

Grace

The Beggars' Kingdom

I WAS A FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIAN ONCE. IT lasted a summer. I was in that same phase of trying to discipline myself to “behave” as if I loved light and not “behave” as if I loved darkness. I used to get really ticked about preachers who talked too much about grace, because they tempted me to not be disciplined. I figured what people needed was a kick in the butt, and if I failed at godliness it was because those around me weren’t trying hard enough. I believed if word got out about grace, the whole church was going to turn into a brothel. I was a real jerk, I think.

I hit my self-righteous apex while working at a fundamentalist Christian camp in Colorado. I was living in a cabin in the Rockies with about seven other guys, and the whole lot of us fell into this militant Christianity that says you should live like a Navy SEAL for Jesus. I am absolutely ashamed to admit this now.

We would fast all the time, pray together twice each day, memorize Scripture, pat each other on the back and that sort of thing. Summer was coming to a close, and we were getting pretty proud of ourselves because we had read a great deal of

Scripture and hadn't gotten anybody pregnant. We were concerned, however, about what to do after we split up, thinking that if we didn't have each other we'd fall apart and start selling drugs to children. One of us, and it was probably me, decided to create a contract that listed things we wouldn't do for an entire year, like watch television or smoke pipes or listen to music. It was the constitution of our self-righteous individualism. The contract stated we would read the Bible every day, pray, and memorize certain long passages of Scripture. We sat around one night with pen and paper and offered sacrifices, each of us trying to outman the other with bigger and brighter lambs for the slaughter. We were the direct opposite of a frat house; instead of funneling our testosterone into binge drinking and rowdy parties, we were manning up to Jesus, bumping Him chest to chest as it were, like Bible salesmen on steroids.

I hitched a ride back to Oregon and got an apartment in the suburbs where I didn't know anybody and nobody knew me. I had this necklace on my neck, this string of beads, each bead representing one of the guys in the contract, and a cross in the center, a reminder that we had all gone in on this thing, that we were going to be monks for a year. At first it was easy, living in a new place and all, a new city, but after a while that necklace started to choke me.

The first of the exploits to go was the Bible. It wasn't that I didn't want to read it or didn't agree with it, I would just forget. It sat on the floor next to my bed beneath a pile of dirty clothes. Out of sight, out of mind. I'd forget about it for a month until I cleaned my room, and then I'd lift up a pile of dirty clothes and there would be my Bible, staring up at me like a dead pet.

One evening I was walking around Pioneer Square in downtown Portland when I noticed a pipe and tobacco store across the street. I decided I'd step inside and take a look-see. I came out with a new pipe that I swore I wouldn't smoke till the year was up.

It was a good deal, you know, about fifteen dollars or something. I couldn't pass up the sale on tobacco, either, even though it would go bad before the contract expired. I sat down in Pioneer Square with the skateboarders and musicians, chess players and coffee drinkers. I decided to pack my pipe, just to get a feel for it. I stuck it in my mouth to bring back that sensation, the feel of the stem between my teeth. Then I lit it. Then I smoked it.

After the Bible and the pipe thing fell apart, I decided to yield a bit on the television aspect of the contract. There was this indie pizza place down the street from my apartment, Escape from New York Pizza or something like that, and they had a big-screen television. I'd go down and watch Monday night football, which was a double sin because on Mondays we were supposed to be fasting. I figured none of the guys would mind if I switched the fasting day to Wednesday, just to shuffle things around. I shuffled so many fasting days around that after three months I was supposed to go twelve days without eating. I think I fasted twice that year. Maybe.

I hated the entire year. Hated it. I felt like a failure every morning. I hated looking in the mirror because I was a flop. I got ticked at all the people who were having fun with their lives.

I'd walk home from the pizza place feeling criminal for my mischief, feeling as though I were not cut out to be a Christian, wondering what my punishment would be for disobeying God. Everything was failing. I'd get letters from the other guys, too, some of them doing quite well. I wouldn't answer them. Not only was I failing God, I was failing my fundamentalist brothers!

o o o

My pastor, who is one of my best friends, experienced similar emotions early in his faith. Rick became a Christian when he was

nineteen. Before he became a Christian he played football at Chico State, which, at the time, was the number one party school in the nation. And Rick did his share of partying. After months of drunken binges, though, he began to wonder whether there was anything more fulfilling in life than alcohol and sex. He began to long for God. So the next Sunday morning he made a point of being sober, and in fact walked to a local church to attend services. This was Rick's first time to step foot inside a church, and that morning the pastor happened to talk about sin, and how we are all sinners, and he talked about Jesus, and how Jesus died so that God could forgive us of our sin. At the end of the service, Rick prayed and became a Christian.

After a few weeks the pastors from Rick's new church came to visit, each in their suit and tie, and Rick entertained them and made them coffee, all of them sitting around sipping their coffee and talking nicely while the smell of marijuana lofted above their heads. Rick's friend was smoking pot in the next room. Rick laughs when he tells me he offered the pastors a hit, not being too offended when they turned him down.

The pastors talked to Rick about his conversion, explaining that he had been forgiven of his sins, and that it was important to try to live a righteous life. And Rick agreed with them, noting how much easier it would be to listen to the sermon on Sunday morning if he didn't have a hangover. So Rick began to choose purity over sin, and for a while he did well, but soon he found that he wanted to party with his friends, or he wanted to have sex with his girlfriend, and from time to time he would fail at his moral efforts. Rick tells me that those were the most depressing moments of his life, because he felt that he was failing the God who had saved him.

My pastor was anguished by an inability to control his desires. He felt that he had been given this new life, this key to heaven, and yet couldn't obey Jesus in return. So one evening he got on

his knees and told God he was sorry. He told God how much he wished he could be good and obedient. He then sat on the edge of his bed and swallowed enough muscle relaxants and sleeping pills to kill three people. He lay down in a fetal position and waited to die.

o o o

Rick tells me, looking back, that he was too proud to receive free grace from God. He didn't know how to live within a system where nobody owes anybody else anything. And the harder it was for Rick to pay God back, the more he wanted to hide. God was his loan shark, so to speak. Though he understood that God wanted nothing in return, his mind could not communicate this fact to his heart, so his life was something like torture.

For a very long time, I could not understand why some people have no trouble accepting the grace of God while others experience immense difficulty. I counted myself as one of the ones who had trouble. I would hear about grace, read about grace, and even sing about grace, but accepting grace is an action I could not understand. It seemed wrong to me not to have to pay for my sin, not to feel guilty about it or kick myself around. More than that, grace did not seem like the thing I was looking for. It was too easy. I wanted to feel as though I earned my forgiveness, as though God and I were buddies doing favors for each other.

Enlightenment came in an unexpected place: a grocery store. I was on my way over Mount Hood to spend some time in the high desert with a few friends. I was driving alone and decided to stop in at Safeway to pick up some provisions for the weekend. While standing in line at the checkout counter, the lady in front of me pulled out food stamps to pay for her groceries. I had never seen food stamps before. They were more colorful than I

imagined and looked more like money than stamps. It was obvious as she unfolded the currency that she, I, and the checkout girl were quite uncomfortable with the interaction. I wished there was something I could do. I wished I could pay for her groceries myself, but to do so would have been to cause a greater scene. The checkout girl quickly performed her job, signing and verifying a few documents, then filed the lady through the line. The woman never lifted her head as she organized her bags of groceries and set them into her cart. She walked away from the checkout stand in the sort of stiff movements a person uses when they know they are being watched.

On the drive over the mountain that afternoon, I realized that it was not the woman who should be pitied, it was me. Somehow I had come to believe that because a person is in need, they are candidates for sympathy, not just charity. It was not that I wanted to buy her groceries, the government was already doing that. I wanted to buy her dignity. And yet, by judging her, I was the one taking her dignity away.

I wonder what it would be like to use food stamps for a month. I wonder how that would feel, standing in line at the grocery store, pulling from my wallet the bright currency of poverty, feeling the probing eyes of the customers as they studied my clothes and the items in my cart: frozen pizza, name-brand milk, coffee. I would want to explain to them that I have a good job and make good money.

I love to give charity, but I don't want to be charity. This is why I have so much trouble with grace.

A few years ago I was listing prayer requests to a friend. As I listed my requests, I mentioned many of my friends and family but never spoke about my personal problems. My friend candidly asked me to reveal my own struggles, but I told him no, that my problems weren't that bad. My friend answered quickly, in the

voice of a confident teacher, "Don, you are not above the charity of God." In that instant he revealed my motives were not noble, they were prideful. It wasn't that I cared about my friends more than myself, it was that I believed I was above the grace of God.

Like Rick, I am too prideful to accept the grace of God. It isn't that I want to earn my own way to give something to God, it's that I want to earn my own way so I won't be charity.

As I drove over the mountain that afternoon, realizing I was too proud to receive God's grace, I was humbled. Who am I to think myself above God's charity? And why would I forsake the riches of God's righteousness for the dung of my own ego?

o o o

Rick tells me that as he lay there in his bed waiting to die, he heard God say to him, "Your life is not your own, but you have been bought with a price," and at this point he felt a certain peace. Rick told me he understood, cognitively as well as emotionally, that his role in his relationship with God was to humbly receive God's unconditional love.

My pastor, of course, is still alive, a miracle he cannot explain. Before he could save himself, he drifted into sleep, but he woke the next morning with ample energy, as if he had never swallowed the pills at all.

After surviving the suicide attempt, Rick went to Bible college, married a girl he met in school, and now they have four children. A little over a year ago he planted a church in downtown Portland, widely considered the most unchurched region in the United States. There were only about eight of us at our first meeting, and now the church has grown to more than five hundred people. On a given Sunday there are dozens of nonbelievers at our church, and each week Rick shares with them the

patient love of God. He talks about Jesus as if he knows Him, as if he has talked to Him on the phone earlier that morning. Rick loves God because he accepts God's unconditional love first.

Rick says that I will love God because he first loved me. I will obey God because I love God. But if I cannot accept God's love, I cannot love Him in return, and I cannot obey Him. Self-discipline will never make us feel righteous or clean; accepting God's love will. The ability to accept God's unconditional grace and ferocious love is all the fuel we need to obey Him in return. Accepting God's kindness and free love is something the devil does not want us to do. If we hear, in our inner ear, a voice saying we are failures, we are losers, we will never amount to anything, this is the voice of Satan trying to convince the bride that the groom does not love her. This is not the voice of God. God woos us with kindness, He changes our character with the passion of His love.

○ ○ ○

We dream of Christ's love for His bride reading like *Romeo and Juliet*; two equals enflamed in liberal love. I think it is more like Lucentio's pursuit of Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew*. That is, the groom endearing the belligerent bride with kindness, patience, and love.

Our "behavior" will not be changed long with self-discipline, but fall in love and a human will accomplish what he never thought possible. The laziest of men will swim the English channel to win his woman. I think what Rick said is worth repeating that by accepting God's love for us, we fall in love with Him, and only then do we have the fuel we need to obey.

In exchange for our humility and willingness to accept the charity of God, we are given a kingdom. And a beggars's kingdom is better than a proud man's delusion.