

AMAZING GRACE – Part 11*'You Are Radically Free!'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

As you have been engaging with this teaching series, has the thought ever crossed your mind: *'When is he going to get around to talking about sin and repentance? Can we just go on sinning if we're forgiven?'* If you haven't thought that or something similar, then I probably haven't made the gospel free enough yet! In Romans 6 we see one of the times Paul was asked this. He was accused of making the gospel too free and so he responds to his critics a couple of times:

Romans 6:1 *"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?"*

Romans 6:15 *"What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?"*

When grace is preached in all its fullness, that question will rise to the surface - it has to. Have you ever thought that you could sin without condemnation? Or have you always known what the rules were - what God and others would condemn you for, in spite of all the evidence which says that **rules are useless at making people holy and the fear of judgement can never, ever produce righteousness?**

Look at the nation of Israel in the Bible – God's called out people. Judgement came through the Philistines, snakes, scorpions, death, destruction and curses galore. Did that keep the people from sin? Did that make them holy? No! It didn't do them any good at all. In fact, one could argue that it just made them more sinful. By contrast, however, let me say this: In all my years of Christian ministry I have never once observed a situation where a genuine understanding of God's unconditional love, grace and goodness has actually had a sinful effect on anyone.

In one of the least quoted but most important verses in the New Testament, (Romans 2:4) Paul says, **" .. it's God's kindness that leads us to repentance."** It's our experience of God's love that cleans up our life. I have yet to meet a person who was made evil by reflecting on God's love for them. Conversely, I have never met a person who was made holy or good by reflecting on their sin or God's judgement. So those people in Paul's day (and today) who fear that making God's grace and power too free will cause people to sin without concern, first of all do not understand God's grace at all to even think that and secondly, they are worrying about something that has not happened.

The true gospel is designed to set you completely and radically free, as Paul said so clearly, *"It is for freedom that Christ has set you free."* (Galatians 5:1). Yet that is not what a lot of modern preaching is designed to tell you. It is more likely to give you standards to 'make' you good. Now if some people want to make up rules and others are silly enough to subject themselves to those rules, that's O.K. There are all sorts of organisations where if you want to belong you have to agree to their rules. There is nothing wrong with that. Just don't ever call such an organisation the Church of Jesus Christ! We can have our rules and regulations if we want to, but let's never dish out those rules with a Bible in our hand, suggesting that Jesus is building that kind of Church – because He isn't.

When people are set free to be who they really are in Christ and not who someone else wants them to be or expects them to be, all the fruit of the gospel will spontaneously break out in them, in the Church, in their community and across the whole nation. That's the power of the gospel! You are free! You are radically and dangerously free. This issue of freedom is not an insignificant one in the Bible. It's a major and central issue.

Jesus said himself:

Luke 4:18 *"I have come to preach good news to the poor and proclaim freedom to the prisoners."*

He wasn't talking about people in jail - He was talking to and about people who were imprisoned by religious law. As I've said before, Jesus' strongest criticism was reserved for the law and the custodians of the law: the religious leaders. The Pharisees were the good, conservative, religious people of His day and Jesus deliberately picked a fight with them many times to expose their restrictive, law-burdened teaching. This same Jesus said:

John 8:32 *"If you know the truth the truth shall set you free."*

That truth is not abstract theological truth. That truth is Jesus Christ - the One Who said,

John 14:6 *"I am the way, the truth and the life."*

If you know Jesus Christ personally - you know the Truth and you will be free! Freedom does not come from the knowledge of certain theological truths it comes from a relationship with Jesus. He goes on to say:

John 8:32 *"If the Son sets you free - you are free indeed!"*

Paul picks up on this in hundreds of places. Let me just mention some:

Romans 8:2 *"The spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and death."*

Galatians 5:1 *"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."*

Galatians 5:13 *"You my brothers and sisters are called to be free."*

Freedom is your calling in life. It is your commissioning. You are meant to be totally unable to be manipulated by religion, religious leaders or the devil himself.

Colossians 1:22 *"God has received you to himself through Christ's death so that you could be holy in his sight and free from accusation."*

2 Corinthians 3:17 *"Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."*

Ephesians 3:12 *"In Christ we may approach God with freedom and confidence."*

Revelation 22:17 *"The Spirit says come - let whoever wishes, take the free gift of the water of life."*

Freedom is not a minor issue to God. It's a big deal. I pray for my Church that a sense of His real presence will be present when we meet together. If God is here, then I don't have to worry about much. He's just going to take care of things; for where the Spirit of Lord is, there is freedom!

Human institutions seem to want to control people. God wants to set us free in our hearts from all that control: be it governmental, religious, relational or emotional control. I would suggest there are two basic reasons why God wants this. First of all, it's only when you are free that you can be who God created you to be. That sounds simple, but it's vitally important.

God wants you to be free from anybody's manipulation so that you can do what you want, act out what you feel, make choices and follow through on them. He treats you with dignity and respect. He values you. The second thing God wants (and longs for) is for you to use that freedom to choose to return to Him in love.

When the Gospel of God's amazing grace is preached, someone invariably comes forward with the warning: *"If you keep preaching this stuff and make people completely free, then you're not going to get them to do anything in the Church. If they take this stuff to its logical end, they may even stop coming to Church! They may stop tithing! In fact they'll do anything they like and think that's ok with God."*

Well, that's risk you take when you preach the full gospel of God's amazing grace and that's precisely the point of grace! God wants to see everyone in the Church doing anything they *want* to do and doing nothing out of obligation, manipulation or expectation from their Pastor, from their Church, or even from God Himself. I want to take the same risk in leading my Church that Jesus took. Either we will return to Him freely - or we won't. If we go back to Him after being set free, then it's the real thing. If we don't, it was never the real thing anyway. He wants us to be free - not slaves; choosers - not robots.

By contrast, religion holds the carrot out in front and the swings stick behind. The carrot out in front is: *"We will like you and accept you if you become like us, do the things we do and believe the things we believe."* The stick behind is: *"If you don't, then we'll reject you - we won't like you - we won't give you the same position of freedom in Christ's Church that we have given ourselves."* Now everybody knows that the thing in between the carrot and the stick is a donkey! That's not the way God wants His children to be treated. That's not His plan for those precious ones who are created in His image and for whom Christ died.

Now I need to caution you that you may not want this freedom. This is an observation of fact among all Christians when radical freedom of this Biblical nature is preached. Many simply can't handle it. The main reason there is so much religious, legalistic, *do-more-try-harder* pseudo-Christianity, is because there's such a big market for it! I used to think that we were all victims of some kind. Yet as hard as it may be to swallow, I don't think we've been victims of anything. Many people submit to this legalistic garbage because deep down they want to. People are scared of freedom. They are afraid to make choices that they're responsible for.

So many Christians seem to prefer submitting to the Church telling them what's right and wrong, rather than embrace a personal, one-on-one relationship with Jesus Christ where He guides our steps each day. That seems to be too scary. When I start to insist that everybody take their own God-given freedom seriously, some people have problems with that. They just can't let go of the need to relate to God through a set of rules. In effect they are saying that they want something other than the unconditional acceptance of God in Christ.

As a Church, this radical freedom in Christ will challenge us in what we do and why. If I am to preach His Word as it is, then I have to be prepared to let the chips fall where they may and let Him pick up the pieces! If that threatens the way we do things, or challenges any sacred cows in regard to what we believe or how we act, then so be it! If a rule, regulation, belief or practice is not from God, then why would we want it? If it's not birthed in the gospel, why should we tolerate it?

Let there be no misunderstanding - Christ accepts you, therefore I accept you. I trust you because I trust the Holy Spirit in you. I want you to do whatever He leads you to do in the Church and in the community.

It is that unconditional acceptance of each other as fellow pilgrims that God wants in every Church congregation that names the name of Jesus. Yes, there are guidelines and Biblical principles of leadership and a general understanding of what is helpful and edifying and what is not ... but these are not put forward as rules to restrict and harness people in a way that hampers them fulfilling their potential. Jesus came to lift that yoke of religion completely off our shoulders and give us His yoke which is light and easy. Yet for some reason, many in the Church still cling to the heavy yoke of religion and wonder why God is not real and why the presence and power of God is not evident in the way it seemed to be in the early Church.

I've said it many times already – let me say it again. **God hates religion!** Until we accept and embrace our total, radical freedom in Christ, we will not see God move in this nation the way so many of us desperately desire. God wants you to be radically free so you can be yourself.

The second reason that He wants you free is so that you can freely return His love to Him - or not. He's prepared to take that risk. He wants a free love relationship with you more than anything else. He's willing to sacrifice control and to risk His good name. He gave the life of His own Son to express free, un-manipulated sovereign love to you in the hope that His love will ignite love in your heart. **True love demands freedom.** God established our freedom from the law through the blood of His Son so that not even He could manipulate us. When you see and feel that love in your heart, you will love Him back freely, without obligation.

We have already seen this in the story of the prodigal son. The Father was under absolutely no obligation legally or culturally to give in to the demands of his son. In fact there would have been much advice to the contrary from friends and family. The father chooses to give the boy what he asks for. He puts him in charge of his own life. He gives him control over his own destiny. He gives him freedom in the hope his son would make the right choices in that freedom – but they were his choices regardless. That is exactly what God has done for us.

Let me put it another way: you cannot give yourself to God if you're not free - if you're not in possession of yourself. If you are acting out of some compulsion or manipulation from your conscience, religion or the expectations of the people around you, then you can't truly give yourself to anyone. I object to the view that says: *"God owns me. I have no choice in the matter. I just do everything He says because He bought me with a price."* If people really believe that, they haven't read the Bible. We choose every single day and that's the way God wants it to be.

We can see this when we look at some of the teaching concerning tithing and giving money to the Lord's work. Some say: *"God owns all of your money. Everything belongs to Him really and He expects you to give Him 10% back. We owe God a tithe."* Let's think about that view for a moment. If your money isn't *your* money, then you can't give it as a gift. God gave you that money. He equipped you to earn it. You can give it to Him as a gift; an act of love, not as a result of manipulation.

In the same way, a god who gives his subjects eternal life but then demands sacrifice and obedience to pay him back for that gift - has not given them a gift at all. He's bought them, but expects them to pay the price. That is the essence of Pharisaism, legalism and religion and unfortunately, much of what passes for Christianity today. The acid test of a true gift is that when you give it, you let it go. It costs the giver - but it's totally, unconditionally free to the receiver - and that's why it's so difficult to receive it. There are so many well-meaning Christians who want to do something - anything - to get even with their conscience before God. They just can't believe that it's all given to them free. If you get this, not only will your spiritual health improve, but your relational health and maybe even your physical health will improve! The gospel is a gift. Salvation is a gift. There are no strings attached!

Paul says, *"There is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus."* (Romans 8:1) That is unconditional. It is a gift - now and forever. If we say or think or imply by our actions, *'Much obliged ...'*, or: *'I owe you one, Lord ...'* we are slapping the Giver in the face! So if you want to give service in the context of the Church – that's great! If you want to give money to support the ministry of the Church – go for it! Just make sure you never do it out of obligation. We should want to be obedient servants of the Lord Jesus Christ out of love for Him, and we'll do it side by side - together. I believe in the *covenant of grace* - not the *contract of works*. Sadly, the latter is what so many of us have been dished out for years and we don't even know it! We've let the enemy distort the truth and mix grace with works so beautifully that it even sounds believable.

Let me say it so that you can't possibly misunderstand: The life, death and resurrection of Christ - and everything that flows to us because of that - is a free gift and *we owe God nothing for it*. That is the gospel truth – that's how radical and free it is. If you don't get that, or can't accept that as Biblical truth, then you can't get anywhere in your Christian walk. This is the foundation to all that will follow in this series and everything I ever teach in the name of Jesus! I know that God has called the Church of Jesus Christ to do great things - and that will cost a lot of money! I also know that I have just made it impossible for me or anyone else to manipulate that money out of you - and that's the way it should be. If the money doesn't come back to God and to His purposes as an act of love on your part, then go ahead and keep it!

Once the gospel of grace takes hold of your imagination; once it sinks into your heart and begins to grow and bear fruit by the power of the Holy Spirit; once you accept that the punishment for your sins has already been dished out and received; once you realise that Jesus traded your sins for His righteousness; when the lights are finally turned on and you see that you are already right with God – then you will be overwhelmed with joy and gratitude. You will see many ways to return that love. One of which is to give of your resources - your wealth - your money. Then you will know the joy of being a *cheerful* giver - and not a manipulated or obligated giver. You will not even think about what you might get in return as you give. How horrible is that? When you give a gift to someone you love ... do you wonder what they might give in return? Hopefully not. Yet there are millions of people actually being taught to expect great things from God WHEN we give and IF we give ... or when we obey and if we obey ... then and only then will His blessings flow. What rubbish! What an ugly, grotesque facsimile of the truth that is. It's a lie from hell!

You can expect great things from God whether you give or not! The fact that God may choose to bless you in your giving is something that should never even cross your mind when contemplating a gift to Him! There will be times when God blesses you in spite of your giving. I can think of lots of reasons to give to God ... one of them is not so that He will respond in some way. God so loved you ... that He gave! Full stop. End of story. He'll not be bought, He'll only receive.

That's the kind of radically free relationship He wants us to have with Him. It requires knowing Him and it requires courage. It is for freedom that we have been set free. Get to know Jesus and you will be free indeed. Say it out loud now ... *God so loved me that He gave ... I so love God that I give*. He expects and demands nothing in return and nor should we. That is the nature of a love relationship. Let that penny drop in your marriages and friendships and the world will be transformed overnight!

Let me close with a wonderful true story of an English Nobleman who lived in a huge house in London. His house maid was employed to maintain the house and cook his meals. The Nobleman pinned a long list of her tasks on the kitchen wall each day. It was visible to the maid at all times to remind her of her obligations.

One thing led to another and the man's loneliness and the maid's care for him developed and they fell in love and were married. After they returned from their honeymoon the groom carried his new bride over the threshold and welcomed her back to her home as his wife, not his maid. As soon as he put her down, she went to the kitchen, tore the list off the wall, and rather dramatically ripped it into a hundred pieces as her worried husband looked on.

"Why did you do that?" he exclaimed. "Are you not, as my wife, still going to cook for me and maintain the house?" She smiled at him and said, "Of course I am darling, but now I will do it because I want to - not because I have to. Now I will do it out of love, not obligation." I know of no better way to portray the radical difference between a contract and a covenant. I believe this man's wife would have done ten times what was on the previous list once her heart had been set free by the power of love.

The Bible is not an index of answers to your questions, nor is it a book of rules or a list of your daily obligations before God. The Bible, particularly the New Testament, is your new Husband's heart on paper, and as you experience His love you are going to want to approach the Bible in a brand new way. You will be searching the Scriptures to find ways to return His love freely. You'll find lots and lots of things to do, but you won't do them to fulfil a contract, or to ease your conscience, or to be accepted by Him or by the Church. You'll do them because the grace and love of God has so filled your heart that you cannot help responding to Him in love.

You are totally, radically and dangerously free in Jesus Christ. Do you really know that today? You are free to do anything you want to do. God invites you to return to Him and know that He will run to you with open arms every time with nothing but love, acceptance, grace and the power to be whoever you want to be. We're all prodigals in some way. We all need to return to our Father - but never on a contract. He wants us to come to Him knowing that we are accepted, loved and set free from any obligation to the law whatsoever. You are free – radically, totally and unconditionally free!

A true understanding of God's grace – that we have been set free from death itself, empowers us to really live. It destroys the fear that was the basis of law. It is stupid then, to go back to small living and narrow-minded pursuits. Those things are certainly out of place in the Church. God set us free because He loves us. He set us free to be ourselves the way He made us to be. He stands against anything that binds up His children. He desires that we return His love and be in relationship with Him, but He gives us that choice. Many people choose to stay under rules because they feel safer, rather than trusting their lives to their loving Father who has given everything to buy their freedom, and has committed Himself to them. When we truly understand God's amazing grace and love for us, our hearts will be moved to give freely to Him.

How then shall we live? By His grace – for His glory and in the power of His love!

1. Read through this week's sermon once without taking notes or highlighting anything ... just to get the big picture. Go through the text more closely. Highlighting or underlining key phrases or paragraphs which stand out as significant to you. What single statement impacted you the most? How will that now change your life? Write down what you need to do to respond to God's truth today.

2. Ponder the following statements from this week's sermon. What practical implications could or should flow from each of these statements? If you ask "How then shall I live?" in light of each of these truths, what would be your answer?

Rules are useless at making people holy and the fear of judgement can never, ever produce righteousness.

True love demands freedom.

Jesus came to lift the yoke of religion completely off our shoulders and give us His yoke which is light and easy. Yet for some reason, many in the Church still cling to the heavy yoke of religion and wonder why God is not real and why the presence and power of God is not evident in the way it seemed to be in the early Church.

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