

AMAZING GRACE – Part 3

'Relationship vs. Religion'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

You may have grown up in the Church or you may have come to faith sometime later in your life. You heard the message of forgiveness of sin, the love and acceptance of God, eternal life in a new relationship with Him, and your heart was pierced by the Holy Spirit as you responded to what God had already done for you. You knew without any doubt that God was real. He was powerful. He was your gracious, loving heavenly Father. You were filled with joy and everyone around you knew it.

Then maybe you were taught, or it was implied, that if you wanted to go on from there – if you wanted to be a first-class Christian and really see the blessings of God, then you needed to start adding disciplines to your life and very soon these disciplines became standards or rules by which you judged yourself and others. You were told that Jesus is the only way to the Father, but then you need to do your bit. Now if you don't think you were exposed to that kind of teaching, praise God! But I can assure you that hundreds of thousands of others were and many of them are no longer with us in this journey and they need us to bring them back to the true gospel message of *'Jesus plus nothing!'*

Let me make it clear right at the outset - if you hear *'Jesus plus something'* you are not hearing an improvement on the gospel; or a new version of the gospel; or even a distortion of the gospel; you are hearing the absolute destruction of the gospel, along with its integrity and its power. When, by the revelation and power of the Holy Spirit, we have those 'extras' removed as requirements, then the beauty, purity and power of the gospel will return to our hearts and lives.

That is the whole focus of this teaching series. That is God's calling on my life. That's why I am here, more than any other reason: to speak the truth of the Gospel into a needy Church and a needy world. This is what all those brothers and sisters who have walked away from the Church and God desperately need to hear: the true gospel.

When it comes to our basic understanding of God and our relationship with Him, most of us don't need to hear something new, we just need to believe what we heard the first time.

Jesus + *nothing* is our salvation and our life.

We need to experience afresh the life of God that is already in us, that never left us and will continue to hold us fast and bring repentance, holiness and godly fruit. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. The gospel contains God's power to effect radical and lifelong change. As I said in my last sermon, I don't have confidence in my ability to communicate these truths, or in your ability to discern them – but I do have absolute confidence in the Holy Spirit within all believers to energise God's Word and produce the changed lives that we all want. The grace of God will have its own effect - of that I am sure. That is why it **MUST** be preached over and over and over again.

Many years ago the Apostle Paul wrote a scathing letter to the Galatian believers after he learned that they had accepted this 'Jesus plus' teaching.

This is some of what he wrote:

Galatians 1:6-7 *"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the One who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ."*

Paul can't believe the report he's heard: these brothers and sisters, whose lives were changed through his preaching of the gospel of God's amazing grace, have thrown their freedom away and accepted something so much less than the full and free life they received through Christ. He's wondering whether he completely wasted his time with them! The Galatians had allowed well-meaning teachers to come amongst them and cut the heart and soul out of the message of Jesus Christ.

The message was simple: *'God loves you and has saved you in Jesus Christ, and He gives you an on-going relationship at His expense, with His power – and it's all free to you upon your believing.'* Why does that simple, beautiful message upset anyone? Well it only upsets those who have been taken captive by religion. It is a breath of fresh air to everyone else! Jesus and Paul taught that the people who struggle with sin but keep looking to God for forgiveness and relationship, depending on Him to put them right, are closer to the power of the Kingdom of God than those who seem to have it all together. The person filled with the Spirit of God looks to Him for mercy and always finds it. Then God throws in His empowering presence, spiritual gifts and all the blessings of heaven as a bonus!

Whereas the person who seems strong and says: *'Thanks for giving me a start, God. I was lost without You, but I can take it from here. I am going to get my act together, I'm going to memorise the New Testament, and really pay my way. I'll earn my status in the Kingdom of Heaven, so You won't be ashamed of me ...'* that person has shifted their focus to their own performance and their heart is full of pride. They have fallen away from grace. The awful thing is that when their life dries up, they will work harder and harder to please God and the more they perform to please God, the more they will suppress the life of Christ within them. Just like the Galatians, they *'have turned to a different Gospel, which is really no Gospel at all.'*

The true Gospel says that God loves us and accepts us just the way we are through the perfect life of Jesus. His perfect performance against the holy law of God is credited to us and that becomes our experience when we believe, accept and embrace the gospel. That's the good news. The Gospel says that God has already fully and forever taken care of sin. The punishment for the sins of the world fell on Jesus on the cross and killed Him. The Gospel says that God has assured us of abundant life before death and promised eternal life after death because of the resurrection of Jesus. Everything has come to us who believe through Him.

The Gospel is not a set of beliefs and practices – the Gospel is a person: Jesus Christ. Everything He is, everything He has ever done and everything He has ever promised to do is yours and mine and it's all radically FREE! We just have to believe it and accept it as ours. When we do, all the experience of the Gospel will explode within us as we move out in faith and act on what we believe.

Paul is not getting angry because the Galatians turned away from an idea, or a concept, or a set of principles for life. He's upset because they are deserting the ONE Who called them. When we believe something other than the gospel of God's amazing grace, we don't turn from a belief system, we turn away from Jesus. No wonder our lives don't work!

The nature of God's grace in Christ is so radical that you get it for free by receiving it, or you don't get it at all. Like any parent, God is looking for our love and a close, intimate relationship. The only way for that to happen is for Him to cleanse us and set us free ... to love Him ... or not ... but with no strings attached. He refuses to deal with us on the basis of our performance.

So when we turn from Him, and all that He's provided for us in Christ, we pull the plug on the life, substance and power of the Christian faith. So why would anyone turn away from such a relationship and substitute religious works? There are many reasons. Grace is risky. Freedom is scary. We might get it wrong. Church leaders who don't understand the basis of grace in our relationship with God may place rules and regulations on us to keep things neat and tidy and controlled in the Church.

We've been taught that we have to work to get on in this life – so we're suspicious of anything we haven't done ourselves. It is difficult for us to believe that our acceptance by God, together with His gifts, power and enabling, does not depend on our performance. Everything of value in this world costs us something, or so we believe. So to be offered the most valuable gift imaginable - for free ... causes many of us to reject it outright. It sounds too good to be true, and we don't deserve it! I guess that is why it's called the 'good news'! In our fallen, broken world the Gospel is too good to be true but in God's eternal kingdom it is THE TRUTH and the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes!

We can also seek affirmation from our brothers and sisters by our performance, so we end up trapped on the 'do-more-try-harder' treadmill and we can't get off. We are happy if we do well and in despair if we fail. It's only in God that we receive affirmation which is independent of our performance. He gives us the same affirmation He gave His only Son at His baptism. Before Jesus did any miracles or began 'performing' in any way, His heavenly Father said: *'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.'* This is not only a possibility for us, it is our birth right and the single greatest threat to us embracing that birth right fully and experiencing the wonder of our relationship with God in Christ is RELIGION.

Unfortunately the word *religion* has been used in a positive or descriptive sense all throughout history to describe the Christian faith. People still refer to that which you and I believe in and live as *'The Christian Religion.'* But when you look up the definitions of *religion* in all the secular dictionaries you will not find one description which contains the word RELATIONSHIP. That is very interesting and significant because even a quick browse through the Bible will reveal to the most unenlightened, sin-impaired mind that **the Christian faith is all about relationship!** From Genesis to Revelation we have the story of God creating us to be in relationship with Himself and with each other. The whole Bible is about relationships and where they went wrong and what God did to fix that and what we are meant to do (and not do) to participate in His global campaign to re-establish close, intimate, eternal relationships with His lost children.

I am not talking about man's relationship to God in some abstract philosophical sense here. That is what religion does ... that is what philosophy does. I am talking about man's relationship with God – personally, one-on-one - an intimate communion. That concept is foreign to religion, and yet that is what the Bible is all about! That's what the Great Commission is about. That's what the Golden Rule is about. That's what the Ten Commandments are about - and every teaching and instruction from Jesus and Paul and all the other Biblical writers – it's all about RELATIONSHIP and none of it is about religion.

Religion is our feeble attempt to establish and maintain a relationship with God through every means possible other than that which He ordained, provides and empowers.

Some of the most powerful and effective demonic spirits in Satan's army are religious spirits. They are the ones who spend all their time working on Christians like you and me; the ones who went after the believers we read about in Galatians. Those believers were totally and powerfully set free in the Spirit and they knew what it was to have a dynamic, personal, life-changing relationship with a living God. Yet within a few short years they had been bewitched by religious spirits and were trying to relate to God through dead religious works again.

You were included in Christ when you heard the truth about your salvation and believed it. At that point the Holy Spirit of God was released in you to make it all real and introduce you to the risen living Lord. In Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul states emphatically that everything you could possibly want, or imagine, or even things that you can't imagine, are yours for free. It's all part of the salvation package, and that package is all or nothing. Therefore we have the following assurance from God in Christ ... are you ready? OK, brace yourself - here it comes:

God chose you and adopted you as a son or daughter and lavished His grace upon you in Christ; your salvation and eternal life with God is a free gift with no strings attached; Nothing you do or don't do could ever save you, or cause you to lose your salvation; your eternal relationship with God was secured on the cross by Jesus before you were even born – before you could say yes or no, before you could sin or rebel; you have been totally and wonderfully set free by the grace of God to love and serve. There is no other name under heaven by which you can be saved, except the name of Jesus. The only way into a relationship with the Father is through Jesus, and by accepting your salvation as a free gift - not just once, but every day of your life! To know Him at all is to know Him as a free gift. To participate in His life, ministry and fellowship, you have to understand His grace, because nothing in the kingdom of God is bought, sold or traded. It's all given and received, received and given – FREE!

Do I hear an amen?! It can be hard to learn to receive love from God and others but it is so important. We also need to learn to give love to God freely in worship, obedience and service; and to love one another in acceptance and kindness. We need that assurance so we can discern the religious traps that would make us slaves to performance again. We need the empowering presence of God in our lives to be able to rest in that assurance, revel in our relationship and be kept free from those influences. The trouble is, they can look so plausible.

I'm sure the Galatians would not have chosen to desert the gospel, if they realised that was what they were doing, and nor would we. But well-meaning Christian brothers and sisters, many of them teachers in the Church would say (or imply): *"So you've accepted Jesus ... great start! But now, you need to press on into the higher things of God, by ... having a daily quiet time, reading and memorising the Bible, praying, fasting etc. ... You get in for free ... but you get on at your own expense!"* Now these disciplines are all great – but they are never a basis for being accepted or not by God. Instead of looking to Jesus and being blown away by His love and grace and empowering presence in our life, we are encouraged by religion to look at ourselves. That personal relationship is traded in for our performance and that is so deadly in our walk with God.

The great thing about freedom is that when you know you're free - law, religion, people and even the devil himself can no longer manipulate you. My highest goal for each believer is that you become so secure in God's love and acceptance, nobody can manipulate you or obligate you or make you feel guilty or oppressed in any way ... ever again. That is my prayer. That is God's will.

One of the reasons that the spirit of religion does not want this transforming, liberating grace of God to get out - is because people in the Church may do whatever they want to do! Leaders will not be able to crack the legalistic whip and lay a little guilt on people any more. God wants you free - He wants you to respond to Him out of love and gratitude and never out of obligation or guilt. Those are the devil's tactics, the world's tactics; that's the flesh - that's religion and you know that God hates religion. Jesus died to save us from that whole world of manipulation and guilt. That's what Jesus meant here:

Luke 4:18 *"The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the captives."*

When you embrace that freedom - when you allow this teaching to get past any barriers in your mind and take root in your heart, you'll find joy like you never experienced in your life; you'll find freedom, spontaneity and a sense of confidence because you know it ultimately all depends on God, not you. You will even sleep well at night - because the guilt and sense of not measuring up will be gone. You'll also sleep well at night because you will have worked so hard that day for the Lord for the sheer joy of it! *"Lord, You've done everything for me ... now what can I do for you?"* It won't take God long to show you what you can do to help fulfill the mission of Christ. It will be hard work and it will be wonderful work - and all done without a shred of guilt or manipulation or a sense of duty.

It will be the natural response of a grateful heart overwhelmed by God's love and grace! God will produce this life in us and impregnate us with the ministry of the kingdom of God. Through the intimacy of prayer, Bible reading, worship, listening and responding to good teaching, obedience, service etc. - this life is then released in us more and more. That is the purpose of those disciplines in our lives - never to gain acceptance or make God pleased with us.

Under the law, prayer, Bible reading, worship, service and obedience all become legal requirements. Under grace, in Christ - the exact same activities are transformed in the context of a love relationship and flow from our free love response to a loving God Who has saved us, redeemed us and reconciled us to Him forever. The Bible is not a book of answers and rules for life. It is the revelation of God's love and a sharing of His thoughts and His heart.

There will be a lot that we will never understand and appreciate about our Lord, but the Holy Spirit has preserved some of His most intimate and revealing thoughts on paper for us and that's how we should approach the Bible and prayer and worship - from the point of a relationship. Loving God will then be our only motivation for any and all of those activities and spiritual disciplines.

Jesus and Jesus alone, is the gospel and our salvation. Whenever we add anything as an 'improvement', we have removed ourselves from the power of the gospel and seek once again to save ourselves by our self-righteousness. This is the essence of religious behaviour, which despises God's grace and His free gift of salvation. Religion is an ugly and deadly distortion of relationship.

We experience the freedom we have in Christ when we look to Him alone, not just for our salvation, but for our ongoing walk in the Christian life, depending on Him in all things. Our response is love and gratitude for all He has done for us. He is enough. God wants us to live freely in His love and grace, free from sin, free from shame, free from religious expectations and rule-keeping. He wants us to return His love freely, as we learn to know Him more.

Relationship or religion? Which will it be for you? Let me remind you of the stark difference between the two from a sermon I preached only a few months ago under the title of *'God Hates Religion.'* You may like to revisit that whole sermon on our website, but here is that comparison.

Relationship causes us to be dependent ... Religion drowns us in our own strength.

Relationship produces fire and passion in our lives ... Religion produces complacency.

Relationship compels us to serve ... Religion drives us to apathy.

Relationship draws us towards what's risky ... Religion draws us to something safe.

Relationship drives us to our knees ... Religion drives us to our platforms.

Relationship births love for the lost ... Religion births love of our rules.

Relationship brings change ... Religion forces conformity.

Relationship brings forth life and fruit ... Religion brings spiritual death and decay.

I want to plead with you to not move on from this sermon too quickly. Let the study notes bring you back to examine what has been said here and reflect on what you believe God may be saying to you. Understanding the difference between relationship and religion is paramount to understanding the difference between spiritual life and death. The implications of this truth will be unpacked more and more in future sermons, but a firm grasp of the foundational nature of the teaching thus far is vitally important.

As your awareness of God's amazing grace continues to grow, I will keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

May it be so, Lord ... may it be so!

