

Liberating Grace
Part 2 of Good News About Grace
Galatians 3:3
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I want us to begin today with a little self-examination quiz. I'm going to ask you some questions and I want you to consider how you'd answer them.

1. Do you ever feel guilty when you relax, knowing you have a lot to do?
2. Do you often feel dissatisfied or discontent with yourself or your situation?
3. Do you have a tendency to see something wrong with things rather than what's right?
4. Do you ever find yourself using these phrases: "I have to..." "I must..." "I ought to..." "I should..."
5. Do you ever feel like God is putting too much on you?
6. Does your relationship with God ever seem more like a burden than a blessing?

If you've answered yes to any of these questions, it's a good chance you are suffering from something called perfectionism. Perfectionism is when you try to prove your worth by being perfect. It's a counterfeit of spiritual maturity. It's not the real thing, trying to prove your worth by being perfect. After years and years in the ministry it's my opinion that perfectionism is the number one hand up of sincere believers, those who are truly committed to Christ.

It happens like this: When you first become a Christian, when you first understand what grace is all about, you think, "Wow. That's a good deal. I take all my sins and give them to God and he nails them to the cross with Christ and then he gives me eternal life and forgiveness and power to live my life." You realize you don't have to pay your own way to heaven because Christ has already paid your way. You don't have to barter with God or make promises to pay him back because your salvation is free. It's a gift from God, a free gift. When you first come to Christ you see what a wonderful gift it is to have this relationship with God and to be set right with God. But what inevitably happens as time goes by is you start thinking, "This has got to be too good to be true. Really, I ought to help God out a little bit. Surely he expects something out of me to gain his approval, to gain his love.

That's when you fall into one of two traps. These traps are the two great enemies of grace. One of them is LEGALISM. That's when you try to earn God's approval through rules. The other is PERFECTIONISM. That's when you try to earn God's approval by being perfect. There is an entire book in the Bible written to address these two enemies of grace and that is the book of Galatians. In the book of Galatians, God says, when you try to earn his approval, his acceptance, his praise, that's really dumb. It says in the third chapter, ***"You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you***

receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"—Galatians 3:1-3.

Over the past several weeks we've been looking at the good news about God's grace. Today I want to share with you how liberating God's grace is. His liberating grace enables you to break out of the performance trap, to break out of the prison of perfectionism. Understanding his liberating grace enables you to RELAX in his grace. It enables you to find a whole new level of joy, a whole new level of freedom. Many Christians start out with that experience. When they surrender their lives to Christ they experience overwhelming joy and the lifting of an unbearable burden. But over time, perfectionism creeps in and takes over.

The effects of perfectionism are very detrimental. Let me just mention a few:

First, perfectionism defeats your initiative. It saps the energy right out of you. Have you ever had a project you just couldn't seem to get started on even though you knew it was the right thing to do, that it would be good to do? You think, "One of these days I'm going to get around to it." But you never do. One possible reason is perfectionism. Perfectionism causes procrastination. You set your standards so high, that it paralyzes you and you can't get started. The Bible says in Ecclesiastes 11:4, *"If you wait for perfect conditions, you'll never get anything done."*

Second, perfectionism damages your relationships. Does anyone enjoy being around somebody who's always correcting you, whose always finding fault with you? Nobody likes to be nagged all the time, corrected all the time, told what you need to improve all the time. It's frustrating. It's irritating. It's belittling. It destroys a relationship. Proverbs 17:9 says, *"Love forgets mistakes; nagging about them parts even the best of friends."*

All of us are perfectionists to one degree or another. We all struggle with this. Being a perfectionist causes us to look at what's wrong rather than what's right. That tendency is rooted in insecurity. Have you noticed when you don't feel good about yourself, you don't want anybody else to feel good about themselves? If I don't like myself, I don't want you to like yourself. It only points out my failure to like myself, when you like yourself. People who are harsh and demanding of others are harsh and demanding of themselves too. They take great pains in their own work but they are also great pains to everybody else.

Third, perfectionism destroys your happiness. Ecclesiastes 7:16 says, *"Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself?"* That verse doesn't sound like it should be in the Bible but it is. He's not talking about genuine righteousness or real wisdom. He's talking about perfectionism. Trying to be perfect will only make you miserable.

In your mind you have this picture of your ideal self. That's what you put on a job application. That's your ideal self, what you show on your first date. There's always a gap between the ideal you and the real you, between who you are and who you want to be. There's always a gap between the real and the ideal. The ideal is always nagging the real in your mind. There's this conversation going on in your head. The ideal is saying, "Shape up...surely you can do better than that...get with it...why'd you do that again?" It's like the voice in my GPS. Whenever I miss a turn or make a wrong turn a voice says, "Recalculating." It sounds so annoyed like what it really means is, "You dummy. Why are you messing up." That's the voice of perfectionism. It causes you to constantly criticize yourself, put yourself down, demean yourself, degrade yourself and have this conversation.

The bad news is that we all were exposed to perfectionism while growing up. It's something we've all learned. It may have been instilled in you by your parents or a sibling or a teacher or an employer. The good is you can unlearn it. Many of you were perfectionists before you became a believer. You stepped across the line and gave your life to Christ, but you didn't leave that nagging voice behind. You brought it along and now you hear it as the voice of God. Now you hear God saying, "Shape up...surely you can do better than that...get with it...why'd you do that again?"

How do you get beyond perfectionism? How do you silence the nagging voice of perfectionism? How do you stop the sound of that great critic in the sky?

The antidote is not found in any therapy. It's not found in a pill or a bottle and it's certainly not found listening to Jerry Springer. There's only one way to get rid of perfectionism. It's not in some tape series. It's not some psychological, pull yourself up by your boot straps. There is only one way to get rid of perfectionism and that is by experiencing the grace of God and learning to relax in the grace of God.

How do we do that? How do we relax in God's grace? To help you remember these points, I'm going to give them to you in an acrostic using the letters in the word RELAX. Here's how to relax in God's grace.

FIRST, REALIZE NOBODY'S PERFECT. Psalm 119:96 says, "*Nothing is perfect except God's Word.*" That's why you need to build your life on God's Word. What society tells you is imperfect. What popular opinion tells you is imperfect. What you learn growing up is imperfect. God's Word, alone, is perfect. If you live with a perfectionist, this would be a good verse to put on your refrigerator. If you spend all your time trying to attain perfection, trying to do everything just right, you're wasting your time. You've got to remember, 92% is still an A for a reason. Ecclesiastes 7:6 says, "*There is no one on earth who does what is right all the time and never makes a mistake.*" There is no one on earth who is perfect. We all need God's grace. We all need God's forgiveness. We all need to come to Christ, to be found in Christ, to rest in what he has done for us. When we give our lives to

Christ, he gives us his righteousness. Then when God the Father looks down at us, he sees the perfection of Christ, and the goodness of Christ that we cannot attain on our own, no matter how hard we try.

SECOND, ENJOY GOD'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE. 1st John 3:1 says, "*See how very much our Heavenly Father loves us, for He allows us to be called His children—think of it—and we really are!*" When you come to Christ, when you receive the salvation offered through Christ, you're made a child of God. You're no longer an enemy because of your rebellion. You're not just a slave to God or a servant. You're a child of God. Yes, you're called to serve the Lord, but not as a slave, but as a child who loves out of gratitude, not fear. You're a child of the King! You're a member of the royal family when you put your faith in Jesus Christ to save you. God wants you to enjoy your new status as a child of God.

You don't have to be perfect for God to love you. He doesn't just overlook your sin. He doesn't just ignore your bad behavior. He takes your sin very seriously, that's why he sent his son to die for your sin. The eternal significance of Christ's sacrificial death more than covers your sin, more than atones for your sin. God wants you to rest in that knowledge. He wants you to enjoy his unconditional love. Romans 8:31 says, "*If God is for us, who can be against us.*" The meaning of God's grace can be summed up in four little words: **GOD IS FOR US**. He will never forsake us or abandon us. He will never reject us. That's a hard thing for some people to believe because they've only experienced conditional love from others. They don't think God could possibly love them unconditionally. The good news of the gospel is that **GOD IS FOR US**. His love endures forever and it is not dependent on us, but on what Christ has done for us.

THIRD, LET GOD HANDLE THINGS. This is very important. At the root of perfectionism is the desire to control. If I can control my situation, if I can control others, if I can control my own behavior, then everything will be good and perfect and I won't get hurt. Unfortunately, we can't control everything. In fact, most of the things in our lives are beyond our control. When we try to control everything, we're trying to play God. You're not God and besides, God can do a whole lot better job controlling things than you can.

So what do you do when you can't control the uncontrollable things in your life? 1st Peter 5:7 says, "*Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.*" What does it mean to cast our anxiety on Him? Anybody ever been fishing? If you have, then you know what casting is. When you cast your line out over the water, at some point you have to let go of the button on your reel or if you're fly fishing, you have to let go of the line. The essence of casting is letting go. To overcome perfectionism, you have to let go. You have to let go and let God do his thing.

There's great wisdom in learning to let go and let God handle the things in your life that cause you anxiety. Proverbs 14:30 says, "*A relaxed attitude lengthens a man's life.*"

Things don't have to be perfect for you to be happy. Things don't have to be perfect for you to enjoy them. There is no such thing as a perfect vacation. If you're waiting for one, it's never going to happen. There's no such thing as a perfect marriage. You're married to a sinner and your spouse is married to a bigger one. Who thinks you can put two imperfect people together and have a perfect relationship? There are no perfect kids. There's no such thing as a perfect body. There's no perfect church and there is certainly no perfect pastor. The PNC will find that out as they begin to interview candidates for your next pastor. The Bible says there is nothing that is perfect except God's Word. We all must learn to enjoy life in the middle of imperfection, under less than perfect circumstances. The apostle Paul learned this and was able to say, ***"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation..."*** —Philippians 4:12. That secret is learning to relax in God's grace. It involves learning to let God handle things.

FOURTH, ACT IN FAITH NOT FEAR. Ephesians 2:8 says, ***"It is by grace that you have been saved through faith."*** The only way to salvation is through God's grace. If you're not saved by grace, you're not saved. There's no other way to get into heaven except by grace. It's by grace, through faith. The way you got into the Christian life is the same way you live the Christian life - by grace, through faith. The way to become a believer is the same way you continue as a believer - by grace, through faith. The Bible says, ***"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him."***—Colossians 2:6.

FIFTH, EXCHANGE YOUR PERFECTIONISM FOR GOD'S PEACE. Perfectionism destroys peace. You can't continue to be a perfectionist and experience peace. Here's the offer. Here's the offer Jesus makes you. In Matthew 11:28 & 29 Jesus says, ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."***

God is perfect and in order for us to exist in unity with God, we too must be perfect. But God knows we are not perfect and that we will never be perfect in and of ourselves. That is why God came up with grace. That is why God sent Jesus Christ into the world, to live the perfect life for you and make the perfect sacrifice for your sins. You share in Christ's perfect life, death and resurrection by God's grace which is received through faith. There is only one failure you ever need to worry about and that is failing to receive God's grace which is ours through faith because of Christ. In Hebrews 12:15 it says, ***"Be careful that no one fails to receive God's grace."***