

## Is Grace Enough?

By Ric Shields – August 2018

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He sat in a crumpled heap in the heat of August just outside the convenience store window. A bicycle and a wrinkled, white paper bag were the only things beside him. He appeared to be high on something when he sat up and suddenly yelled, “Welcome to America!” With that, and as if those three words had taken every ounce of strength, he resumed his slumped position.

I closed my eyes, shook my head, and mouthed a phrase I had heard and used too many times over the years. While it had previously comforted me, today would be the exception.

*“There, but for the grace of God, go I.”*

I pitied him. Where was he from? Who was his family? How did he get there? What would his future hold? Admittedly, it all looked bleak. I struggled to understand how one could fall so far. He appeared to be in his late 20’s, was relatively handsome, and seemed physically fit. It couldn’t have been so long ago that he was in high school. Was he a star athlete? Had he attended college? What brought him to this disparate state?

Though it didn’t make me feel any better, I kept coming back to the idea of grace; the unmerited favor of God. It was God’s grace which had sustained me, helped me, and given me purpose in life. His grace was more than enough. Lots more. Right?

Satan tormented the Apostle Paul with what is vaguely described as a “*thorn in (Paul’s) flesh.*” Through centuries of speculation, no one really knows what Paul meant by the word *thorn*. What we do know is the Lord’s instruction to him. “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*” (2 Corinthians 12:9 NIV). For Paul’s situation, God made it clear that His grace was enough. Paul may have even understood the Lord telling him to quit

pestering Him about it. Like my mother used to say when I had exhausted her with incessant whining, “*Enough is enough!*”

Still, it gnawed at me and wouldn’t quit. What if it wasn’t only about grace? Not to discount God’s grace, but was it enough all by itself?

I kept pondering the concept. What if it took more than grace, though grace should be more than enough? The irony of the thought made me squirm. Who was I to tell the Lord one needs more than grace while knowing His grace is more than enough? It became a circular thought with no exit ramp.

The answer surprised me and provided the off ramp I couldn’t see. It seemed simple, but I knew simple answers are known to have complicated, hidden, supporting elements. I began to realize that more than grace was at work in my life and in the lives of others who had escaped a plight like that of the “*Welcome to America Guy.*”

It occurred to me that grace is at work in the spiritual disciplines of our lives. Though it is more than enough, grace seems to dissipate if not linked to spiritual disciplines and spiritual disciplines become unbearable laws when grace is absent.

What are those spiritual disciplines which complement grace?

- **Community:** We need others no less than others need us. Knowing we are not alone or unseen gives meaning and purpose to us. No one likes to fail in public. Grace is with us when we live openly among others.
- **Accountability:** Mutual accountability gives others the opportunity to speak into our lives and us the opportunity to speak into theirs. Regularly meeting with an accountability partner provides a window for another to see and hear changes in our lives and to reflect those observations to us. Many personal crises can be avoided by early detection and intervention.

- **Custom:** On the Sabbath day, Jesus “*went into the synagogue, as was his custom*” (Luke 4:16). When we reverse the order and customarily choose to NOT participate in corporate gatherings and worship, we decrease the sense of God’s presence in our lives and fail to see it in others within the sphere of our relationships. As I reminded our teenaged children, “*We don’t HAVE to go to church; we GET to go to church.*” While worship may not be obligatory, our church attendance should be customary.
- **Preaching:** “*Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ*” (Romans 10:17). The faith we need to live by is transmitted by the spoken word. The Word of God enters our ears, is processed by our brain, travels to our heart, and produces faith. Unless there is a physical disconnect, we need to hear the Word for us to join in the corporate faith enjoyed by others around us.
- **Personal Shame:** The shame we receive from others can often alienate us. The shame we feel due to our own failures can motivate us to change. I have often considered the words in Isaiah 57:1 and have prayed, “*Should my actions bring discredit to my family, my church, or the Kingdom of God, please be so gracious to spare me from the evil and take me to be with you.*” There are behaviors from which I abstain because I know them to be sinful and would discredit the testimony I intend for others to know. His grace helps me to embrace the good, reject the bad, and avoid bringing shame.
- **Personal Study and Devotions:** God’s Word is alive, and the Holy Spirit illuminates it in our hearts and lives. The Psalmist wrote, “*I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you*” (Psalm 119:11). Precious things are often locked away so others cannot steal them from us. Knowing the Word comes from reading and studying the

Word. The precious truths we uncover and apply to our lives become an important part of us. My Bible may become lost, stolen, or destroyed but the Word of God can remain in my heart and be an important guide in my daily activities.

While the grace of God is more than enough, its effectiveness is multiplied when coupled with spiritual disciplines. Together, they will help us to keep our feet on the path that leads to an abundant and everlasting life.

I cannot say with certainty what happened to bring about the difficulties experienced by the “*Welcome to America Guy.*” However, I have every confidence of how grace and spiritual disciplines impact my life. I can’t make it with just one or the other; both are required to keep me, my life, and the ministry the Lord has entrusted to me.

“*There, but for the grace of God, go I.*” I am grateful to have His favor overshadowing me and intend to make every effort to stay under its cover.

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Ric Shields – © 2018  
P.O. Box 2023  
Broken Arrow, OK 74013  
Email: Ric@DoorWays.cc

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