

“Free But Not Cheap”
Romans 5:12-19
February 10, 2008
1st Sunday In Lent
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Hard to believe but Lent has begun. It's time for reflection, for self denial, for self improvement, for sacrifice, and for transformation. Lent is often looked upon as doom and gloom, and with good reason for some. We know where this leads to. We know that this can only end with the palms the arrest, the denial, the crucifixion and death of Jesus. What is so great about that! So some have given something up, some have taken on a new discipline, and others are saying huh?

Why do we do this? Well the Lenten discipline is not so much a necessity but a reminder of the constant duty of our faith. It reminds us to believe. In fact the 40 days of Lent used to be the final time of intense examination of candidates for baptism. It relates to the lengthening of the days, as we draw closer to spring and the new life that we will find in the resurrection. But we do this because of what Jesus has already done for us. It reminds us that we as followers of Christ have accepted this free gift of grace, and reminds us that because of his obedience that we are made righteous as Paul clearly states.

This gift of course is free and offered to all, but if that is the case one may ask, Why bother at all. Well for another thing it is about habits and practices. It is about discipline of our lives, instead of earning our salvation. In American culture we have

come to believe that everything must be earned. That is not all bad, for there are many things that we can only achieve after hard work and output. But the concept of having to earn God's grace was one that even the earliest Christians struggled with. So Paul reminds Romans, and reminds us that the free gift which is given to us has already done far more than the law ever could.

God's grace is free but not cheap. The phrase actually was first coined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German theologian and Nazi resister, when he dubbed this line of thinking "Cheap Grace." Grace that comes with little cost and great reward and where everything is going to be okay. This has actually nothing to do with forgiveness and reconciliation. In his book *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer writes about the concept of Christian community, arguing that often it breaks down because it originates in some sort of fantasy world. "The serious Christian," he writes, "set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and try to realize it. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves.

"By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even a brief period in a dream world. He does not abandon us to those rapturous experiences and lofty moods that come over us like a dream. God is not a God of the emotions but the God of truth. Only the fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be

what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it. The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community the better for both."

When we look honestly and ask ourselves when our peak moments of happiness took place, the ones that leave a lifelong imprint, what do we discover? Almost invariably we find ourselves reliving moments of achievement and of real connection. Yet the sweetness of achievement can never really be separated from the challenges we have to face when committing ourselves to doing something meaningful. Both challenge and inspiration are gifts from God. The key to happiness is learning to recognize God gifts, both in the form of what we call "content" and what we call "discontent."¹

Frederica Matthewes-Green wrote an article titled "Both Door and Path" which was first published in *Touchstone* magazine. In it she observes, "Talk of repentance makes modern-day Christians nervous. We are embarrassed by the stereotype of old-fashioned preachers hammering on sin and making people feel guilty. We rush to assert that Jesus isn't really like that, he came out of love, he wants to help us. He knows us deep inside and feels our every pain, and his healing love sets us free."□□But Matthewes-Green continues, "This is one of those truths that run out of gas halfway home. The question is, what do we need to be healed of? Subjectively, we think we need sympathy and comfort, because our felt experience is of loneliness and unease. Objectively, our hearts are eaten through with rottenness. A hug and a smile are not

¹ —Rebbetzin Tzipporah Heller, "Sukkot and the secret of happiness," aish.com/sukkotthemes. Viewed April 9, 2007.

enough. □□“We don’t feel like we’re rotten; if anything, we feel like other people treat us badly. One of the most popular myths of our age is that if you can claim to be a victim, you’re automatically sinless. □□“A second popular myth is this: We’re *nice*. Being nice is all that counts in life, right? Isn’t it the highest virtue? □□“... Finally, there’s the ever-popular conviction that we’re still better than a lot of other people. Christians should know better than this; God doesn’t judge one person against another, he doesn’t grade on the curve. Yet we find it desperately hard to believe that we’re really, truly sinners, because we see people so much worse than us every day in the newspaper. In comparison with them we’re just so gosh-darn *nice*.” □□Which brings Matthewes-Green to the conclusion: “The problem in all these cases is that we’re comparing ourselves with others, rather than with the holy God. Once we get that perspective adjusted, repentance can come very swiftly. And once we really decide that it is God himself we want to approach, repentance comes to feel like a clarifying, tough-minded friend.

That is what Lent reminds us of. Is that God’s grace is available to us all, in an imperfect and often disillusioned world. Grace is not about warm fuzzies, that grow on trees that we can reach out and pick whenever we need to feel good. Grace comes in the midst of all of this stuff and yet still enables us through God to call it good. Mary Pickford has said: “If you have made mistakes, even serious mistakes, you may have a fresh start any moment you choose, for this thing we call ‘failure’ is not the falling down, but the staying down.” As Paul tells us the many will be made righteous and we are made righteous by our faith in God with one another. That’s not cheap, but thank God it is free.