

Special Section: From Guilt To Grace

Good Enough!

Are You Tired Of Trying To Measure Up?

By Paula Rinehart



Illustration by Kim Kauffman

One fall evening, after months of recurring chest pain and a rather hectic schedule, I found myself thinking out loud with my husband as we watched the sun sink lower and lower in the Colorado sky.

We had been discussing the various pressures that clogged our lives—mostly good things, but too many and too much. It seemed the more we did, the more we had yet to do. I never felt I could get to the end of all the “doing.” Where was the off-button? What kept me pushing so hard, so long?



Illustration by Stefano Vitale

Finally, I posed a question I didn’t even know I was asking until it popped out. “Why do you suppose,” I asked my husband, Stacy, “that God makes it so hard to serve Him?”

That question was like a peek behind a wall for me. It plagued me for months, dogging my steps with the tenacity of an old hound. It hinted of a God who could not be pleased. After years of trafficking in the great truths of God, might there be a large gap between what I knew about

Him, and what I personally believed, I wondered? Could the image I held of God be vastly different from who, in truth, He is?

Stuck on the Treadmill

My chest pain hinted that I should look further, especially after a battery of medical tests failed to reveal a physical reason for the pain. I decided to accept it as a talisman to help me see what I really believed, on an emotional level, about following Christ.

What I discovered in that quest was the utter shallowness of my understanding of grace.

As I read the Bible, I would ask myself what I knew in my mind to be true . . . and what I actually believed. The discrepancy, in many cases, was unnerving. I came upon old, familiar passages, one in particular that I had memorized as a young Christian.

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 shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

—*Matthew 11:28–30*

Here were wonderful words of Jesus about rest and a lightened load, but I had never been able to apply them to myself. They spoke of something so contrary to my experience that I had, in effect, deleted them from the text.

I slowly began to realize that I had been reading Scripture for years through the lens of personal effort and discipline, as though the great weight of following Christ rested squarely on my shoulders. And the crazy, destructive part of living out of personal effort and zeal is that you can never know when you've done enough. You are stuck on a treadmill with the off-button forever out of reach.

I had lived by “the tyranny of the oughts.” You ought to do more. You ought to do better. There might be 30 things wrong with you, but with God’s help, the list could be narrowed to 20 or with extra effort, even 10. Someday, you might even be “fixed.” Then you could relax . . . once you were a little closer to the ideal. Until then, like the Eveready^a bunny, you just keep going and going and going. No wonder I felt tired all the time!

I began to see that while the grace of God had been the booster rocket that launched me into the faith, I knew more about explaining the message than the actual experience of living under grace. God’s grace had become just a familiar part of the backdrop to the real business—and busyness—of life. It did not describe an address where I actually lived.

As I went through this period where I felt I could never do enough, I became aware of a rather harsh, inner critic, a “voice” that provided a walking commentary on my life.

Hadn’t I had a pretty good devotional time this morning? “Well yes, Paula, but you know you aren’t doing much serious Bible study these days.”

Reading was a struggle for our son despite everyone’s efforts. “And you know, Paula, that a really good mother would tackle this problem with home schooling.”

A close friend was going through a rough time in her marriage. “But you let her walk out of your door yesterday with a rather weak word of comfort.”

In whatever direction I looked, I felt I was not measuring up. And the faint but relentless little voice inside rarely failed to point out that fact.

Turning Points

A major turning point in my quest to live under God’s grace came when I finally realized

that my “inner critic” was not the voice of God. I was hearing an echo of myself and my longing to be loved and affirmed. Maybe I could finally do enough to feel loved. And doing enough to merit God’s approval would be, of course, the ultimate silencer of any thoughts of unworthiness. The emotional logic behind a lifestyle of personal effort is that someday, if I work hard enough, I will be received with open arms and a big smile.

One of God’s best gifts to me was chest pain and fatigue. They forced me to face the empty, scary vacuum that opens up when you are stopped in your tracks. And what I stumbled upon was an experiential understanding of God’s grace, one that comes when you are too empty-handed to do anything but humbly receive.

I came to realize that for years I had been relating to God as more of a “hired hand” than a daughter. David Seamands was the first to make this distinction, and it’s an important one. A hired hand is always in a rather tentative position. She may, by hard work and faithfulness, be promoted to a higher position—or she may be dismissed summarily and replaced by another. There’s no security, and hence, no rest.

But the relationship that God has invited us into is different altogether. By His grace, we are counted as His children. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” the Apostle John said (1 John 3:1). My relationship, then, is that of a daughter. A daughter may grieve her Father, she may encounter His discipline—but she has the basic confidence of belonging and being loved. A daughter can work and serve and give—and a daughter can play and rest and receive. There is a world of difference between living as a hired hand (as though God had some “need” of our services) and living as a daughter or a son.



Illustration by Kim Kauffman

An Emotional Home

I began to see that the frustrated feeling that I might never “get there,” a feeling I carried beneath my chest pain, was accurate. No amount of “doing well and doing enough” would bring the sense of peace and acceptance I longed for. Rather, grace begins in a different place altogether. It grows out of believing that I am already there, already declared His daughter, pronounced His. He has been there waiting for the prodigal to return from the fields of her own self-effort, ready to speak the words He said to the elder son, “I have always loved you and all that I have is yours.”

Grace is our emotional home, the new place on the far side of the cross from which we begin, the very air we are meant to breathe. It can never be earned—only claimed. As Paul said, “Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1–2). Grace describes the ontological reality of our existence: We are already loved, already accepted, already made secure by the blood of Christ.

Living under grace is best described in terms of being, rather than doing. In fact, grace is the being that makes all the real doing possible. What does it mean to live from a place that the Scripture calls “this grace in which we stand”? The experience of grace is about living from a place where we know we are really loved. That may sound simple enough, but the truth is that

any time we encounter the experience of being loved by God, it comes with an element of surprise.

A Welcome for the Unworthy

We are conditioned from childhood on to expect to encounter acceptance and love when we have been good boys and girls. That is the way life works. If we perform well, then we have a chance at winning the prize. Our talents, our strengths, our good attitudes provide our best hope of ever feeling wanted and valued. But the strangest thing happens in the gospel. If we read the text right, we realize that God looks at our “best” and claims that He is not terribly impressed. Yet He reaches past that, into the unseemly, weak, broken—and even sinful—aspects of who we are and loves us as we have never been loved before.

Frederick Buechner writes of a rather ordinary moment in his life when this kind of reality stung him. He was receiving communion one morning in a small village church where he knew the local priest well. As the priest moved nearer, Buechner could hear him intoning the familiar words, “The body of Christ, the bread of heaven.” Over and over he repeated the phrase.

But when the priest came to him, on an impulse he inserted another word. “The body of Christ, Freddy, the bread of heaven.” It was not unusual that the priest knew his name. But the effect on Buechner was extraordinary—it caught him off guard. He says,

For the first time in my life, maybe, it struck me that when Jesus picked up the bread at His last meal and said, “This is my body which is for you,” He was doing it not just in a ritual way . . . but in an unthinkable personal way for every particular man or woman or child who ever existed or someday would exist. Most unthinkable of all: maybe He was doing it for me.

The truth of the cross, the truth about grace, Buechner writes, is that “we are welcomed not as the solid citizens that our Sunday best suggests we are, but in all our tackiness and tatteredness that nobody in the world knows better than each of us knows about ourselves—the bitterness and the phoniness and the confusion and the irritability and the prurience and the half-heartedness. The bread of heaven, Freddy, of all people.”

Grace invites us to return, over and over and over, to the surprising reality of being loved in the midst of failure, weakness, and sin—in all the unworthy places of our lives where we would least expect ever to encounter such a response.

Grace and Obedience

The experience of grace is about letting our obedience grow out of our relationship with God.

David Seamands tells the story of a woman he helped, a woman who had known many disappointments in her bruised background. She was faced with a terribly attractive temptation. Amazingly, she was able to resist. Seamands asked her how she summoned the strength to turn away from an offer that symbolized so much of what she’d missed in her life.

“I’ve thought long and hard about it,” she said, “but it would be a real departure from Christ, and I just cannot bring myself to turn my back on that kind of love.”

I often ponder her response. The “ought-to’s” and the “have-to’s” and the “shoulds” were not what she was relying on to force her to make the right choice. Rather, she let the relationship she enjoyed with the Lord be what drew her to obedience. She could not turn her back on that kind of love, she said. What God asked of her was not viewed as a burden. It was the evidence of His care and protection, the proof of His unfailing pursuit of her.

Paul makes this point in his letter to the Romans. He says it is the kindness of God that is meant to lead us to repentance—not His severity, not the harshness of the judgment we deserve (Romans 2:4). His kindness in the face of our sin is meant to melt the stubbornness in our hearts. We are responding to Someone who loves us and went to incredible lengths to demonstrate that love.

Grace and Rest

The experience of grace is also about letting ourselves relax in His embrace. There is something about experiencing grace that brings to mind the image of a weaned and satisfied child. For grace requires a willingness just to be with God in a way that we can receive, rather than perform. In his book *Silence on Fire*, William Shannon suggests that we often make the mistake of feeling we must do something in order to gain some entrance with the Lord, some hearing. He says, rather, that we need only pray to be made aware that we are already there, already at home with Him. His grace has brought Him near.

Sometimes when I pray and I am having a hard time settling into a sense of being with the Lord, a picture flashes before my eyes. I see myself standing behind a large bush, straightening my skirt and trying rather frantically to untangle something in my hand. I think it is my life I am trying to untangle! The idea is that if I could just get a little more presentable on the inside, then it might actually be possible to enter His presence.

That mental picture has helped me immensely because I realize more and more that *grace is not like that*. Grace means I can come out from behind the bush and be received by Him, once again, as the old hymn says, “just as I am.” My prayer is that I can become aware that I am already with Him, in this present moment. That is the practical reality of being received by grace. I am invited to experience the pleasure of a relationship that has been redeemed.

A few years ago a woman addicted to cocaine taught me something about what it means to let God love you this way. She was my client in a counseling internship, and one day she was terribly upset. Her roommate had tried to commit suicide, and Rachel had found her, barely alive. Rachel was unable to get the image of her friend out of her mind, an image that painfully reminded her of her brother’s death a few years before.

As I sat alone in a room with her, I felt at a loss for words. Indeed, there were no words to be said. What could I offer a woman who had experienced years of trauma, of which this last was a reminder of all the rest? Yet her tears were bordering hysteria. Finally, I made a move unusual at a county agency. I said, almost out of desperation, “Rachel, would you like for me to pray for you?”

“Oh, would you please,” she replied, to my surprise. “I would be so grateful to have someone pray for me.”

The prayer I prayed was very simple. I have no memory of the words I said, but I realized that the woman before me was becoming calm again—incredibly calm—almost childlike. When we finished praying, we began to talk once more. I asked her, “Rachel, you changed so visibly in the midst of praying, I wonder what you saw in your mind as we prayed?”

“I saw God on His throne,” she replied, matter of factly. “I saw God on His throne and He invited me to sit in His lap, and He said, ‘There now, Rachel, it will be okay. You will be all right.’”

I was speechless at the way that God met this woman. It struck a deep, deep chord in my life. I think each of us longs, at the very core of our being, for this kind of reassurance from God, for the sense that we are welcomed into His presence in a way that soothes the most tattered edges of our soul. It is His grace that invites us, always invites us. There in the silence and the solitude

He waits to give the grace we need.

Dare to Be Free

I discovered in my journey that the compulsive pace of my life mirrored the true beliefs of my heart, however erroneous. Whatever I said I knew was true about God, what I really believed was that my effort could wrest from Him a love and acceptance based on my performance. I could not receive grace—the marvelous, utterly surprising grace of God—until I stepped off the treadmill and waited with empty, needy hands. I could not hear His voice—strong, inviting, and steady—until I could separate Him from the nagging critic I carried inside me. Until I disconnected my longing to be loved from my efforts to please.

I know a little more now, with my heart as well as my head, of what the Apostle John meant when he said at the end of his life, “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev. 1:5). John was the man who dared to describe himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved.

I think John was writing about grace—the grace in which we stand.

» **See Also:** *Sidebar: Why Do I Feel So Guilty?*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PAULA RINEHART is a counselor and writer in Raleigh, North Carolina. She recently helped write an “introduction to the Russian soul” for westerners ministering in Russia.

Someday Paula hopes to walk across Scotland with her husband, Stacy.