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Worship in the Park 8/26/2012

Costly Grace

Last year in our combined worship in the park, we talked about the cost of discipleship. We talked about how following Jesus was not just something that we do when it is convenient, but that following Jesus is something that is foundational to our lives, as Christians it is the purpose of our existence.

This year, we will talk about a related theme to the first one. Today we will talk about grace.

The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl

⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

The message:

⁴⁴ “God's kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field for years and then accidentally found by a trespasser. The finder is ecstatic—what a find!—and proceeds to sell everything he owns to raise money and buy that field.

⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶ “Or, God's kingdom is like a jewel merchant on the hunt for excellent pearls. Finding one that is flawless, he immediately sells everything and buys it.

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One of the more popular hobbies among people is to have a collection of things. Some people collect rocks, other people collect roosters or cow figurines or maybe its glass bottles or model trains or matchbox cars or baseball hats or decorative plates. I also am a collector. In addition to the coin and stamp collection that I have, about a year and a half ago, I started collecting Brighton jewelry. (It was a collection that also was practical, because I could wear it.)

I had admired a lot of Brighton's older jewelry designs, and about 5 years ago, I had researched and bought a used Brighton purse off of ebay, (a style which I still carry) and I really liked their stuff. --What I didn't like about Brighton is their full retail prices when you buy them at expensive boutiques. --But I did like hunting down older Brighton jewelry pieces of ebay and pulling together sets of their jewelry that I can wear. And so my hunt began. In the beginning it was easier, since I could watch several different ebay auctions for the same piece, and when the price got too high, I could just let it go and wait to bid on the next auction. But as my collection filled up with more of the common pieces, the more rare pieces in my collection became more difficult to find. I began to rely on ebay alerts to let me know if a design I was looking for was listed. And on Friday, one of

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those emails came in. On ebay, right now there is a bracelet called “Orleans” which is one of the designs that I am looking for. I have the necklace, but not the earrings or the bracelet. The problem is that they have it listed as a buy it now item for \$54.00!!! That price is more than I want to pay for a bracelet. I like to spend maybe 15 – 20, but \$54 for that bracelet is more than I think it is worth.

While the bracelet that I am looking at on ebay is not worth what it is listed for, there are other things that sometimes Christians also devalue that are much more significant. We devalue something which is critical to our relationship with God. We devalue **the grace of God**.

Now, the definition of Grace is maybe not familiar to you. Grace as often defined getting something that you haven’t earned. God’s love and forgiveness are not something that you can earn. It is a gift, but it isn’t cheap. It is something that we should value a great deal and be significant in our lives. The theologian Dietrich Bonhoffer had written extensively about grace before he was killed by the Nazi’s in World War II. He warned churches about the dangers of making grace “cheap” –and about not preaching about to people about the cost involved in God’s love and grace. In his article about *Costly Grace*, he writes:

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Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian "conception" of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins.... **In such a Church the world finds a cheap covering for its sins; no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin.** Cheap grace therefore amounts to a denial of the living Word of God, in fact, a denial of the Incarnation of the Word of God.

What does Bonhoffer mean by this? By "Cheap Grace", Bonhoffer is warning us against a church and society where grace is so cheap, there is no real consequence to breaking God's rules or committing sins. He is talking about the fallacy of a system, where if you goof up, you can simply think "Oh Well, God is love, I am forgiven" and insto-presto you can go back to living however you want. ---This is the dangerous concept of cheap grace, and it is not Biblical and it is not Christian living at all. Cheap grace is grace that is so free and so taken for granted that it doesn't change you. It is grace that allows people to continue to hurt each other and to even twist grace and use it as weapon by saying, "You have to forgive me if you are a Christian."

In 2008, on **dearcupid.org** a man in his 20's posted a question on a forum board on the internet asking for advice. I will call the man Dave and the woman Ann. Dave had been with his girlfriend for three years, and Ann always treated him well and often treated him even better than he

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deserved. Ann was always there for Dave, never cheated on him, and always forgave him when he cheated on her or went out drinking and partying. But because Ann had a past, and had been with other men before Dave met her, Dave would also abuse her by bringing up her past and nagging her with it. --He would call her terrible names, throw things at her, and threaten to cheat on her and leave her. Over the course of three years, Dave systematically ground Ann's self esteem into nothing and made her beg for forgiveness from him for a past that she could not change.

--But at the same time that Dave was not willing to forgive Ann from a past that she had proven that she had changed from, a past that she had given up and was now demonstrating a new and turned around life from; Dave was also was requiring Ann **to forgive him** for the things that he was still continuing to do. No matter what he would do, or how bad he would treat her, Dave expected immediate forgiveness and acceptance from Ann, who loved him very much. Even when he was very bad, Ann would jump into his arms and beg him for forgiveness for her past which was the excuse that Dave used to say that it was her past that was driving him to do these terrible things.

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One night, things got really bad. Dave began to emotionally abuse Ann again about things from her past. He yelled and carried on and even threw a chair at her. Anne sat there in silence. At the end of his tirade, Dave yelled that he was through with her. Ann simply said, "OK." She packed quickly, left the house and wasn't returning his calls. This action on Ann's part is what prompted Dave to write his story on a forum asking for advice. Dave was afraid that he had pushed her too far and had lost her forever. --The consensus on the forum was that she should have left him long ago.

What is going on in this little story is all too familiar of an occurrence. Dave was demanding forgiveness for all of the things that he did wrong, for all of the ways in which he hurt Ann. He was demanding over and over and over again that she give him another chance, that she accept him the way that he was. --That she look past his cheating behavior and his lying and drinking and partying. He kept demanding that he be forgiven and then allowed to live his life in the way that he wanted. **This is the definition of cheap grace.** It is grace that demands forgiveness without admitting mistakes, without being truly sorry, without any intention of changing the bad behavior that hurts other people. Cheap Grace is the kind of grace that doesn't hold people accountable and that doesn't change lives at all.

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Unfortunately, this is the cheap substitute that has leaked its way into many Christians thinking. The kind of grace that doesn't transform lives and that doesn't demand anything of anyone. It makes a mockery out of forgiveness and out of the power of Christ to change lives.

In order for Grace to function in the way that it is supposed to, it we need to understand the concept of Costly grace. Being a Christian and in a relationship with God is much more than simply nodding ones head and saying, "Yup. Sure. God exists." It means understanding and living into the cost of love. It demands a whole life sacrifice, not just when it is convenient. The love of our God, the God that made you and wants to be in relationship with you is not satisfied with simply a yearly Christmas card of greetings, or showing up to beg God for something.

One of the best analogies of God's love and grace is the analogy of God being a parent. A true parent or a true grandparent, simply loves the child without a price tag. That love is a fact. When that child was born, there was nothing that the child had done to earn that love. As an infant, they didn't know your birthday or buy you Christmas presents. As a child, before they could even speak, a true parent loves their child, and sacrifices themselves for that child. They get up in the middle of the night to feed the

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child and to change their diapers, they forgive them for pulling their glasses off of their face with their curious hands and for crying when they are afraid or unhappy. This is like the unearned love and grace of God for us.

But just like a child grows and begins to understand what it means to hurt other people, just like that child grows up and learns how to live in a loving way, just like a good and loving parent will also hold that child accountable when they break the rules and when they treat others in a non loving way. ---In the very same way God demands a changed life from us. Christianity is about costly grace. The love that God has for us doesn't change, but as we grow up and know better, living in a relationship with God, being bearers of God's love to the world includes holding each other accountable to that high standard. As children of God we are to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength and we are to love others as much as we love ourselves. And when we fall away from that, when we mess up, it is not simply OK to live our lives for ourselves, to nod to God for forgiveness and move along with no intention of changing our lives. The Costly love and the Costly Grace of God are the real thing, and they demand of us that we live our lives within that love and grace. We are to pay attention to the needs of our neighbors and to bear God's love to them. ---Living the life of a Christian isn't about occasionally reading the Bible and

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saying that you are a Christian and forgiven, but living your life like you want. Anyone can do that. That is cheap grace and blatant hypocrisy.

What is real love and grace, what is costly love and grace, is the love and grace that demands better of ourselves and of others. It is grace that is actually lived out every day with what we do, with how we live and how we treat other people. Costly grace is grace that matters, that changes lives that makes a difference to ourselves and to others.

May we, all, as children of God commit ourselves to living a life of costly love and costly grace and may we allow that love and grace to sink down deep into our very soul and change us from the inside out. Amen.

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