

Discerning Truth and Error About God's Grace (Part 2)

I titled this, “Discerning Truth and Error about the Grace of God.” This is a very, very important subject, and in our nation in this hour, there is far more error on this subject than truth. The prophets in the New Testament—the apostles, who prophesied—spoke about how, in the generation that the Lord returned in the end times, how the doctrine of grace would fall into ruin, even amidst the Body of Christ. Many would pervert it, and that is one of the signs of the times. I just want you alerted to this, because my assumption is that a number of you in this room are not alerted to this fact. And if you are not alerted to it, then you are far more vulnerable to its deception.

For those of you who are alerted to it—that there is significant error in our nation around this subject—then you will be paying attention. You will be diligent and vigilant in terms of your searching of the Word in this subject. Don't assume that what you heard for years back in children's church growing up—don't just assume it was true.

Because I want to say it again; I want to say it kindly, but I want to say it straightforwardly. I believe that a significant amount—I am saying even the majority of what is being taught about the grace of God is a distortion of the truth. Which means, if that is true, it means that many of you in this room grew up in settings where grace was presented in a positive light, but not in a true light—not in its full truth. So don't assume as you hear this, you think, “Oh, I already got that. I grew up on that. Our church was really into grace.” The question is, “What version of grace?”—because everybody uses the term “grace.”

Those who speak the truth, those who speak error, and those who speak a lot truth but part error all use the terminology of grace. Everybody does. That is part of its difficulty.

REVIEW: FALSE TEACHERS IN THE CHURCH DISTORT THE GRACE OF GOD

Roman numeral I—This is a little review from last week. False teachers in the Church distort the grace of God. One of the great pressures in the end times will come from false teachers as prophesied in the two main chapters (although Paul touches on this a number of times). It's 2 Peter 2 and the book of Jude.

The most common area of false teaching that will happen in the end times is the teaching that perverts the truth and Biblical understanding of grace, and it is confusing what is works and what is not works. There is a tremendous energy for people to make sure—and some of this is really good—that they are not doing anything that has to do with works. But there is a lot of confusion around the subject of what are works.

What constitutes earning salvation or doing works that the Bible forbids or that the Bible warns us against? What constitutes diligence? Much diligence is being neglected in a fear that it is “works”—that they are trying to earn something. Diligence is life-giving, but there is distortion of understanding of this idea.

I want to say that false teachers—there are false teachers who lead the cults and the false religions of the world—but there are many false teachers who are born again, and when they die they will go to heaven, but they are still false teachers in the Body. So a false teacher—I am using the term in a soft way. It is somebody who loves God but has fundamental issues with the Bible. They are teaching falsely. They still go to heaven when they die, so do not think that all these false teachers that the apostles were prophesying about have horns and they wear red capes. They don't.

When you study 2 Peter 2 and Jude, the most troubling thing is that they're unnoticed in the midst of the Body of Christ in their teaching ministries. They're unnoticed. The people do not even know that they are false teachers. They're in the Body preaching from the pulpits. The most common area false teachers focus on is the idea of perverting the Biblical understanding of grace, to where they confuse what earning God's favor is, and they confuse the Biblical definition of what good works are and what dead works are, and what earning our position before God is.

They pervert God's grace—and here, in one sentence—by reducing its message to receiving forgiveness without requiring repentance. Most of you can think off of the top of your head of many places that proclaim a message of forgiveness without any emphasis on repentance. That is a false teaching. That is a false doctrine. People can be born again and teach that false teaching. It doesn't mean that their whole ministry is false, but they have a significant strand of error and falseness in what they are teaching. I am more concerned that none of you would do it than you figuring out who down the road is doing it.

They reduce the message of receiving forgiveness without requiring repentance, and their goal is to seek to make people to feel comfortable with God while they continue in their sin or while they continue in their spiritual laziness—to feel comfortable and to feel good about their life while living in sin or living in spiritual passivity and laziness before the Lord.

AVOIDING THE EASY ANSWERS TO ISSUES OF OBEDIENCE

Now the first emotion that we all have if we love God is, "Oh no. Am I sinning, and am I lazy?" Those are the two big issues that diligence calls us out of, and the answer is: don't let anybody give you a quick-fix answer. The answer is that it is not a big deal if you wrestle with that several times—for seasons even—for periods of time over your life. The fact that you would wrestle with that is a sign of your sincerity and godliness. It is not a sign of something negative.

The idea that we have this inherent, perfect knowledge—that we are walking in perfect obedience and full zeal—is a false idea. We don't always know if we are. We ask the Holy Spirit the question, we search it out, we don't take easy answers from people who are wanting to pat us on the back and tell us we are doing good.

There are many people who will do that. They will just put the fire out, and they will just comfort you in your sin and in your spiritual passivity, because in reality, they are comforting themselves by dialing you down a little bit. Because if you are all stirred up about this, well, you are stirring them up. Sometimes it is just a legitimate desire to be a blessing, but it's not a blessing. Any time we quench the activity of the Spirit in a person's life, and the Spirit is stirring them up to zeal and to righteousness, and we quench that in them, that's bad. That's bad.

I remember an example that I have permission from my wife to use. I have used it over the years here and there. It was many years ago that my wife, Diane, came to me and she said, "I just feel like I'm backslidden."

I said, "You do? Why?"

She said, "Well, I don't have any life in the Word; my heart is stale. It's sterile. I don't feel God's presence. I am not pressing into Him like I know that I should be."

I operated in, you know, a standard, basic husband response, a nice husband response. I said, "Sweetheart, you are doing great," and as I was finished putting my hand on her shoulder to say,

“You are doing great,” I changed my words right in mid-stream, and I said—I mean, it completely slipped out. I didn't expect to say it, but it was a bit of the Lord helping us. I said, “It *is* true. You *are* backslidden.”

I was shocked. I was shocked. I mean, Balaam's donkey prophesies after all. I just—there it was, right there on the spot, and I said, “It *is* true. You *are* backslidden, and so am I.”

It was two for one. She did not know that it shocked me when I said it. I did not expect to say that. I'm not in the habit of blaming all my kind of last-minute phrases on the Lord. I am not one who does that, but that was a true breaking-in of the Lord.

I said, “So am I.” I said, “You know what? We need to reevaluate our schedules. We need to reevaluate what we are doing with our time,” and we did. It was a searching time.

RIGHTEOUS MOURNING IN OUR SPIRIT IS THE GIFT OF GOD

It was some years back when that happened, but I have had those kinds of seasons with the Lord many times, many times—when the Lord made it clear to me, “You are not where you need to be right now, and do not let some well-meaning person encourage you out of this and get you out of this place where I am challenging you, because this pain, this anguish to go deep is the gift of the Holy Spirit operating in your spirit.”

That's what I told Diane back then. I said, “Yes, you are backslidden, and the fact that you”—and I said—“so am I, and the fact that you understand it is the gift of God on our hearts right now. And it's called Matthew 5:4, ‘Blessed are those who mourn.’”

I said, “This mourning is not the fruit of the devil. It is not the fruit of just human zeal. It's real godly mourning in our spirit. This is the gift of God. By no means should you let somebody comfort you when God is afflicting you, because God wants to bring you into greater glory and a greater relationship with Him.”

But it's in our culture that everything that is easy is good, and every word that makes it easier for somebody is good for that person, even if we quench the work of the Spirit in a friend whom we love. So have it in your thinking, in your paradigm, to not instantly encourage somebody when they say they're struggling. Say, “Yeah, you are. That is good that you are. That is good that you are unsure if you are walking in full obedience and full diligence. That is a good thing because if you are not, the Holy Spirit will tell you, and if you are, the Holy Spirit will tell you. He may not tell you in a week or even a month. He will tell you over time if you care, and our relationship with Holy Spirit is worth having uncertainty and even having a few restless, sleepless hours in our bed because we are not sure we are doing right. That is called loving God. There is no problem with that.”

But our culture is against anything that causes us to be troubled, even though the Holy Spirit might be the One striving with us to bring us into greater dimensions of the glory of God.

JUDE 4: CHARACTERISTICS OF FALSE TEACHERS

OK, Jude 4. Jude talks about this. He is talking about men in his own generation, but it goes on to talk about, in 2 Peter 2—because 2 Peter 2 and Jude are parallel passages. They are very similar.

It says, “Certain men have crept unnoticed” (Jude 4, paraphrased). They are in the pulpits. Jude said, “They are teaching in your churches. You do not even know it. They are unnoticed. They are ungodly men.” He says, “You do not even know they are ungodly men. You do not know what is going on in their secret life, their private life.”

That is not your business to try to figure out what everyone is doing. That is not the point. But here was the sign: “They are turning the grace of God into lewdness, and they are denying Jesus by doing it” (Jude 4, paraphrased).

Now we turn the grace of God into lewdness—one translation says licentiousness, which just means sinfulness. Lewdness, if you do not know the definition of “lewdness,” it just sounds—ugh. It just does not sound very good. It is negative. What they are doing is turning the grace of God into lewdness by teaching the grace of God in a way that makes people more comfortable in their compromise. They say, “Well, the grace of God, what about grace? The teacher said...”

If you resist that and make a big deal about that, they say, “Well, you are just getting into works anyway.” That is the number one—undoubtedly, that has to be the number one lie Satan has used through all of Church history. That lie has emerged in every place where God's people are: “By all means, don't do anything that is unnecessary, take it easier, and claim the grace of God.”

Jude says, “They are actually turning, they are perverting the grace of God by making it enforce lewdness” (Jude 4, paraphrased).

THE GRACE MESSAGE INSPIRES US TO DENY LUST

OK, paragraph B—The grace message inspires us to deny lust. The grace message inspires us, and gives us power to walk in godliness. The true grace message teaches us to deny ungodliness, and it gives us power.

Look at this in Titus 2: “The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared” (v. 11). For the word “salvation,” you could add the words “that brings deliverance.” You could add the word “deliverance” there. It doesn't mean just deliverance from the *penalty* of sin; it brings deliverance from the *power* of sin as well. It brings salvation from the penalty of sin (that's hell), and it brings salvation, deliverance from the *power* of sin even in our life now.

How does it do this? Verse 12. Here's how you can tell it is the grace of God. The true grace teaching teaches you to deny ungodliness. The true grace teaching teaches you to deny worldly lusts. It teaches you to live godly in this evil age, this present evil age.

Most grace teaching that I've heard over the years has been nearly absent on the issue of godliness. It is almost always on the subject of feeling comfort in our compromise. Almost all grace teaching emphasizes being comforted in the way we're living. That is not true grace teaching, although grace teaching has an element of comfort to it, for sure. But grace is the power of God and the revelation of God to inspire us to deny ungodliness, to deny unrighteousness.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GRACE AND MERCY

OK, let's go to Roman numeral II—The difference between grace and mercy. Mercy extends God's forgiveness, and grace imparts God's power. Now, grace is a big enough term where grace actually—grace can be used to encompass everything related to God's favor. Grace is a huge term that is all-encompassing, and then grace is used in a very specific way to talk about God's enabling power. So we find that both uses of grace are found throughout the New Testament.

But anytime the general term for grace is used—grace is used in a general way of God's favor, God's goodness, God's forgiveness, mercy is involved in that general idea—it also means the power to live free from sin. Many times the word grace is specifically the more narrow meaning. It means the power and the inspiration, the *enabling* to deny sin, is what it means.

There are many passages that have grace and mercy in the same passage because there are distinctions of grace and mercy in that more specific way. Again, there is a sense of which grace is very general, and it is everything that has to do with God's kindness, God's goodness, God's power, God's anointing—it's all under the large banner of grace. But many times the word "grace" is very specific, and it has to do with enabling power. It enables us in righteousness and it enables us in ministry. It's an enabling power. That is what grace is.

Paragraph B— We looked at this last week. Mercy is *not* receiving the bad things we deserve. Mercy is *not* getting what we deserve. Those are the bad things. We escape something negative, called the wrath of God. Grace is receiving the good things that we don't deserve, an impartation of God's power for righteousness, but it's also power for ministry. It is not just for our own hearts. It is also for the sphere that God has called us to.

BIBLICAL GRACE IS POWER IN OUR INNER MAN

Now the verses that I have under here, 2 Corinthians 12—the term "grace" is used related to the subject of strength and power. It is not talking about forgiveness. When Jesus is speaking to Paul and says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9), He wasn't saying, "My *forgiveness* is sufficient." He meant, "My *power* is sufficient." The word "grace," there, is the idea of power.

It goes on, Paul does, in Romans 6 and really is specific about this. It is in Romans chapter 6—people were confusing the idea of grace. When they heard "grace," all they heard was forgiveness, and Paul said, "No, I am not talking right now about forgiveness. I am talking about the power to live rightly." Grace is the power to live rightly. Do not automatically say, "Grace means forgiveness," because grace, many times is very specific in its offer and invitation to give power to the inner man or power to our ministry. But here in Romans 6 he is talking about power in the inner man.

Paul gives his logic. He says, "For sin shall not have dominion over you" (Rom. 6:14). Why? Why shall you be free from sinful addictions? "Because you are under grace" (Rom. 6:14, paraphrased). He is not saying, "Because you are under the power of *forgiveness*." That's not what he is saying.

He says, "Sin should not have dominion over you because you are under the power of God. You are under the administration of God's power" (Rom. 6:14, paraphrased). The Holy Spirit lives in you, and if you live rightly with the Holy Spirit and you fill your mind with the Word and make right choices, and you are not quenching the Holy Spirit but you are living right with the Holy Spirit, that's all understood as living under grace. It means living right with the Holy Spirit.

So Paul said, "Sin should not have dominion over you. You don't need to live in those addictions, because you are under grace. You are under the, you are in a relationship with God where the Holy Spirit is living in you. And if you live in a close relationship to the Spirit, you are going to experience that grace. The Holy Spirit will help you live close to Him. It takes God to love God. The Holy Spirit will help you live rightly with the Holy Spirit."

Then he goes on in verse 15. It is very important that you follow this logic of Romans 6. Paul now addresses the common subject that has been, for two thousand years, mistaken in Church history. Paul says, "What then? Do we sin more? Shall we sin more because we are under grace? Don't tell me that you're misunderstanding how grace operates. I am not talking about sinning more so you get forgiven more. I am talking about—you are not trying to get more forgiveness right here. You

are trying to experience more power” (Rom. 6:15, paraphrased).

He says, “Shall we sin more to get more grace? No! You totally misunderstood. Rather, present your members of your body”—he is talking about the members of your body—“present them to God as slaves of righteousness” (Rom. 6:15,19, paraphrased).

He says, “Grace produces a zeal for righteousness and a power for it.”

JESUS IS A KING AND WE ARE REQUIRED TO OBEY HIM

Let's go to paragraph F.—a foundational revelation of the kingdom is that Jesus is our King. I know that's pretty fundamental, but this is a revelation, honestly, that you rarely hear. You rarely hear emphasized the relationship of a king and a slave. A king's subjects are his servants, and when it is a king—all of his servants—if it is a king, they are his slaves. They don't have democracy in kingdoms.

So a servant, though the king has a good relationship with the servant, there is no mistake that the relationship is one of obedience. Now, it is a really radical revelation when this touches you. Maybe, as there are a number of you in this room, maybe it never has. The idea that you are really a slave who really does not have rights because a King is ruling over you who owns your body—for real, not figuratively. It is not a neat metaphor; it's a reality. There is a King; He owns you. He owns you, and He has given you grace so that you would have the insight and the power and the perseverance *and* the forgiveness that is necessary to live in that ownership in a faithful way.

It says here in 1 Corinthians 6:18, “Flee immorality” (paraphrased). Verse 19, “Or don't you know that your body is a temple of the Spirit? Don't you know that you are not your own” (paraphrased)? You do understand that in the way that Caesar owned the people in the Roman empire”—and the people in the Roman Empire understood that in Paul's day—“you really are a slave. For real; you are.”

You really don't have the right—it's not just that you do not have the permission, you do not have the right in your relationship in the kingdom of God to tell King Jesus, “I am going to do what I want, and I'll just get forgiven later.”

That is an intrinsic misunderstanding and violation of the fundamental concept of the kingdom of God. But the reason that to most believers, that is an idea that does not touch them or they never think about, is because they were brought into the kingdom on a message of grace that was all about forgiveness without repentance—and it wasn't even a kingdom. It was a club. What they joined was a fraternity where everybody got to vote, and they all determine what the party would be like.

It is a real kingdom. It's not a fraternity. And we don't get to vote. The Lord loves us, and He hears our heart, but He is the King, and it's not mostly about having a party, though there are elements of joy and festivity in our relationship with the Lord—significant elements, and more elements in the age to come—but there is a real kingdom that is really being assaulted by another king. It is real.

And the reason that you flee sexual immorality isn't just because you might get caught, or you might get a disease, or somebody might get mad. Those are the reasons that many people avoid immorality. They don't want to get caught, they don't want to get a disease, and they don't want somebody getting mad. They don't want somebody to break up or somebody to get the wrong expectation.

But the reason we abstain from immorality is because we are owned, our body is, by a King. That is

the reason Paul gives. He says, verse 20, “You were bought with a price. Glorify God in your body *and* in your spirit”—that means your attitudes—“because they belong to God” (1Cor 6:20, paraphrased). Your body and your spirit belong to God.

OBEDIENCE IS NOT ABOUT SIMPLE PRAGMATISM

So when somebody is looking at the subject of immorality, it's not just an issue—it's not just pragmatism, which means being practical. It's not just, “Well, I do not want to do that because I might get caught, and it is a big mess, and I do not want to get caught. That is just a big hassle.” That's pragmatism, and pragmatism has some wisdom in it. And it's not just because you don't want somebody to get mad and they get the wrong expectation and you have to break up with them later, because you did not really mean it anyway.

We avoid immorality because we are owned by a King who paid for us, and He *really* shed blood to buy us, and He really owns us, and that's His view of the kingdom—that it is a kingdom. His view of the kingdom is not that it is a fraternity. It is not a club. It is really a kingdom, for real. And when this strikes our spirit more, we have more of a spirit of truth when we read the Word of God.

But the revelation of a King and a kingdom is very rare in our nation. Now, thousands of ministries are preaching it. Thousands are, but tens of thousands are not. It is rare. It is still out there. I was just reading some material today from some of the great minds and some of the great hearts in our nation—guys like John Piper. They were talking, and I was reading what some of them say about grace, and it was so strong. It exhilarated me. It made me excited that I am in the Body of Christ with men and women who have zeal for God.

And I say, “O Lord, we need ten thousand more of them.” There are thousands of them out there, so I am not trying to overstate it in a negative, but there are tens of thousands, many, hundreds of thousands. There are three hundred thousand churches in America right now, and I would go as far to say as there are some hundreds of thousands of ministries who are not focused on this in a spirit of truth.

Therefore, our young people don't even have a grid that they grow up in a kingdom culture, that they are owned by Somebody else, and that they really don't have rights. It's like, “What? What? What about grace?” That is what grace is about. Grace is to give us the insight, because it takes supernatural insight to see that. It takes grace to see that. Grace is the spirit of revelation. And it takes power to walk out that revelation.

And it takes forgiveness because when we blow it, and we will blow it, instead of blowing it and going to probation for three months, we can blow it, and if we understand the mercy dimension of grace, the forgiveness dimension, we can confess our sin, and within the hour be standing with boldness and confidence that we are in God's embrace and feeling His pleasure if our repentance is sincere. So understanding the forgiveness dimension is *huge*, because the Lord does not want us to spend three months on probation when we sin. He wants us right back in before Him with confidence—running to Him, not from Him—with confidence that we are first-class citizens having sinned an hour ago, because we repented and the blood of Jesus is sufficient.

But the mercy dimension of grace is by no means the only dimension. There is a revelatory dimension—the fact that you have insight in the Word. That's grace. The fact that you have a tenderized spirit when you worship, you feel God's presence—that's grace. The fact that you have more victory than you did a year or two ago—that's grace. That's power working in you. Whether we are talking about the forgiveness dimension of grace or the power or revelatory dimensions of grace, it is all unmerited favor. All of that is favor we don't deserve.

BEING DILIGENT IN GRACE IS NOT EARNING GOD'S FAVOR

Some people think because we exert energy, somehow we deserve it. I mean, think about it. We're sitting before God with a sinful heart with no power. God gives us power because we're sitting there saying words to Him. You can't *earn* power by sitting in a prayer room in a chair. There is no government in existence that would give somebody power because they sit in a chair. In no court would that be considered earning anything.

Yet when you tell people to be diligent, to bring their inner life before God, they automatically think, when they have wrong teaching, "What about grace and unmerited favor?" The power we get when we sit is still undeserved. Reading the Bible and saying words to God in no stretch of the imagination warrants deserving power that is eternal touching your spirit.

So it's this confusion that we are earning it, so therefore, if we are earning it, it cannot be grace, so hey, I would rather be into grace, so they slip into laziness and compromise and their heart goes stale. Their heart shrinks. They confuse this very, very simple doctrine, but it has been confused all the way through Church history. There have always been God's servants who have made it blazingly clear in every generation, but the common or the larger numbers have always gone for the false definition of this.

See, what we do when we are diligent is that we are bringing our inner man, we are bringing our attitudes, we are bring our mind into God's presence. We are bringing our cold hearts into the presence of His bonfire, even though we don't feel His fire that much. We are bringing it and just saying, "Lord, give us power and insight on our cold hearts and our cold minds. Give us what we do not deserve." All we are doing is sitting here and saying no to sin. That is not deserving of anything.

I mentioned last week that if a murderer was convicted of, you know, mass murders and stood before the judge and he said, "I am sorry, and I am willing to study. Will you free me from those murders."

The judge would say, "No, you have to pay for those murders."

Being sorry and reading the Bible and changing attitudes *never* cancels out the crime we committed and the penalty we deserve. It is all unmerited favor—whether it is the forgiveness dimension or the revelatory part where God gives us divine ideas, He gives us insight into the Word or into life, or the fact that He gives us motivation in our heart. It is all underserved. But He says, "You have to bring yourself and sit in front of My fire if you want to receive that undeserved power."

But it is the bringing of ourselves to sit in front of His fire—that is where people trip up and think, "I am earning it somehow," but there is no court in Heaven or on Earth that would constitute that as earning the power of the King.

CONVICTION ABOUT OBEDIENCE IS KINDNESS

Paragraph G. Now the reason I care so much about this—well, I care about it because it is right and the Lord is honored, that is good enough—but I care about it because I understand what I wrote here in paragraph G. The only possible way you are going to feel on a regular basis—and I do not mean every minute of every day. That is not what I mean by regular. But I mean more than once a year. The only way you are going to feel the presence and the power of God on your spirit is if you are pursuing one hundred-fold obedience. That is the only place in our relationship with God where the power touches our spirit regularly.

So this false teaching of grace, which appears to be sympathetic and kind, it's like a doctor who is looking at a patient with cancer, and says, "You know what? I am going to be kind to you. You're doing well. We are not going to give you any treatment, because this treatment is going to hurt. So why do we just not—you know what, I just want to make your day good. You are doing well. Go ahead and go home."

The guy says, "Really? I am doing well?" That guy is going to go home, and that cancer is going to grow. That doctor—well, he would get a malpractice suit and be sued for a huge amount of money.

He says, "No," as he stands before the doctor judges and says, "Well that guy was so discouraged, and the treatment was going to hurt, and it was going to make him sick, and it was going to be expensive. I didn't want to put that on him."

The judge would say, "You're out of your mind! What are you doing? That man is going to lose his life. He lost years of his life because of that approach."

The reason I care so much about this is as a shepherd, I know for a fact that if you buy into the truth for decades, many more times than not, you will feel His presence and His power and it will change your destiny before God in this age and in the age to come. I am contending for your greatness. I am contending for a Christian life that has power in it.

And the other way, though it's man-pleasing and comforting, it leaves the Body of Christ bored and addicted—addicted to many things. It is not just addicted to, you know, the real scandalous sins, but just addicted to laziness, addicted to selfishness, just addicted to unbrokenness, pride. It doesn't have to be some particular substance that they are addicted to. But we will never get free of our addictions, the really heavy-duty ones, or the ones that are more subtle but are still powerful—our pride and our selfishness is just our way on the inside. We are born with a powerful dimension of sin, and our only possible way out of that bondage is through the teaching of the Word of God by experiencing the grace of God while going wholeheartedly.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ONE HUNDRED PERCENT OBEDIENCE

I have written here something that I have said for twenty-five years; meaning, I have judged it, and had people like it and not like it, and twenty-five years later, I feel very strongly that it is true because I have lots of interaction, good and bad, on it, on this principle.

Ninety-eight percent obedience, if you are obedient in every area of your life but one, and you have one area—I mean, you are trying to be obedient. You might be stumbling in it, but every time you stumble, you get right back into the race, and you repent of your sin and go hard after God. That is what I mean by obedient. I do not mean that you are victorious, but you have set your heart to obey. You have one area, *one area* in your life where you say, "No, I am going to do what I want to do on that. The money is mine. The time is mine. My speech is mine. My attitudes are mine." You take one of those areas and say "no," you will live virtuously a powerless Christian faith. *One issue* will do it.

It's like the story of the little boy who, you know, on Christmas morning he gets the big train set. He hooks it all up, and says, "Daddy, look. The train set is great." He plugs it in, but the train will not work. This one-pound train will not work. It's an elaborate train set. If there is one piece of metal on the track that is touching both of them, it will short-circuit, and the entire power and light company of that city cannot move that little one-pound train.

That's like *one area* where you say to the Holy Spirit, "No, I am not going to do that. I am going to do what I want to do with my time. I am going to do what I want to do with my money. I am going to do what I want to do"—you just pick one—"with my attitudes, my sexuality, my food, my serving or lack of serving. I'm just not going to obey You on that subject. I'm going to do what I want to do."

One issue. It won't kick you out of the kingdom, but I guarantee you this: you will live for decades with a powerless Christianity. You have a little spurt here and there because God is nice, but by and large, you will have far more deadness on the inside than being alive, because the Word of God requires—the grace of God functions when we live—not in victory; I am not talking about victory. I am talking about the *decision* to obey, not the attainment of it. You can decide to obey the day you are born again. If you were brought into the kingdom in a right way, you can say, "Every area is Yours," and you can begin to feel the power of God, literally that day.

You can feel it your entire Christian life, and again, I do not mean twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. There are times when you won't feel His presence, but the rule is that you will. The rule is that the Word of God will be exciting in your spirit, not always. It will be dead and boring sometimes, but it will be—it will have a spark on it more times than not.

A brand new believer can operate in grace that way, not because they are victorious, but because they have set their heart to obey in every area. Now a couple years go by, and that fiery believer starts thinking, "Hey, I am the only one around here going all the way, you know? No one else is; the leadership's not. I am going to get into grace," and they start getting into deception. Then they end up in the boredom of the people around them, the spiritual boredom.

I tell you, I have watched this for so many years, and it pains me that so many well-meaning people are like the doctor who does not want to bother the patient with the truth about the cancer and the treatments. So they say, "You know what? Let's make this a good day. Let's just make it nice." I know for a fact, in my own experience, having done it and not done it. I have done it both ways lots of times. I am not proud of the one, but I am glad for the other. I have gone back and forth a bunch of times where I have had times where there was not *one* issue in my life that I was not working hard to obey, not one issue. Then there will be an area that I will just get lazy on, and there is a direct correlation in terms of those months between what is happening in my spirit and what I am feeling about God.

STRIVING TO ENTER THE NARROW GATE

Roman numeral III—Jesus calls us to strive to enter the narrow gate. Now my guess is, He used the word "strive"—that's down in Luke 13:2, and we'll get there in a second. He used the word "strive" on purpose. "Strive" is the absolute anathema word in the Body of Christ. You can say anything, and if you say "strive," it's canceled out. Because one thing we know as Americans is that we are not going to sweat and we are not going to strive. That's absolutely not—we are not even open to the s-word. We are not going to strive.

If it infringes on me and troubles my schedule or troubles what I want, and it's not a big heavy thing, it's not a sin thing, I am not going to bother with it because that is called striving—and Jesus might answer and say, "Yes, and you will be rewarded forever if you obey Me in this issue."

We must understand what striving means and what it does not mean. Because the idea that striving is automatically negative means that Jesus was a good teacher, except for a few times where He kind of blew it, like this one time here. I assure you that Jesus is a perfect teacher. He did not blow it.

Our culture is blowing it, not Jesus. I am talking about the culture of the Church in our nation.

It says in Matthew 7, “Enter by the narrow gate” (v. 13). Why? He tells us, “The narrow gate it difficult. The way is difficult” (Matt. 7:13, paraphrased).

“That doesn’t sound like grace.”

“There are few who find it” (Matt. 7:13, paraphrased).

“Augh! That *totally* doesn’t sound like grace. Well, where is Jesus coming from? He ought to read the Bible. He said ‘difficult’ and ‘few.’”

Now, later on, Jesus says it even more directly. They asked the question, “Lord, are there few who are being saved” (Luke 13:23, paraphrased)?

He said to them, “Strive.” He does not just say *enter* by the narrow gate. He says, “*Strive* to enter by the narrow gate” (Luke 13:24, paraphrased). He is going to bring it up a notch.

Exert energy, go through the uncertainty of, “Maybe I’m trying too hard.”

The Lord says, “Don’t worry. If you’re trying too hard, I will talk to you.”

I would much rather be trying too hard and have the Lord correct me mid-stream than doing it the normal way of our culture, which is to be totally out in laziness and selfishness, thinking it is in grace, and being deceived.

ENTERING THE NARROW WAY: FULLNESS IN THIS LIFE

Jesus said, “Strive.” He says, “Why? Why do I tell you to strive to go through the narrow gate? Because *many*” —circle that— “many, many people who say the name of Jesus, who use His name” — He is not talking about Muslims right here. He is not talking about other religions. He is talking about the people who are trying to go through the narrow gate of Jesus. He is talking about people who profess the name of Jesus. “Many will seek to enter, but they won’t actually be able to do it because they won’t do it My way. They will do it the false way. They won’t enter in.” (Luke 13:24, paraphrased).

Now entering in is talking about the fullness, the way, the narrow way. The way is entering into the fullness of what God has for us in this life. I know many of you in this room, if not all of you—we are in this thing for fullness. We are not trying to do the least possible thing to get fire insurance and hopefully end up in heaven. We are not doing this for that reason. We are trying to go all the way with God and to touch Him. The narrow way—the narrow gate—is the way of fullness regardless of how full “fullness” is. We don’t have to define how full it is, we just need the most that God will give the human spirit in this age. You have to go the narrow way.

Now, in verse 23 (paraphrased), the apostle said, “Lord, are there few being saved?” And this is where people have gotten off on this. They have reduced salvation. Salvation in the Bible is in three tenses. Did you know that you *are* saved, you are *being* saved, and you *will be* saved? All three of those are Biblical concepts. I can give you Bible verses for all three of them. You *are* saved—justification. You are *being* saved in the present tense; that’s called sanctification. You *will be* saved at the resurrection; that’s called glorification.

What happens is that people read this and they reduce this only to justification, but Jesus is talking

about His saving purposes of why He came to the Earth. We better hope that He is talking about sanctification and glorification, because if He is talking about justification, the standard went way up.

I have had people look at this verse and say, “That striving thing, that’s about salvation.”

I said, “That just doubled your trouble if that is true. You are not out of trouble. You got into twice the amount of trouble you were in from what I was telling you.”

I don’t believe that Jesus is talking about justification by faith. I think He is talking about the salvation experience in its three tenses, and of course, the difficult one is the present-tense sanctification. It is our life being freed and full of the Spirit in this age.

It’s easy to walk in the Spirit in the age to come. I do not think that was on His mind. We get salvation—we get forgiven for free. The difficulty is walking in the way. It’s the way. It’s not the experience of getting born again one day. It’s the way. It’s the lifestyle. I believe the focus of this passage is on the present tense, not the past-tense justification, not the future-tense glorification, but the present-tense sanctification. But of course, with the Lord, He would say, “I came for salvation. I came to deliver you from darkness in the full sense of the word.”

Beloved, I want to ask you, have you reconciled, not in your teaching ministry—because most people read these verses to see how they are going to teach them. “You know, I have a little Bible study,” somebody says. “I have three or four people. I have to figure out how to teach this rightly.”

That’s good. I like that. I’m a teacher. I understand that. But have you ever struggled with this verse, not so you can teach it rightly, but so you can actually live it rightly in your private life? Have you actually looked at verse 24 and wrestled with it and said, “What meaneth thou this? What is this thing? *What?*” Not so you can say it rightly at a Bible study, but to where you can actually live it right under the gaze of the Holy Spirit.

Paragraph B.—Paul exerted—because to walk, to strive, is to exert effort. That’s the idea. It’s to give it our best. It’s the analogy of the athlete that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 9. He uses the marathon runner when he gives this analogy. He is talking about exerting effort to live without any compromise and to live in the presence of God.

Now look what Paul says in Acts 24. He says, “I always strive. I exert effort. I really am careful. I am not casual about this issue. I want my conscience right before God, and I want to be living honest before people. I want to be living right before people, not just before God” (Acts 24:16, paraphrased).

STRIVING IN GRACE, NOT IN LEGALISM

Paragraph C—In what sense must we resist striving? In what sense must we embrace striving? Because, beloved, we have to answer this. This Bible verse is never going away—never. We are not going to wake up one day and find that Luke 13:24 is out of the Bible. It is going to be there forever.

So I determined, I’ve got to figure this out, and I don’t want your opinion. Meaning, I appreciate your insight, but what I mean by that—it sounds negative. I don’t mean it that way. I mean I’ve got to know. I do not want you to encourage me and pat me on the back and say, “O Mike, you’re doing great.”

That is not going to help me if you're wrong. I don't want somebody's encouraging opinion. I want to know by the Spirit of truth that I am striving *always* to have a good conscience before God and man and to enter the narrow way. I want to know by the revelation of the Spirit, not that I am looking for one day when the Lord says, "You're doing it." That is not what I mean. I am not talking about an audible voice experience. I want to have the assurance for decades that I am always striving to enter the narrow way that few enter into because it is hard to enter into as a Christian in the grace of God.

Even though you enter into it, it's still unmerited favor. Because what you will do, the energy we will exert to enter into that, will only be a small fraction of the payment of power and insight that God gives us. We give energy, we give our efforts, and God gives us the power of God and the wisdom of God. Beloved, that is not earning it by any stretch of the imagination.

So I'm asking you the question. In what sense do you resist striving because of the legalism, and in what instance do you embrace striving, called dedication? Because if you don't know the answer to that question, then you are playing—you're playing a game with your soul. It's like Russian roulette. "Well, I read a book, and he said I was doing good." It doesn't matter what the book says. You have only got one soul, and you have only got one time on the Earth. You better know from God the answer to that question, and if it takes you months to get the answer, that is a great investment of your months to do this.

"Well, I am uncomfortable today. I'm not sure." Well, there's nothing wrong with that. Just sweat it out for a while. Go for it.

Meaning, we are just so quick to want everybody comforted. It's the analogy I have used so often of the little caterpillar in the cocoon struggling to get out: "Somebody please cut this thing off of me." And the Lord knows the way He created that caterpillar, if somebody cuts that cocoon off, the struggle, that little worm will never be a beautiful butterfly.

We are in a struggle, and we don't need quick answers; we need right answers. We need right answers, not quick ones. And if we struggle for a while, that's not so terrible. Although I am all for using godly wisdom to help people in their struggle. But at the same time, if you don't get the answer immediately, don't settle for quick answers, because you want answers that God is going to back up. If we answer this wrongly, we walk in legalism. If we answer this wrongly on the other side, we walk in lewdness, or licentiousness or compromise. We've got to avoid both of them.

WHAT GODLY STRIVING LOOKS LIKE AND WHAT IT ACCOMPLISHES

Paragraph D.—Obviously, everybody knows this. We don't strive to earn God's love. But do you know that you *do* strive in terms of bringing your attitudes of your inner man, and bringing your mind (in terms of prayer and fasting and the Word), you *do* strive to walk in the narrow path of holiness. You do have to exert energy to bring your inner life into the presence of God. The bringing of your inner life—that's what you're doing when you're reading the Word of God; you are bringing your inner life into God's presence. You're taking time to put information into your inner man.

When you repent of an attitude, repent of a sin—that's an inward attitude you're changing in your inner life. That takes effort. That takes energy. That takes time. That is troublesome. It takes effort to do this. Fasting, prayer, and serving take effort. But basically, the effort you are exerting is to bring your inner man into greater contact with the Holy Spirit. You are not earning it at all. What you're doing is positioning yourself to receive.

So we all know that grace is unmerited favor. We are not striving to get God to like us. What we're doing is we are exerting our best energies to get a breakthrough at the heart level. That's what we are doing. We are getting a breakthrough at the heart level.

Paragraph E— We're just going to end with this. There is much error in the Church today about Jesus' command to strive to enter the narrow door. Much confusion—well, it is not that much confusion or that much error, because almost nobody has even bothered with it. But I'm hoping that this is going to be an important subject in our lives—all across the kingdom of God in our nation. We are going to *care* about what that verse means. I just talked about it: we exert our greatest efforts to bring our energies, to bring our inner life before God. That's really what we're doing.

THE KINDNESS OF GOD IN ALLOWING STRIFE IN OUR LIVES

Now, I'm just going to give you a little point that I do not have on the handout. I am going to end with this principle that is not here on the notes. It's that, when Adam sinned, Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden—Genesis chapter 3, they sinned. What did God do? He put a curse on the ground.

He said, "Here's the deal, Adam, for you, in terms of work. Here's the deal. Instead of the fruit trees growing easily—they're still going to grow, but here is the catch: they are going to grow with sweat, and hot sun. I am going to let the sun bear down on you, and they are going to grow with weeds, with obstacles. So there is going to be frustration, a hot sun, and there are going to be obstacles—weeds, thorns, and thistles."

So whereas before there was sin, he still cultivated the garden—Adam still cultivated. He still planted seeds and cultivated the garden before there was ever sin, but now that there is sin, there is the frustration of the heat, and there are the obstacles of the thorns, and now there is—the animals are mean. The animals were really nice, and now the animals are mean, and the weather is hostile, and all these things.

Here's my point. We look at that and think of that only as the curse, and it is a curse. But that very curse is redemptive. What I mean by that is that God in His wisdom knew that because Adam has sin in him, if he doesn't have something that is occupying him and completely getting a hold of his attention, something that is resisting him, he is going to get into far greater sin unless he is in the midst of this battle and the rigors of this work that God has given him.

For instance, we see it all the time in the kind of people who are in famous public life, the rich and the famous—but I will just give you a scenario. It will seem humorous, but it is not. Imagine your life. Imagine your life. You are a born-again believer. You love God. You are exactly who you are. Somebody comes and says, "OK, here is a billion dollars. You will never have to work again. You will not have to do anything, and then everything is going to go right that you touch. You are not going to have any frustrations. You are going to go build a company, and no one is going to betray you, no one is going to hassle you, no one is going to lie to you, and you can have lots of energy. You are never going to get sick. You are going to have lots of energy."

What would happen to you in five or ten years? If you're normal, you would end up in so many addictions to sin with that kind of free time and energy in your hand. What I mean, we think, "No, I would be different. I would just read the Word. I would serve in humility. I would just take the lower route. I would really do it if I had all that."

What I am saying is, the way the human spirit is designed, the very rigors of what frustrates us and

hassles us, preoccupies us, and humbles us—and does about five other things that I won't go into right now—that actually is a part of God's purpose that keeps us free from far greater bondages than we have right now. If you had tons of free time, tons of money, everybody liked you, no obstacles, no frustrations, you would have a far greater struggle with sin that you don't even know about.

You know I think about just the rigors of IHOP. Sometimes I sit back and think, “Man”—you know, it's the same with many of you as well—I say, “here we go. We have Friday, Saturday, Sunday morning, Sunday night, Monday staff, Tuesday. I'm tired!” I get done with one and I get right ready for the next one.

And I have heard this over the years, just the Lord's whisper: “You have no idea the trouble your soul would be in if the last ten, twenty, or thirty years you were not wrestling against the rigors of leading and preparing and serving and battling. You have no idea the bondages you would be in right now.”

I know lots of believers and they have gotten out of the battle, and they get everything as easily as possible—and of course, we want everything as easy as possible; we do not have to make things hard. There are plenty of things that are hard by themselves. But they have retired spiritually, they have retired financially, and they have retired relationally, and they just play. I know scores of them. And their soul is more weighed down, and they have more things in their spirit that are negative than they have any idea about.

Because sin is in us, there is another dimension of striving. We have to go against the elements, like the caterpillar. It is part of the design of the human spirit. Yes, we have tears, but you would have far greater tears if you had no struggle. We only know the tears we have today. We don't know the tears we *would have* had today if everything would have been different and nothing resisted us.

You sit in the prayer room, “God, the Bible is boring. I love You. You're boring. The people next to me, they're weird. I don't like this. Why did I sign up for this dumb program? I would rather be...” What? “I don't know, on a beach floating—you know, doing something easy.” That works for a little while, but if that happens for years and years, like what people would love to do if they could, they would end up with so many bondages they have no idea they have the capacity for.

IF YOU GET OUT OF THE WAR, YOU WILL GET INTO SIN

I remember the day I met Bob Jones. I mean, talk about a weird conversation. He walked in, and you know, I have told you this story before. He says, “Hey, you are a youth pastor.”

I answer, “No, no I'm not. I am the senior pastor. I beg your pardon.”

He says, “Nah, nah, you're a youth pastor.” And he said, “Are you a singer, a musician?”

I say, “Nope.”

He says, “Well you are going to have a ton of singers and musicians. They are going to come from everywhere.”

I said, “What are you talking about?”

He said, “Well, it won't happen for a while, because you have to grow up.” It's the first time I ever

met him. He says, “You are way too immature to be this youth pastor that God has called you to be.”

I said, “OK.”

He said, “You see this thing you are doing, this church? It is going to even grow.”

He had my attention now. I ask, “Yeah?” Because he was at least touching my sense of dignity with a little pride here and there, floating with some salt and pepper shaken on it. I said, “Yeah?”

He said, “Yeah, it is going to grow.”

I said, “Good.”

He said, “The reason it is going to grow is because God is going to keep you busy to keep you out of trouble till you grow up.” He really told me that. He said, “Because you are like David”—and many people are like David in this sense—“You are like David. You have a warrior spirit. In 2 Samuel 11,”—I happened to know the verse, because I had been a student of the life of David. “It says in 2 Samuel 11, ‘In the springtime when the kings go to war, David stayed home and stayed out of the war’ (v.1, paraphrased), but what happened? He fell into sin with Bathsheba, and when kings go to war,”—he said—“you’re like that. If you get out of the war, you will get into sin.”

He says, “Do not listen to anybody that tells you that you are going to burn out. You are not going to burn out; I promise you. You get out of the war, you have enough energy in your spirit, you will get into addictions and into sin. I assure you. You get out of the war, you will get into sin. So the Lord is going to let your world grow, and it is going to really occupy you, and the Lord will bless you and bless people and do some things here and there, but know this. It’s to keep you busy to keep you out of sin.” I wasn’t very impressed with that.

THE REDEMPTIVE VALUE OF STRIVING

My point is this. Many of our struggles at the end of the day, though we want to get rid of them, much of our striving actually has a redemptive value. The very fact we’re pushing, as the caterpillar against the cocoon, we are forming wings like a butterfly. There are many things that we have no time and energy to do that we don’t ever like to admit or ever think that we would do them, but many of us would be doing other things if our life was completely easy, maybe not in a week, maybe not in a year, maybe not in five years, but over decades, history just gives testimony of that for believers and unbelievers alike.

So I look at this thing called striving. It is God’s way, but this is the God who saw the curse in the garden. I think He would say something like, “Striving is as much for you, saving you.”

You have no idea how essential it is that you war against your boredom in the prayer room. You war against your confusion in the Bible. You go take classes, and you study and say, “Augh, I have to figure it out.” That whole thing is completely engaging you in an entirely different mindset than you would be in.

Amen. Let’s stand. Lord, we ask You even now. God, we ask You for liberty in our spirit. Lord, we want to live lives of striving in the grace of God. We don’t want to strive to earn Your favor. We want to give ourselves in diligence. We want to pursue with all of our heart.