as we experience His love in our lives. Our heavenly Father is asking each of us right now if we will be people through whom He can love the world. We've been invited not to be spectators on what God is doing in this world, but to be active participants in the grace of Almighty God!

Surely we must let our hands do His work, but we must not stop there. In order to live the grace-filled life, in order to experience the grace of God in our lives as

intended, the work of our hands must be fueled by the presence of His grace in our hearts! For many of us it is difficult to have a right attitude about God because our minds are full of *ingrained misconceptions* about who He is. It is awfully difficult to let God love the world through us if we don't even know just how much God loves us. How can we share something that we don't have?

For us to move from obligation to love in our relationship with God, we must learn to experience the divine. Christianity is not intended to be a dry theological discussion, nor is it merely a list of do's and don'ts. I am convinced that much of what is marketed in this culture as Christianity is little more than the denunciation of immoral behavior and the exaltation of the noble, publicly acceptable, self. In many ways church culture encourages a kind of disconnected genuineness, does it not? We have a way of encouraging people to only show us the good sides of their

personalities as we “play nice” on Sunday mornings simply because that is what good people do.

Christianity is not the sum of its doctrine any more than it is about religious obligation. Christianity is about a vibrant relationship with God as He is to be found in Jesus Christ! In the first verses of the very next chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus gives us the Lord’s Prayer. In Luke 11:4 Jesus says, “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.”

When we read these words of Jesus, most of us read into the text what our western minds have been preprogrammed to understand. Whether we like it or not, our minds have been shaped by the logical, rational, and often legalistic components of western thought. This is nothing new. The western mind has been shaped by the Greeks, the Romans, and the Middle Ages church, and right up to this very day our minds are oriented very

much toward logical argument, rationalism, and legalism.

If you are anything like me, it is very easy for you to read these words of Jesus and walk away thinking that Jesus has described a criteria for receiving forgiveness that is very much contingent on my ability and willingness to forgive others. It is as though what He is saying is that to the extent that I forgive others God will forgive me. Our legalistic minds enjoy order so much that we read the passage in pieces instead of reading it in the context of Jesus' broader message in the preceding and following text as well as within the context of His entire message.

Jesus is not saying that this is a "tit for tat" relationship of forgiveness whereby God offers to me only the measure of forgiveness that I offer to others. God's grace is not in any way contingent upon anything that I do. God pours out His grace because He is gracious. God pours out His mercy because He is merciful. This portion

of the Lord's Prayer is an invitation to be active participants in the grace of God.

Jesus is inviting us to participate in the radical grace of God that has been poured out in Jesus Christ. The message is not that I must get busy forgiving so that God will forgive me. The message is that God's forgiveness is so magnificent and His love is so rich that even I, despite my shortcomings, despite my imperfection, can participate in it. I can love others the way God loves me. I can forgive others the way God forgives me. The message is that I can do this because of God's love fueling my actions to such an extent that it is as though they are His actions, because it is His love working inside of us that is the well spring from which all good things flow.

Only one chapter before the account of Jesus dealing with Mary and Martha, and in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus says or confirms that all of the law is wrapped up in loving God with all of our heart and soul and loving our

neighbor as ourselves. Christ was a radical and we are to be like Christ. To the extent that we allow God's love to reside in us, to that extent we are the church of Christ. To the extent we allow God to love others through us, having God's love (not stoic obligation) be the driving factor in our lives, we will find freedom from the drudgery of obligation.

Good actions and right living should flow out of the depth of God's love inside of us. Good actions and right living are not how we please God; they are how God responds to a hurting world through us and in us, not because of us.

Application

I heard the story of a bird that flew through an open door into a sanctuary on a particularly sunny Sunday morning during a worship service. The bird became very afraid of all of the people in the pews and became frantic in its attempts to get out of the church. Over and over again, it flew

into the stained glass windows and rafters, longing to find freedom.

Finally, the bird came to a calmed rest as it surveyed its surroundings for its best chance of escape. Just then it realized that the door through which it had entered the sanctuary was still open. It calmly and directly flapped its wings and made its way out into the warmth of the sunny Sunday morning sky.

All the while there was a woman who had been watching the entire affair of the trapped bird. She thought to herself, "Do I not behave just as the bird? I struggle under the weight of my own sin in the vain endeavor to get free from the burden of guilt and obligation even though the door of God's grace is always open and available to me."

Let go of counterfeit ways of thinking about God and your response to Him. Let God's grace fuel your relationship

to Him and to other people. Obligation is good, but love is better!

CHAPTER 3

Longing for Something More

Luke 14:26–33

My house seems always to be filled with activity—from an active two-year-old boy, a smiley baby boy, a goofy Saint Bernard, and all of the normal and abnormal happenings in my home. I often take advantage of the quiet hours after everyone else is in bed to write, prepare sermons, or read. My last activity of every evening is to take Happy the Saint Bernard on one last walk for the night. One of these evening walks not so long ago, stands out in my memory. It was about midnight in the chill of early spring in northern Michigan. As Happy and I strolled up Huron Street in Cheboygan, I had her thick strap of a leash in one hand and my thoughts of God in the other.

As I walked I found myself praying for the church, praying for my family, and

praying for a more intimate relationship with God. As I talked to God I found myself longing for something more. I am rather pleased with my life. There is little about being a husband or a father that I find disagreeable. There is little about the ministry that I find unpleasant. Even in the struggles of family life and ministry, God is always working. His love is always obvious if we keep a careful eye open for it. I, probably like many of you, am a rather content and blessed person. Yet, in spite of my contentedness, I often find myself longing for something more than this world has to offer.

I am convinced that all of us, if we are honest with ourselves and with one another, sometimes, perhaps often, find ourselves filled with a sense of longing for something more than what we see around us, longing for something more than what is available in this world. It is as though we are homesick but know not the place for which our hearts long. It is as though we

miss something terribly but cannot quite put our finger on who or what it is. Observations of the human experience compel me to believe that each of us carries this burden of longing, though we do listen to it to varying degrees.

Just last week Christina, Sebastian, and Ephram flew down to Florida where they met up with Christina's mother before driving to Louisiana to spend a few days with Christina's brother and his family. Christina is a brave woman to fly alone with an active two-year old and a baby! Two-year-old Sebastian and I are very close. He is always very concerned about where I am and regularly does his best to get me to work from home so that I will be near.

On days when I do work from the church office, it is not uncommon for the church secretary, Ellen, and me to have one or more visits from Christina and the kids. While Sebastian was gone in the South for a week, he perfected a phrase which he has only recently come to use, "I miss you,

Daddy.” He now says it if we are only apart for a few minutes or a few hours. He hugs my leg and tells me that he has missed me.

We have been talking about the grace-filled life, about learning to see God in a new way so that we might not be seekers of God’s mercy but rather, that we might be active participants in the work of God’s grace. Just as Sebastian misses his daddy, just as he longs for my return, our hearts long for something more than this world has to offer. Indeed, our hearts long to know the heart of Abba—“Daddy”—as Jesus affectionately referred to God, our heavenly Father.”

The question is often raised, “What is a disciple of Jesus?” What does it mean to follow after Jesus? What does it mean to be a Christian? The term Christian means “one who is like Christ.” If then, we are to be like Christ, then by what means am I to attain such a state? Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” In

our longing for something more, in our seeking to be disciples, in our seeking to be like Christ, we must learn what faith is.

There are those who tell us that “faith is knowing that we know that we know!” These folks tell us that faith means that we are always certain of God’s existence and even more so, that we are always certain of His work in our lives. Perhaps I am not alone when I say that there are times when having that kind of faith is difficult for me. Perhaps I am not alone when I say that for me, faith is not a destination of absolute knowledge. Faith is a journey of longing for something more.

Leaving All to Follow Christ

In Luke 14:26–33 there are three instances of Jesus saying that unless we do a certain thing then we cannot be His disciple. In the last chapter, we discussed how our minds have been shaped to a large extent by western rationalism, which tends toward a legalistic, “tit for tat”

understanding of the New Testament. When we read these three instances of Jesus telling His disciples what is required of them in order to be a disciple, we are likely to read it as a sort of contract, whereby Jesus is offering discipleship to the masses under the following conditions. But that is not it at all!

By this point in Jesus' ministry the disciples had been with Jesus for some time. They were already seasoned followers of Jesus. In the first of these three seemingly conditional statements Jesus says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). This is one of those passages in the Bible that has the power to leave us absolutely perplexed. Is Jesus really saying that unless we hate our father and mother, our wife and children, and our brothers and sisters, and even our own life, then we cannot be His disciple?

How can this be? Elsewhere in the Bible we are told to honor our parents, and clearly there is an entire thread of teaching in the Bible that commands us to love and even cherish our families. We must remember that in the previous verse (Luke 14:25) we are told that great crowds had begun to follow Jesus. This piece of information gives us incredible insight into what seems like such severe language on the part of Jesus. Many of those who followed in these massive crowds only followed Jesus because of what they thought He could do for them.

In the first part of the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, we see that a great crowd of people had gathered to follow Jesus because of the miracles He performed. This chapter records that Jesus fed the great multitudes by performing a miracle of multiplying only five loaves of bread and two fish into enough to feed more than five thousand men and their families (Matthew 14:21). Jesus was not

only speaking to His own twelve disciples, He was also speaking to the crowds who had gathered out of a desire to see what Jesus could do for them.

Jesus is not making the point that we have to hate everyone whom we are related to in order to be His disciple. Jesus is using a style of language known as hyperbole in order to clearly and profoundly make the point that in order to truly be Jesus' disciples, in order to truly live the grace-filled life, we must place all earthly attachments under the authority of God and address the circumstances of this life from the perspective of the life we live in Christ. Jesus is not encouraging us to hate our families. Jesus is using poetic language to change our perspective from getting to giving, from having to sacrificing, and from seeking after selfish motives to living the grace-filled life of Christ!

Galatians 2:20 says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body,

I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Jesus is telling the crowds, just as He is telling us, that the things of this life such as earthly ambition and selfish gain are hindrances to living the grace-filled life of Christ. A disciple of Christ who is experiencing and participating in God’s grace will learn to view his or her entire life through the lens of God’s grace and purpose. Our parents and siblings are gifts from God and we should love them as Christ loves them. Our children and spouses are gifts from God and we are to pour out the same grace to them that God pours on us. The message is that our entire lives are to be reflections of God’s grace.

Bearing Our Cross

In the very next verse Jesus gives us more teaching, which appears to include conditional requirements to being a disciple of Jesus. “And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27). This is another one

of those passages that has the absolute ability to leave a reader perplexed. If this passage is taken literally, then all who call themselves followers of Jesus should have a large wooden cross in their house by the door, just next to their wallets, purses, and keys!

I remember once watching a television documentary about what is apparently a fringe group of Philippine Catholics who literally nail themselves to crosses during the Easter season, perhaps even in strict obedience to this passage. Clearly, though, Jesus is not telling us that in order to be a disciple we must literally, physically, carry a cross on our shoulders. The message here is simple, clear, and equally profound. We are to look like Jesus. At the cross, Jesus expressed a message of mercy, redemption, and hope; we are to do likewise.

Carrying our cross means that we are willing to publicly identify with the suffering, shame, and humility of the cross

of Christ. In Luke 23:26 we are told of Simon the Cyrenian who was commanded to help Jesus carry His cross to Calvary. Often in cinematic portrayals of the passion of Christ, Simon is depicted as being forced to help Jesus because Jesus is so beaten and battered that the Roman soldiers grow impatient with His struggling efforts to carry the cross on His own. Oh, how like Simon the Cyrene are we! It is we who must carry the cross of Christ in this dark and hurting world. It is we who bear the message of hope and redemption found only in Christ!

That is what the church is supposed to look like, like Simon standing shoulder to shoulder carrying the cross. The cross we are to bear is the very message of the cross: that hope for humanity and redemption and freedom from sin and its consequences are found in Christ alone!

The trouble is that the church doesn't always look very much like Jesus on the cross does it? As Jesus hung on the cross, He died for the very people who had

forsaken Him. As Jesus hung on the cross, He loved the very unlovely people who had showed Him hatred and cruel indifference. Carrying the cross of Christ is an essential part of living the grace-filled life because it is in identifying with the radical love and mercy of the cross of Christ that we free ourselves to be able to love like Jesus and to look like Jesus dying on the cross.

Forsaking All

Have you ever wondered why the church, which was founded by the greatest example of mercy and grace, is so often characterized by the opposite? I have thought on this subject many times for many hours. Why is it that we, who are supposed to look the most like Christ on the cross, showing mercy to even the unmerciful, so often are characterized by the very judgment that characterized those who crucified our Lord? Indeed, there is a little bit of the man who whipped Jesus, the men who nailed Him to the tree, and the

Pharisees who accused Him inside of each one of us; is there not?

The most compelling difference between the ones who nailed Him to the cross and the ones who followed Him is still the difference between living the grace-filled life and living a life full of judgment and self-condemnation. The difference is the extent to which we are willing to forsake all for the sake of carrying our cross as we follow after Jesus. No doubt, many of those who participated in the crucifixion of Jesus had heard His message. Time and again in the New Testament we see Jesus interacting with Roman soldiers and huge crowds. Many, if not most, of those in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion had heard Jesus or at least heard of Him and His radical message.

The difference between one who nails and one who does not is a willingness or lack of willingness to follow. Every time we judge ourselves because of a poor understanding of God's grace, every time

we judge others because we are motivated by obligation rather than love, every time we do these things, we hammer the nail further into Christ's wrists and feet. With every choice to forsake the grace-filled life in favor of a life of judgment, it is as though we identify with those who crucified Christ, rather than with Simon who helped Jesus to carry the cross. In our judgment and self-condemnation we are like the executioners, while in our identification with the grace of the cross we become like Simon the Cyrene as we bear the cross of mercy for the world to see.

Application

A boy and his father, guided by the light of a lantern, walked along a lonely road at night. The boy told his father he was afraid because the lantern showed only a little way ahead. The father answered, "That is so, but if you walk straight on, you will find that the light will reach to the end of the journey." God often gives us light to

see only a short way ahead, but He always gives us light enough for the whole journey.

A life of faith is just the same way. Faith is a longing for something more than this world has to offer, and we find the satisfaction of that longing only in a life lived following Christ. Christianity is not a destination of knowledge any more than it is an opportunity to obtain perfection in this life. Christianity is about being a disciple of Jesus. Being a disciple of Jesus is about strapping on your sandals, picking up your walking stick, and following the Master of Mercy—Jesus Christ!

In Philippians 1:6 the apostle Paul writes, “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Faith is not so much about knowing as it is about following; following is not so much about a destination as it is about the journey; and the journey is about experiencing the grace of God! If you are imperfect, good! You are still on the way

and God is not finished with you. If you are at times unsure and full of longing, good! You are still trotting the dusty hills closely behind Jesus as you receive His teaching and you are transformed by His grace!

CHAPTER 4

The Freedom of Forgiveness

Luke 7:36–48

In ancient times, there was a blind man who was wrongly convicted of a crime and sentenced to many years, bound in chains, in a dungeon. The jailor knew the old blind man and took great pity on him. When he placed the blind man in the jail he took care to shut the chains as tightly as he would with any prisoner, but he did not lock them. Though they felt tight on the man's wrists, he would be able to escape.

The jailor returned after being away for a long period of time only to find that the blind man had not escaped, though his chains remained unlocked. When the jailor asked the man why he had not left he said, "I did not realize that the chains were unlocked. Their cold steel on my wrists constantly reminds me of my plight and I

was sure that I could not escape the power of their bondage.”

How many of us are just the same way? We are bound by the chains of sin and guilt though they have been unlocked by the Master of Mercy, Jesus Christ. We have already received an eternal inheritance, yet we live like spiritual paupers. Our chains have been loosed by grace!

The forgiveness of God comes to us not by way of forced receipt, but of a divine invitation toward freedom. In other words, God does not compel us to receive the gift of His grace and mercy; He merely invites us to participate in the free gift of His forgiveness. He invites us to loose our chains of bondage in favor of participating in the freedom of forgiveness. Participation in forgiveness means that we are not only able, by faith, to receive forgiveness for our sins, but also to find the freedom to forgive others and to find the freedom which comes in learning to forgive ourselves.

Forgiveness is not a one-time experience through the recitation of a formula prayer. In many circles of Christianity, believers are encouraged to say the “sinner’s prayer” upon conversion to Christ. While the sinner’s prayer may have merit in encouraging a point of commitment in one’s life, forgiveness has little to do with such prayers and much more to do with a constant lifestyle of ongoing covenantal relationship with God. A sinner’s prayer constitutes a lifestyle of grace no more than the saying of marriage vows constitutes a lifestyle of committed covenantal marriage. Commitment comes not only on the day the vow is made. Commitment comes in the day-in-and-day-out living out of one’s vows!

Just as we have been talking about grace as an experiential reality in one’s life, so too, forgiveness is a cyclic relationship of receiving and sharing in the forgiveness of God. Forgiveness is a journey of experiencing and sharing grace because

grace is the foundation for all forgiveness. As we experience the grace-filled life we are enabled to forgive others just as we have been forgiven, and as we live in the freedom which forgiveness brings, we are enabled even to do that which is most difficult for many of us—forgive ourselves.

The Heart of Judgment

The prevailing theme in Luke 7:36–50 is undoubtedly forgiveness of sins. Jesus had been invited to eat at the home of one of the Pharisees. While inside the house, a woman who was known for her sin came inside weeping. Much to the dismay of the pious and judgmental Pharisees, she began to anoint the feet of Jesus with very costly scented oil from an alabaster box and with her tears. The so-called “keepers of the law,” the Pharisees, were appalled not only by the actions of this sinful woman, but also by Jesus’ evident approval of what she was doing. True to form, rather than show compassion to this woman, the Pharisees began to judge Jesus!

The Pharisees were so filled with self-righteousness and a judgmental spirit that they judged others, including Christ Himself, for their lack of judgment. Devoid of compassion and any real understanding of Jesus' ministry, the Pharisee who had invited Jesus to his home said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39).

A heart that is filled with judgment cannot understand the grace and compassion of Christ. In their zeal for the law, the Pharisees had abandoned its chief aim: to bring people into a covenant relationship with God. Sin alone created a separation between God and man. The law was never intended to be a wall of separation, but a teacher guiding humanity into a loving and eternal relationship with its creator. How many of us have been like the woman with the alabaster box of fragrant oil longing for forgiveness and

acceptance? How many of us have been like the Pharisees with a heart full of judgment? If we are ever to learn to live the grace-filled life; if we are ever to experience the freedom that forgiveness brings in our lives; we must learn to let go of our Pharisaic need and compulsion to judge others and ourselves.

At the heart of judgment is blame and at the heart of blame is a denial of grace. The heart, which is filled with judgment says, "I am not worthy of grace and neither are you!" Our ability to forgive others is closely linked to our ability to forgive ourselves because both stem from our understanding of the work of God's grace in our lives. Judgment is a denial of grace. This denial of grace is a disease which, to varying degrees, we are born into. From the earliest days of childhood we compare ourselves with others and make judgments as to who is better or worse. We seem to be born with a bent toward

judgment which is like a deeply embedded tick that is not easily loosed.

I do not like bugs. Were I to make a list of the bugs I admire the least, I would no doubt place the tick very near the top of that list. When I was a child growing up in northern California my family traveled extensively as a result of my stepfather's love of the game of softball. We took wonderful trips to the coastal mountains of Oregon, Lake Tahoe, and cities all over the West Coast. I remember one trip to Santa Cruz. My mother had told me and some of my weekend travel-league softball friends that we were not to venture far from the softball field area. However, the park was nestled beautifully in the coastal mountains and we were not likely to listen to her instructions!

When we got a chance to sneak away, we went for a hike in the mountains for what turned into a very long time, as we got lost on the trails. Eventually we made our way back to where we were supposed

to be and no one seemed to be the wiser of our adventure. After we arrived back near the softball field, however, I felt something on my neck that I thought must have been a leaf or small piece of mud. Very much to my disliking, my travel companion realized that it was a large black tick! Not knowing the proper way to remove a tick, also not wanting to alert our parents, we commenced to use every means within our power to remove the tick including, but not limited to, a pocket knife, a borrowed lighter, and eventually a rather sharp stick!

A tick is not easy to remove. This is especially true when you do not have the right tools or knowledge for the job. A heart filled with judgment is just as difficult to correct when we do not have the right tools or the appropriate knowledge to affect the change we desire. We go through our lives longing for forgiveness as we carry our alabaster box around with us, not knowing where to turn for the freedom of forgiveness we seek. We carry our

alabaster boxes around inside of us longing for someone to accept us for who we are, longing for freedom from our addictions to judging others and judging ourselves. The woman who anointed Jesus' feet and the Pharisees were not nearly as different they thought.

The Pharisees were just as full of sin and judgment as the woman. The difference is that while the Pharisees were full of judgment of others, the woman was full of judgment of self. Both are a denial, a misunderstanding, a distortion of God's grace, and both carry equally heavy chains of bondage to judgment and keep us from knowing the freedom of forgiveness. God has not intended for us to be prisoners to guilt and shame, and that is exactly what we are when we live lives full of judgment of others or self! Is the person who is constantly judging others any freer than one being judged and judging self? Both are in chains.

The Heart of Forgiveness

In this same chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus gives the parable of creditors and debtors. He tells of a certain creditor who forgave the debt of two debtors. The one debtor was forgiven much and the other was forgiven a little. Jesus makes the point that the woman who anointed His feet is the one who has been forgiven much and the other debtor had only been forgiven a little. The woman, as with the debtor who had been excused of a great debt, showed a great appreciation for the forgiveness she had received. The woman went on to reciprocate the forgiveness, the grace, which she had received. She became not merely a recipient of grace, but a participant in the freedom of forgiveness.

That is what is at the very heart of learning to forgive others. The freedom of forgiveness is about receiving forgiveness from God and then pouring out that forgiveness, pouring out our alabaster box, to others as an offering to God in gratitude.

How often do we see even forgiving others as some sort of religiously driven ritualistic duty? The cycle of denial seems almost unstoppable! Indeed the tick is embedded so deeply into the skin of our beings that it seems impossible to loose. Can anything shake it free? Can anything free us from the bondage of judgment? Grace alone is the answer. At the heart of experiencing forgiveness is grace; the unmerited, unwarranted, unearned, underserved favor of our heavenly Father.

Judging others and judging ourselves are symptoms of the same disease. Judgment is alive and well in the heart of the Pharisee and the woman with the alabaster box. Both have either denied or radically misunderstood grace. Jesus was and is always ready to receive both the outcast and the well-regarded member of society. Grace is like a free-flowing fount that is always available and never runs out. Psalms 86:5 says, "You are forgiving and

good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.”

Forgiveness is not something that we merely do out of obligation, but something that we experience according to God’s love. We do not forgive others out of duty, but out of the abundance of the forgiveness we have received. In the last verse of this section of Scripture, Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:50). Faith in Christ alone sets us free from sin, its eternal consequence, and our bondage to judgment. Just as Jesus told the woman to go in peace, He is also telling us to experience the peace of God in our lives by experiencing the freedom which forgiveness brings.

The extent to which we will find freedom from the bondage of the chains of judgment is in direct proportion to the amount of grace we extend by forgiving others. When we apply no grace to forgiveness we find ourselves busy trying to

earn forgiveness, through sacrifice and rituals of every sort. This is the way the Pharisees would have understood forgiveness, and it is the way many of us understand it as well. When forgiveness knows no grace, we will strive to be perfect so that we can earn God's forgiveness. When we are forever working to earn God's favor, we will expect others to do so as well. We will judge others in just the same fashion that we assume God is judging us.

Many of us have learned to apply just a little grace to forgiveness. We know cognitively that God loves us, but because we have not truly experienced that love we busy ourselves with many good tasks, hoping that in our doing much we will find the forgiveness we seek. This is the way that the woman who anointed Jesus' feet would have understood forgiveness, just as it is the way that many of us do. We carry around our alabaster boxes, our offerings of great worth, not knowing where to find the satisfying forgiveness that our hearts seek.

We judge ourselves because we feel the weight of the condemnation of the self-righteous Pharisee and we feel the burden of our own mistakes and shortcomings.

Application

There is an alternative to the no-grace and the some-grace way of understanding forgiveness. The alternative is as beautiful as it is freeing, and it is as satisfying as it is eternal. The all-grace alternative is the answer to our compulsion to judge others and ourselves. The all-grace alternative is where we find the freedom of forgiveness. Jesus forgave the woman who anointed his feet with her very tears not because of what she had or had not done, not because of who she was or was not, but because He is merciful and full of forgiveness. Grace is just as available to the Pharisee and to us as it was to the woman with the alabaster box.

If we believe in Him, God has forgiven us in Christ. Let us not stay

shackled in unlocked chains which have no power to keep us enslaved, save for our own unwillingness to abandon their curse. We have been forgiven, let us forgive others, and if God forgives us, who are we not to forgive ourselves? The freedom of forgiveness comes to us to the extent that we are willing to view ourselves as God views us; forgiven and free!

CHAPTER 5

Grace in the Moment

Luke 12:22–34

There is the story of a young boy who was driving a hayrack through a rocky country road past a farmer's house. Glancing out of his window, the farmer saw the boy struggling to right his hayrack, which had fallen in the ditch near the door. The farmer went to the young boy and explained to him that the farmer's wife had just finished making dinner and that he should come inside, eat and then they would work together to right the fallen hayrack.

The boy said to the farmer, "My father is going to be so angry with me though. I need to get the hayrack fixed up right away!" The farmer told the boy, "You have gotten yourself all worked up over a very small thing. After supper we will fix the hayrack." Reluctantly, and only after

much urging on the part of the farmer, the boy agreed. After supper the farmer said to the boy, "Now, don't you feel better?" The boy said that he did, but that his dad was sure going to be angry at him. The farmer said, "Where is your father anyway?" The boy replied, "He is under the fallen hayrack sir!"

This life is inevitably going to be full of cares and concerns which we do well to consider. Clearly, it is a good thing to be concerned with our lives and take care to consider our actions as they relate to handling responsibilities, duties, and caring for other people. For many of us, however, there are times in our lives when being concerned turns into being worried, when being careful to handle our responsibilities morphs into anxiety, fret, and worry that distracts us and can even consume us and threaten to consume all that is around us.

The things we love are loved best by trusting God with them. The things we care for are cared for best by placing our

faith not in our ability to care for them, but in God's sovereign grace. It has been said that worry is much like interest paid on a debt not yet owed. Who among us would freely go to a bank and offer them monthly interest payments on a loan we had not yet incurred? Anxiety and worry about the future is the same. Many of us find ourselves trapped in patterns of worry and so ensnared by anxiety we they simply cannot find the strength to break free.

In order to live the grace-filled life God has intended for us, in order to be free from worry, freed to live a life of active participation in God's grace, we must first learn to control our thought life. We must learn to replace thoughts of worry with thoughts of trust, thoughts of anxiety with knowledge of God.

It is important to remember here that there is a distinction between legitimate concern and worry. It is right to be concerned, even to some extent worried, about walking in an unsafe area

late at night or driving a car that is known to have rotten brake lines! What I will be discussing is more the worry that distracts us from knowing and loving God. The worry that Jesus talks about is the kind that has the power to overtake us and distract us from knowing the grace of God.

I am also keenly aware that as I write this there are many people who struggle so severely with anxiety that they must seek out professional care through counseling and even medication. I have no intention of trivializing the very real pain and stress anxiety can cause in a person's life. I am convinced, though, that the Bible speaks to all areas of life: mind, body, and soul. As a Pastor, I mean to offer an alternative way of viewing worry in our lives from a purely biblical perspective. As we apply the teaching of Christ in regard to worry, may we find a place of refuge from anxiety and a means of growing in the grace of God!

Do Not Worry

Luke 12:22–34 Jesus lays out a two-part method of finding freedom from worry. First, we must capture our thought life. Human beings have been made *imago Dei*, that is, in the image of God. God has made us wonderfully thought-filled beings with unimaginable complexities, capacities, and capabilities. Our minds are active, as they should be, but it is not very difficult to become overwhelmed by our own thoughts. One need not look very far or for very long to find a great many things to occupy and eventually consume one's mind with concern and worry.

Second Corinthians 10:5 says, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." Worry is a battle that takes place primarily in the mind. The trouble is that most of us have convinced ourselves that our internal situation, our internal state of peace or lack

of peace, is determined primarily by what is going on around us. To be sure, when the storms of life rage around us, when our circumstances are at their worst, it is more difficult to capture our thoughts in order to bring them into submission to the will of God.

The point here is not that our external circumstances do not matter. The point is that regardless of our external circumstances, ultimately we have the choice to make. Will we allow our thoughts to spin out of control or learn to take them captive to make them obedient to Christ? Notice that nowhere in the entire New Testament does Jesus say to us, "Do not have problems." While we cannot always choose our circumstances, we can choose our response.

The time to choose the right response to worry, though, is not in the midst of anxiety, in the moment when we are overwhelmed; this battle must be won much earlier in our thought life. If we are

going to take every thought captive then we must learn to slow down our thinking. This life comes to us at high speed. Whether troubled by the immediate concerns of a job and family or by the broader concerns over the world at large, if we are not intentional about slowing down our thoughts to a manageable level, we can easily find ourselves trapped by anxiety and worry.

Our family dog, Happy the Saint Bernard, is much more active than the books and the breeder had promised. She is calm most of the time, but every now and then when she gets so worked up over food that is out of her reach, children she wants to play with, or, to quote Elmer Fudd, "a wascily wabbit," she is nearly impossible to catch. She is so fast that she cannot easily be chased down, and she is so heavy and powerful that even if reached, she can not easily be wrestled into submission. I have tried and failed many times!

The trick with Happy is to slow down and then wait a moment for her to come to you. Almost without fail, this technique has proven successful in catching my sometimes mischievous dog. So it is with our thought life and with the things in our lives that we worry about. If we are going to be able to “take captive every thought,” we are going to have to slow our thoughts to a manageable speed. When our minds are racing with worry over this thing and that, we have to learn to slow our thoughts in order to capture them and bring them into submission to Christ’s will.

There is a second lesson in Happy’s mischief as well: if we will stop chasing after the things that worry us they may, in fact, cease to be worries. How often do we find ourselves worrying over something that we cannot control? How much of our anxiety is centered on things that will dissipate if given just a little time to dissolve? In Luke 12:25–26 Jesus says, “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”

Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?"

We must learn to let go of worry over things that are out of our control, not in defeat, throwing in the towel, but in recognition that if our efforts are futile then they are self-defeating. God is not the author of confusion but of peace. At the root of worry are misconceptions about the nature of reality. We must also learn to confront false beliefs. Once we have slowed our thoughts to a point where we may capture them, we then must examine our belief systems.

We live in a world full of lies. Every television commercial, billboard, and latest fad promises to make us happier, healthier, and wiser. Some of this happens through insinuation, so-called subliminal messages, while much of it is blatant and easily understood. We are bombarded from all sides. Our minds are pummeled daily with false advertising about everything from our appearance to our health and from our

happiness and to our prosperity. Inevitably, we pick up some or many of these false belief systems just like we pick up burs and thorns when we walk through the high grass of a wild field. We must challenge these false belief systems with the truth.

Some have likened excessive worry to an addiction, though I would liken it more to an infection of wrong thinking. Our minds drift from legitimate concern and care over our circumstances to anxiety and worry largely as a result of wrong attitudes and misperceptions about the nature of reality in general or the nature of a given set of circumstances. The world has thrust lie after lie upon us. It is as though the landscapes of our minds are filled with holes that can be filled only with the truth of God's Word. We have to take our thoughts captive and confront those thoughts that are out of accord with the will and truth of God.

Despite our desire to be immediately cured of all worry and anxiety,

we must recognize that this is a continual and gradual process, a habit which we must develop in order to retrain our minds. In Romans 12:2 the apostle Paul writes, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” That is exactly what we must do if we are to find freedom from worry. We must allow God’s Word to transform us from the inside out. We must allow God to work in our minds so that we can replace anxious thoughts with peace-filled, faith-filled thoughts even as we allow the Word of God to penetrate our minds, confronting the lies of this world with the truth of God.

Follow Christ

Jesus lays out the second way to find freedom from worry in Luke 12:22–34. He tells us we must follow after Him. While the first admonition of Christ was, in a sense, a negative command not to worry, the second dose of medicine in this cure for worry is the positive instruction to place all

of our cares secondary to following Jesus Christ. It is a matter of attention and focus. Jesus is telling us that when our attention and focus is on doing God's will, living in God's will, then we will not be as easily distracted and tempted toward worry and anxiety.

I remember when I was a young Marine in combat training. Each of these intense four weeks of training culminated with a long hike in full combat gear, with rifle, canteen belt, and a full pack. Each Friday morning the hike was significantly longer than the week before, concluding with a hike that felt as though it were at least one hundred miles, though I believe it was actually less than twenty. At any rate, it was long and grueling.

It was sometime during the first hike that I realized that the best thing to do was to simply focus on the sloshing water in the canteens of the man in front of me and keep my attention on him. We hiked at a fast pace and often through difficult terrain.

Looking at my watch or wondering how far I had gone was useless. The very best thing was to keep my focus straight ahead and put the rest of the world out of my mind. So it is with following after Christ in this life.

We too are on a mission. We are on a mission to declare Christ to this world by reflecting His love all around us. When our minds drift, when our thoughts race, when we are consumed by worry and anxiety, we are not free to live the grace-filled life. In 1 Corinthians 9:24, the apostle Paul writes, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize." Just as a runner keeps his focus on Christ, just as I learned to keep my focus on the man in front of me during a long road march, we too must learn to keep our focus on Christ lest we be consumed by worry and cares of this life.

Application

In the Gospel of Luke 12:29–31, 34 Jesus says, “And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well ... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Experiencing God’s grace is a moment-by-moment experience of placing my trust in the unseen Christ rather than in the seen circumstances of my life. It is a matter of choosing to trust God’s grace in the moment of trial, in the moment of worry; indeed, it is choosing to focus on the man in front of you rather than on the terrain through which you walk.

We need God’s grace in the moment of trial, the moment of affliction; we need to see Him in the moment of joy and happiness. We need His grace moment by moment as we travel the often difficult and cumbersome trails of this life. Our

sandals get dusty, our backs ache, and we grow weary, but we are never alone or for want of the grace we need to answer His call and fulfill ours.

The things in this life, the cares of this life, are passing and fleeting. If we are to live lives free of worry, if we are to live grace-filled lives, we must place our trust in the eternal things, which will not pass away. We must let go of this life and in so doing, receive the grace necessary in the moments of this life!

CONCLUSION

Recently, my wife and I took our two youngest sons, Sebastian and Ephram, swimming at a local pool. At the time, Ephram was just a few months old and my wife held him. Sebastian, on the other hand, an active little two year old boy, was firmly inside of a life preserver and he clung to his daddy. This particular life preserver was very capable of keeping Sebastian completely afloat without my aid, but Sebastian was not to be convinced of such madness!

Every time I attempted to let go of him, as I encouraged him to kick his legs to move around the pool, he yelled at me to not let go. Though Sebastian was actually rather safe inside the life jacket, his natural sense of fear demanded that I be very close lest danger ensue. It occurred to me that we are very much the same way.

Though God's grace is wrapped tightly around us, keeping us afloat, our natural sense of danger fills us with fear. We find ourselves surrounded by the waters of life that constantly threaten to overtake us. We feel alone, as though our heavenly Father has abandoned us, and deep down, despite the masks of courage we often wear, we know that we are ultimately unable to save ourselves from the things that plague us in this life.

Finger-wagging preachers of all types have convinced us that God is full of wrath and judgment. They have distorted our view of God to such an extent that we find ourselves bound by chains of judgment, discouragement, religious obligation, and disconnection from God. Indeed, we find ourselves in abject isolation from the very grace of God, which we were intended to receive, share in, and pass on to others.

I say often that the Christian life is about strapping on your sandals, picking up

your walking stick, and following after the Master of Mercy, Jesus Christ. That's what the grace-filled life is all about. It is about seeing God for who He is and seeing ourselves and others as God sees us. He is above all, a gracious and loving Father who is slow to anger and abundant in mercy. We, His creation, are intrinsically valuable regardless of who or where we are.

Choose to experience the grace of God in your life. Cast off the chains of judgment as you allow the love of Christ to permeate your being. Choose to live a grace-filled life! "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen" (2 Peter 3:18).