

# If My People - 1

## *'A Hard Word'*

**John 6:60-67** *"Many of Jesus' disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" ... Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? ... The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe." ... From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.*

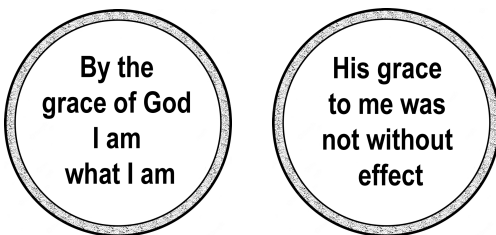
I have a passion for the grace of God. Grace lies at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I have preached the grace of God over and over again for decades now. I have stood at the gates of Hell and preached the grace of God in the face of the enemy as He attacked me and my family and my Church and my city in multiple locations.

The grace of God is the key to life. The grace of God is the foundation of the Christian faith. The grace of God reveals the essence of God in His dealings with us and so I gladly join the Apostle Paul in saying, *"By the grace of God I am what I am .."* I can also say that by the grace of God you are what you are and by the grace of God this Church is what it is today.

But there was another important part of that statement from Paul – let's read it all.

**1 Corinthians 15:10** *"By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them - yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."*

This verse is like a two sided coin – containing two equally important truths:



So can I ask you today what *effect* has the grace of God had in you and through you? Has your knowledge of God's grace changed your understanding of God and yourself and sin and forgiveness? Has grace changed the way you think about all sorts of things? What effect has God's grace had in your life and ministry?

You may be able to affirm today that you rejoice in the knowledge of the grace of God and you know that you are saved by His grace and that even your best efforts are filthy rags in His sight and that all that you are and ever hope to be has its beginning and end in the grace of God. You may affirm that your life will never be the same because you understand God's grace. Many believers can't even say that, but perhaps you can. I certainly hope and pray that anyone who has engaged with my teaching for any length of time has a deeper and broader understanding of God's amazing grace.

However, what do you say when I flip the coin and ask what *effect* has God's grace had in your life? How are you living in response to the revelation of God's amazing grace? It is great for us to focus on God's grace and all the hard work He has done in Christ to secure our salvation and bless us with every spiritual blessing, but there comes a time when we need to ask what our role is in all of this in terms of *our response* to His grace. All through the Bible, God reminds us of the need for us to respond in certain ways if His grace is to have any effect in saving this lost world. The strongest and clearest reminder of our role in all this is contained in one verse from the Old Testament which I have quoted and spoken about many, many times:

**2 Chronicles 7:14** *"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."*

Allow me to paraphrase:

*"If my people ... who understand My grace and have been blessed by the revelation of Who I am ... if My people live out of the reality of that grace ... in humility, brokenness, worship, confession and prayer ... then that grace will not be without effect ... I will heal their entire land ... through them."*

As I pondered what I might preach as another year of ministry unfolds before us, I found myself reflecting on the thousands of hours that I have stood before God's people and poured out my heart, doing everything I can to connect people with God's heart. It has been a joy to journey with brothers and sisters in my various congregations over many years and serve them by expounding God's Word. It has been a new experience and a great encouragement to be able to use the world wide web in more recent years to spread my teaching across the world.

However I have to be honest and say that there are also times when I ponder how ineffective most of that teaching has been in producing long-term, life-changing responses in people. I am reminded often that the Apostle Paul referred to this thing that I do every week as *foolishness*. To pour one's heart and soul into sermons week after week after week, year after year after year, must seem like foolishness to any rational, thinking person. And yet, God's call to preach and teach has never been stronger in me.

There are however many times when I find myself reflecting on these confronting words:

**Hebrews 5:11-6:3** *"We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation ... and God permitting, we will do so."*

Where is the hunger and thirst for righteousness? Where is the passion and longing in people's hearts to hear from God? Where is the ache deep within us for our city and our nation such that we will do anything to gain an edge on the enemy and make a difference in our community? Where are the people of God who know that they have been bought with a price and have a call on their life to shine as lights in the darkness and that this call of God is the most important thing in their life above their family, their job, their worldly success and even their very lives?

Where are the people who are genuinely sick of playing Church, who know there is more to this Christian life than they have experienced – those who now choose to do whatever it takes to see their lives, their Church fellowship and their city transformed and Jesus Christ reign as King and Lord?

Where are these people? The Bible calls them disciples. Where are they? Are you one of them? Are there many in our city? They are the ones who arrive early for worship services ... because they know that being with the people of God, in the presence of God, listening for the Word of God is the most exciting and life-changing activity in their whole week and they can't wait to be there and they don't want to leave when it's over.

They are the people who hang off every word ever preached; they take notes, they have their Bible's with them when someone is preaching so they can find the passages themselves and reinforce all that God is saying to them; they are the ones who set aside time during the week to read the manuscripts or watch or listen to the sermon again so they can distil every gem of wisdom from God. They are the ones who weep when they read or watch the news and see the needs in our city and nation which confront us every day and which only God can fix - if and when His people stop pursuing their own selfish interests and starting focusing on the needs of those they are called to reach.

Where are these people? Where are these committed, determined, focussed, maturing disciples; the ones who actually read the New Testament and take it seriously; the ones who have more interest in living in the book of Acts than in the materialistic, self-seeking, flesh-serving, Spirit-quenching world around them; the ones who have given up talking about themselves and their needs and their achievements and are only interested in the needs of others and the furthering of God's Kingdom. Where are these people? Are you one of them? If not, then would you like to be one of them?

What is the secret to being a full-on, committed, dynamic, world-changing disciple of Jesus Christ? What button do you push to make this all happen? Do you really want to know? I will tell you if you really want to know. You may not realise this but there is a simple answer to this question. There is, in fact, one button and only one button that you need to push to make all this happen. Do you want to know what that is? This is the key to life; this is the button you push to catapult you into the reality and the power and the glory and the effectiveness of the Kingdom of God. There is one word on that button ... what do you think it might be? That word is:

**CHOICE**

Disappointed? Feeling conned? Perhaps you thought it would be something more spiritual? Sorry. This button has been the catalyst for every major move of God, every revival and community transformation ever recorded in the history of mankind.

Do you want to be a committed, effective passionate disciple of Jesus Christ? *That can and will happen ... but you have a choice to make first.*

Do you want to move on from the spiritual milk that has dominated the teaching landscape of most Churches for years and get your teeth into a juicy piece of Kingdom Steak ... which will produce the kind of life-changing ministry in and through you that we read about in the Gospels and the book of Acts? Is that what you want? *That can and will happen ... but you have a choice to make first.*

Do you want to see the Church emerge from the ashes of denominationalism, division and dissention? *That can and will happen ... but you have a choice to make first.*

Do you want to see the day when the Mayor of our City addresses an all-night prayer vigil and declares to the 10,000 people present that this city belongs to Jesus Christ? *That can and will happen ... but you have a choice to make first.*

Do you want to see the day when everyone in this nation who needs a job, has a job; where domestic violence and sexual abuse are rare occurrences, not hourly events; where pubs and clubs close their doors because people now have lives to live which mean something? *That can and will happen ... but you have a choice to make first.*

Do you want to see a headline in the local paper which reads, “No arrests again this month. Police numbers cut.” *That can and will happen ... but you have a choice to make first.*

Do you want to be able to pray “Your kingdom come, your will be done in my community as it is in heaven” and then see the reality of heaven unfold right before your eyes ... as the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame dance and the power and glory and majesty and love of God flood this entire city and region? *That can and will happen ... but you have a choice to make first.*

You see friends, all these wild, pie-in-the-sky dreams I have laid out before you just now **are already a reality** for people just like you and me in hundreds of communities around the world - right now. Furthermore, all these crazy dreams just happen to be the plan and purpose and expectation of God. Those wild ideas and unbelievable notions are actually what God desires for every one of us, every day of our lives. Do you know that? You don't need to ask His permission or seek His will on these things for they are clearly understood from the Bible and from all of human experience.

All of that reality, all of those wonderful dreams of what might be, begin with you and me and people like us, making a **CHOICE**. So I can hear you ask, if it's that simple; if all we need to do is make a choice; why doesn't it happen every day? Why aren't all those things a reality if simple choices are all that is needed? What a great question. I am so glad you asked it!

I believe the reason is because something needs to happen BEFORE you can make that choice. Something vitally important has to happen in you if any choice is going to be effective. So many people have made a choice but ended up nowhere because they failed to have this one vital pre-requisite to all effective choices; what do you think that might be?

The answer: **DESIRE**

You have to get in touch with your deepest desires and decide what you really want in life. You have to decide what is important to you - deep down inside. So many people make choices in life based on guilt or obligation; other people's expectations; a sense of duty - all sorts of reasons. Some of these reasons appear very noble and proper but I am here to tell you that if you don't really want a particular thing; if you are not passionate about pursuing that goal until the very end; chances are very high that you won't ever get there. Worse than that, making the choice to pursue that direction without the motivation and desire to follow through may well be the most frustrating, humiliating, depressing experience you ever have. So friends listen to me, in Jesus' name hear this please:

**There is no point making choices that are not consistent with your heart's desires.**

It is a guaranteed recipe for disaster to make a choice in life, no matter how small or large, if that is not what you *really* want. That's why so many marriages fail. That's why so many Churches are ineffective. That's why so many relationships fall apart. We make choices which have not come from the depths of our heart's desire and therefore our ability to commit to those choices and pay the price to see them through to completion is radically reduced and more often than not, we will fail. This is a hard word friends, but I tell you that it may be the most important word you hear in your life, so stay with me.

If you are not sure that you really want to be a disciple of Jesus then don't bother trying to make that happen, because it won't. If you are not gripped with a passion to see your community transformed spiritually, socially, economically, politically, agriculturally - in every possible way in fact - then don't bother praying for it; don't bother telling anyone about your passion to see your city come to Jesus, because you won't be part of any of it until you really want to be. Then, and only then, you must choose to pay the price to see that desire fulfilled. If you are not committed to drawing as much as you can from the teaching you receive from me and any other source, it is simply because you don't want to; it's just not that important to you.

Now let me assure you that I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do. That's why this is such a great Church! You don't have to do anything you don't want to do ... and that freedom in the grace of God will always be there while ever I am around. If you want to sit in the corner and drool and waste your whole life while Satan kicks the stuffing out of thousands of people in the city you call home – that's your choice and I will love you no less for it, God will love you no less for it and we will still share heaven together. You will just have wasted so much of your life in this world.

If, however, the Holy Spirit gets under your skin and releases a passion and hunger and desire within you for the Word of God; if there's this energy within you which draws you to solid Bible teaching and releases an insatiable desire in you for truth and wisdom and the heart and mind of God - then, and only then, will you be ready to make a choice and do something about that desire so that it bears fruit.

At that point you won't be satisfied with the meagre offerings of teaching once a week on Sundays. When you get that kind of hunger for God's Word, I would not be able to satisfy it with ten sermons a week. Friends, if you remember nothing else today (and you won't if this is the only time you connect with this sermon), if you take nothing else away with you - please take this.

It's a formula. I usually don't believe in formulas but this one is guaranteed. This one you can take to the bank. This formula will affect every area of your life:

$$\frac{\text{Desire + Choice + Commitment}}{\text{Prayer}} = \text{SUCCESS}$$

If you really want something and choose to pursue it moment by moment, day by day; and are willing to pay the price in commitment; and that whole process is saturated and guided by God in prayer ... then you will succeed. You will see the desires of your heart fulfilled – that is a 100% guarantee.

Now I can hear the questions already. What if our desires are not God's desires? Surely we can't expect to succeed unless we know God's will first. Excellent question - I'm so glad you asked it! That is where prayer comes in. The whole process is birthed and covered in prayer. As you humbly and constantly seek the face of God, any ungodly desires; any desires that are not in line with His plan for you right at that time, will be replaced with new desires by His Holy Spirit.

It really is that simple. I pray this way all the time. *“Lord, give me the desires of my heart - or change those desires so they align with Yours.”*

I hear other questions: What if you know you should desire something but it just doesn't come? What if you know that you should want to be a committed disciple - and want to see your city transformed and really want to make a difference - but you can't seem to connect to that desire in your heart at present? Now that's a tricky one but it strikes at the very heart of the matter and reveals a dilemma in the modern Church. What if the desire for the deeper things of God is just not there? What if all this revival stuff sounds exciting but it just doesn't ring your bell at all?

Well I'm afraid I can only find two possible explanations for that. I can see only two reasons why someone who professes to be a believer would be devoid of the desire to be a real disciple.

- (a) You are not born-again and only think you are a Christian. Therefore we need to pray over you and let God's saving power touch and transform your heart.
- (b) You are born-again but you have made choices which have repelled the manifest presence of God in your life and you have backslidden into a form of godliness that lacks power.

Either way, such a person needs prayer. The first one needs God's Spirit to lead them to the point of embracing the salvation Jesus died to give them. The second one needs God's spirit to convict them of their backsliding and to make a fresh choice and commitment to really follow Jesus.

Friends, listen to me. Jesus said in John 10:10 that He came that we might have life to the full ... 'abundant' life some translations call it. So let me ask you, is your life *abundant* today? Is your life overflowing with fruit and purpose and passion and blessing? The answer should be YES because that's what God desires! That's why Jesus came.

If your life is not full to overflowing it is probably because you don't want that more than anything else in the world ... or you want it, but you have not made the choice to pursue it .... or you have not made the commitment to persevere, pay the price and see it through. Jesus told us how wild and crazy our desires should be. He told us to pray something outrageous. He said to pray, *“your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”*

Do you know what that means? It means that you and I are to pray for and believe God for the reality of the kingdom of heaven to increasingly become a reality in us, through us and in the world around us. So all the needs we see and the shortcomings we experience in this broken, fallen, world will gradually be overpowered by the reality of God's Kingdom - where Jesus Christ rules and reigns as King and God's will is always done. That is God's promise to us in 2 Chronicles 7:14.

### **God never wanted a dictatorship - He always wanted a partnership.**

He always planned to save, redeem and bless His creation with us by His side all the way. There is nothing we need to know that has not already been explained in the Scriptures and taught by millions of faithful preachers down through the ages. God has made it abundantly clear how important this partnership is to Him. We just have to decide how important it is to us.

*“If my people . . . then I will . . .”* has been God's constant refrain throughout all of human history.

Believe it, or not.