

*Confused by
Grace*

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Introduction

Confused by grace?

Grace is at the heart of Christianity. Grace means that God accepts us as we are, sinners. We don't have to earn it; it is simply free and complete forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ. In the words of Billy Graham's favourite hymn, *Just as I am*:

Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bid'st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come.

What a wonderful teaching – we can come to Jesus just as we are, and he forgives us and accepts us. We can't earn our salvation, the only thing we can plead before God is the blood of Jesus Christ. One man in our church said that when he came to Christ, it was like a burden had been lifted from him. He came to Christ burdened by sin, and Christ forgave him and released him. Hallelujah!

But, once our sins are forgiven, the question arises: *what next?* We know that our lives should change, and we should come to obey God. But we also know that our obedience doesn't contribute to our salvation. Or does it? Maybe in your Bible reading, you come across passages like this from Deuteronomy 28:

All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God... (v2)

However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you. (v15)

In these verses, Moses tells the Israelites that God would punish or reward them depending on their obedience to him. Does that mean their salvation depended on their obedience after all? You can find lots of places in the Old Testament prophets where God judges his people because of their sin.

Some people say that's just the Old Testament, and things are different now for Christians. But this is not true, you can find many similar passages in the New Testament:

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.
Matthew 5:48

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. *Hebrews 10:26-27*

Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. *1 Corinthians 6:9-10*

No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. *1 John 3:6*

So, how do you square that circle?

- Does grace mean that we still must obey God?
- But then, won't God just forgive us for the times when we fail?
- But then again, how do we know that we've tried hard enough?

Is it any wonder that many people are confused by grace?! If you can identify with this confusion, then read on – this book is for you!

Cheap grace

The root of the problem is that we don't think deeply enough about the relationship between grace and the Christian life.

Many Christians have, like me, been brought up with the gospel message: "Jesus died on the cross to forgive our sins". We know that we are not saved through our own merit or efforts – we are saved *only* by grace. The apostle Paul says: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith... not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). We are saved by grace alone, and categorically not through our own good works. When I was confirmed, the bishop quoted Jonathan Edwards in his sermon: "we contribute nothing to our own salvation except the sin that made it necessary". Perhaps that's a familiar quotation to you as well.

But grace without making a difference in our lives is not grace at all. Dietrich Bonhoeffer realised that grace without a changed life was meaningless – it was what he called "cheap grace":

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession.

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.¹

Clearly, grace does not mean that we can go on to live as we like! Paul says that grace “teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives” (Titus 2:12). Grace is our teacher in how to live rightly. But how? **How does grace connect to obedience?**

If you’ve ever struggled with these questions, then fear not – you are not alone! I have struggled with them too. This book is an attempt to set down in words what I have learned as I have wrestled with God and the Scriptures. I have made many mistakes along the way and gone down many wrong paths – but the Lord has used them to lead me to a better understanding of the relationship between grace and obedience.

Let me tell you a little of the journey I’ve been on which led me to writing this book.

Walking the tightrope

One of the biggest mistakes that I made was thinking for many years that the Christian life was a kind of tightrope. You *try* to obey God (i.e., keep the Ten Commandments), but God’s forgiveness (i.e., grace) is there when you fail.

It was a kind of compromise: I ended up thinking the Christian life was a balancing act, with obedience to the law on one hand and grace on the other. Christians were trying to walk a tightrope, making sure that ‘grace’ and ‘law’ were in proportion to one another.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Touchstone: 1995), 44-5



Perhaps this understanding of the Christian life is recognisable to you, too. I believe it is a common one.

The problem with this view is that it led to constant feelings of guilt. I felt guilty that I wasn't trying hard enough; guilty that I wasn't living enough for God; and guilty that I wasn't doing well enough at conquering sin. Try as I might, I couldn't stop *wanting* the wrong things. I kept praying that God would help me to stop doing the wrong things – but little seemed to help, and nothing much changed in my life.

I often ended up feeling that I was abusing God's grace – whenever I went back to a sinful pattern of behaviour, coming back to God for forgiveness *again* seemed like a burden! From conversations I have had since then, I think this is a very common experience.

Terrified of temptation

There was one issue which helped me more than anything to clarify my thinking about grace and obedience. That issue was friendship with the opposite sex.

I have always been a man who finds it easier to relate to women than my fellow men. Even as far back as primary school, I remember being friends with a girl in my class and my classmates making fun of me for it. However, like every normal teenager, as I grew I started to become aware of the sexual dimension of life and the complications this can introduce into relationships.

At the same time, from a young age I was taught the importance of living by the Ten Commandments. The commandment which always gave me most anxiety was “Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery”. As a young man, it seemed very contrary to my natural inclinations – not to mention the fact that we live in a world which is saturated with sexual imagery and pornography. It’s a very difficult world to live in if you struggle with sexual temptation.

While I was at theological college, I became more and more anxious about keeping this command. There were so many things that fed my anxiety: we were told about the many temptations there were as pastors. We heard stories of pastors who had lost their ministries due to falling into temptation. We had books such as *Dangerous Calling*² recommended to us, which contained various accounts of how pastors had fallen into temptation (with disastrous consequences). We took safeguarding training, which included terrible accounts of the damage pastors had done when they had fallen into sexual sin. We studied Bible

² Paul Tripp, *Dangerous Calling* (Crossway: 2012)

verses such as Hebrews 13:4, “Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.” It was enough to make anyone terrified of what might happen!

I was determined not to be another statistic and fall into temptation. At the same time, I was very aware that I was not strong enough in myself to keep this command. My mind was filled with visions of what temptations lay in pastoral ministry, and how easily it could happen to me. I pleaded with God many times to prevent me from falling into sin. I remember praying during our daily college chapel services for God to keep me pure.

When the penny dropped

Fast forward a year or two. I finished college and my wife and nine-month-old daughter moved to a new town as I started my curacy.³ Due to having a baby at the time, I started helping with our church baby & toddler group. One thing you can say about toddler groups is – there are always plenty of women! I was one of the few dads who attended.

Think about it for a moment: for a man struggling with sexual temptation, could there be anything worse than being surrounded by lots of young women? And yet, this was the moment that God used to bring me to a fresh understanding of his ways.

³ A curacy is a bit like an apprenticeship in the Church of England for those who have finished theological college and are on their way to becoming vicars. It’s the practical side of training – being in a church and learning the nuts and bolts of what it means to be a vicar. They usually last for three or four years.

As I started to build relationships with the mums at the group, it became clear to me that I had a choice:

- Keep them at arm's length out of fear of temptation.
- Move towards them in love, in the faith that God would help me do the right thing.

During those early months, God helped me to see that the path he wanted me to take was *love*. He led me to understand that I could trust him to handle temptation, and give me the love I needed to do what was right. I began to see that God wanted us to act, not from *fear* of breaking the law, but out of *love* for others. Over time, I came to see that fear and love are opposites – and God desires love, not fear.



The reason I was so terrified of breaking God's law to start with is because I knew the power of temptation. I could feel it in my own life, but I had also seen many examples through history of people who had given in to temptation with disastrous consequences. To put it bluntly, it seemed like there was a lot to fear! But it turns out that God does not want us to dwell on those fears.

Putting the pieces together

Over the last few years, I have thought more deeply about the law and its relationship to grace. In my exploration, I have found that the Bible and my experience both point in one direction. The way that I used to

understand the Christian life - the tightrope walk between law and grace - was wrong.

The Christian life is not law and fear, or some kind of mixture of grace and law. God's way is *love*, pure and simple - and love itself is the fulfilment of the law. In this book, I am going to work through the Bible with you to help you understand what I've come to see. By the end of this book, I hope that you will have a deeper understanding of how the Christian life works, and how God calls us to live a life of love and not fear. My aim is that this will be more than an intellectual exercise but will teach you how to put this into practice in your life right away.

Chapter One: The purpose of the Law

Which law?

The first thing to clear up when we talk about “the law” is, which law exactly are we talking about? Sometimes in the Bible this is a reference to the first five books of the Bible (known as the Pentateuch). Sometimes it refers to *all* the Jewish ceremonial law – such as circumcision, the system of sacrifices, and so on.

The New Testament makes clear that some laws have been abrogated for Christians. For example, Mark’s gospel adds the comment that Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19). This means that Christians do not have to obey the food purity laws of the Pentateuch. The million-dollar question for us, therefore, is *which* laws are still in force today and which can we ignore?

Christians have often been accused of inconsistency in which Old Testament laws they choose to apply. For example, there’s a scene in *The West Wing* where the President talks to a doctor who calls homosexuality an ‘abomination’ on her radio show. As she points out, “The Bible calls homosexuality an abomination – Leviticus 18:22”. The President then questions her about other laws from Leviticus – for example, what price he should ask for his daughter when he sells her into slavery (as

permitted in the law). The implication is, she is a hypocrite for cherry-picking the laws she wants to obey and ignoring the laws she doesn't.⁴

I appreciate this is a difficult issue for many Christians. However, I do not wish to get embroiled in the question of which specific laws Christians should take from the Law of Moses. Instead, for our purposes in this book we will focus on the Ten Commandments. This is because the Ten Commandments are the 'high point' of God's moral law: they underpin everything else. In his book *Devoted to God*, Sinclair Ferguson outlines a few reasons why the Ten Commandments are distinct from the rest of the law:

There the Decalogue [the Ten Commandments] is viewed as foundational to and distinct from its local and temporal applications. This distinction is built into the very way in which God gave the laws in the first place:

- The Ten Commandments alone were spoken to the whole congregation.
- The Ten Commandments alone were written on stone tablets.
- The Ten Commandments alone were written by the finger of God.
- The Ten Commandments alone were housed in the ark.

By contrast,

⁴ You can watch the scene on YouTube: https://youtu.be/Q5f_IUyfQUE

- The civil laws were given through Moses, not directly written by God.
- The civil laws and commands were to be kept while the people were 'in the land'.
- The ceremonial laws do not appear in the words of Deuteronomy which were spoken to the people as a whole - except insofar as they involved the people's action.⁵

So, the Ten Commandments were special. They cannot be dismissed simply as a part of the Law of Moses, along with e.g. the food purity laws. The Ten Commandments represented something fundamental about what God required of his people. This aligns with what Moses said in Deuteronomy 4:

He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets. And the Lord directed me at that time to teach you the decrees and laws you are to follow in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess.

Deuteronomy 4:13-14

The Ten Commandments are at the core of God's covenant, his relationship, with his people. The other laws from the Pentateuch (the civil and ceremonial laws) were given to a particular people at a particular time, to help them know how to obey God in that context. While they may give us insight today into what it means to obey the

⁵ Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God* (Kindle edition: 2016), 2614

commandments, they are not binding for Christians in the same way. (A happy thought for those of us who like to enjoy a bacon sandwich!)⁶

So, just why are the Ten Commandments so important? Let's think about why they were given in the first place.

Going back to the beginning

To answer that question, we need to go right back to the beginning. What was God's will for humanity from the start? We need to go back to the book of Genesis and the creation of the universe. This is what it says about the creation of mankind:

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:27

This teaches us that human beings are made in the "image of God". This is the most fundamental truth the Bible teaches about humanity: each human being is precious because we are made in God's image and belong to him. There has been no single Christian doctrine which has had a greater impact on the Western world. This one verse has led to our views about equality, human rights, and so many other things we take for granted.⁷

⁶ Of course, this is also simplifying the law – for example, the sacrificial laws, which have been fulfilled by Christ's sacrifice. See Sinclair Ferguson's book *Devoted to God* for a fuller explanation of the law.

⁷ See Tom Holland's book *Dominion* for a thorough exploration of the way Christianity has impacted upon the modern world.

Let's think more deeply about what it means to be made in God's image. Christians have an insight into what God is like in a way that Old Testament believers did not. We have the doctrine of the Trinity, which was developed in the early years of the church as they wrestled with the question 'Who is Jesus?' One thing the Trinity means is that God is fundamentally *relational*. Mike Ovey, the late principal of my theological college, used to say: "The Trinity means that God is, from eternity, a community of other-person centred love."

If God is a community of love, and we are made in the image of God, does that not say something fundamental about humanity? Whatever else you may say about us as human beings, we are made to be part of a network of loving relationships. In the same way that you cannot define Jesus the Son of God without reference to the Father, you cannot define us as human beings without reference to our relationships. John Donne famously said, "No man is an island": our relationships are essential to who we are. You could say that *love* is at the core of who we are and how God wants us to live.

Sidebar: Men, women, and marriage

Have you ever considered before the significance of the creation of man and woman? Genesis 1:27, as we saw above, says that God created men and women equally in his image – you could say, that's the summary. But Genesis 2 gives us a little more detail.

We see Adam alone in the Garden of Eden, and this is the first time in Genesis where something is described as *not* good: "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (Genesis 2:18). He then causes Adam to fall into a deep sleep, takes a rib from him, and creates Eve.

Then the narrator adds the note: “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).

It would be easy to skim over this, yet it’s a deeply significant truth. God has taken *one* man, formed *two* people (man and woman), and then in sexual union they become *one* again. One, becomes two, becomes one again.

This is why sexual intimacy is so fundamental – it’s the high point of human love. It is where our love for one another finds its deepest physical expression. And for that reason, sexual ethics are very important in the Bible – simply because sex is so deep and powerful. We’ll think more about this when we look at the commandments in Chapter Six.

How do the Ten Commandments fit in?

I’m sure you know that the perfect situation described at the beginning of the Bible (the first two chapters of Genesis) did not last long. In Genesis 3 sin enters the world, and Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden. You can read for yourself what happens next in the book of Genesis – but we’re going to skip on a little.

The Ten Commandments were given to God’s people at Mount Sinai, once he had rescued them from slavery in Egypt⁸. Before we move on, it’s extremely important to highlight this: God saved his people first, and only then gave them the law. This is the way it worked in the Old Testament, and it’s the same with us as Christians: **God saves us first**,

⁸ You might be familiar with some of the story from the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat* and the film *Prince of Egypt* – but it’s always better to read the source material!

then calls us to a holy life. Holiness is the *result* of salvation, not the requirement for it! We'll come back to this later.

What was the purpose of God giving the commandments? They were to teach his people how to obey him. This is how Sinclair Ferguson puts it:

The law of God – in the sense of the Ten Commandments – was an expression of the will of God for the people he had delivered from bondage in Egypt. But in a deeper sense it gave expression to his original design for the lifestyle of men and women made in his image...

The Ten Commandments therefore expressed, largely in negative terms (because addressed now to sinners), what God originally willed in a positive way for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden... There God was republishing his original blueprint for life.⁹

The Ten Commandments were not some new idea that God dreamt up for the Israelites at that moment. They were simply God “republishing his original blueprint for life”: it was, in other words, nothing more than a statement of God’s *original purpose for human beings* from the Garden of Eden. But, because people had become sinners and turned away from God, this changed the way the message was communicated. What they had previously known instinctively, they needed to be told explicitly in black-and-white.

This new context of sin also meant that God expressed his purposes differently. As Ferguson points out, the law was expressed largely in *negative* terms – i.e. “Don’t do this or that”. It made it easier for sinners to understand. But the underlying principles of love were exactly the

⁹ *Devoted to God*, 2497

same as they were at creation. The only difference was how they were communicated, because of the different context.

The commandments in the New Testament

It's a common misconception that the Old Testament and the New Testament contain very different ideas about what God wants from us. This is the opposite of the truth: God's purposes remain consistent throughout the whole Bible. However, the vision of God's purposes for mankind in the commandments is made clearer in the New Testament. Let's look firstly at Jesus' explanation of the law:

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?'

Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'" This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'

Matthew 22:34-40

Jesus condenses the whole law into just two commandments: to *love* the Lord your God, and to *love* your neighbour. He said that everything in the Law and the Prophets hung on those two commandments. This is completely logical given what we have seen about the Ten Commandments and God's purposes for humanity. Everything God wants from us is summed up in the one word, 'love'. We are to love others as God has loved from all eternity.

Further on in the New Testament, the apostle Paul builds on this understanding of the law:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not covet,' and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.
Romans 13:8-10

Paul couldn't be clearer, could he? "Whoever loves others has fulfilled the law". It's there in black-and-white. But, for the avoidance of doubt, he spells it out in the next verse. He lists several of the commandments, then says they are "summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbour...'" All the Ten Commandments are summed up in the *one* command to love. This is because, as he puts it, "love does no harm to a neighbour". In other words, **if we love others, we won't harm them.** Love and harm are opposites.

Let's summarise what we've learned so far.

The Ten Commandments and love

Everything that God wants from us as human beings can be summed up in the one word, 'love'. This is the way that he made us from the beginning. He wants us to love him, and he wants us to love our neighbour. The Ten Commandments are simply a *summary* of what that love should look like in our lives.



The commandments were given as an expression of God’s purpose for us as human beings, to help sinful people understand what it meant to love God and love others in practice. It needed to be communicated differently (in negative terms) because it was given to sinners, but the purpose was still the same.

Now, at this point you might find yourself thinking, “why have we spent all this time on the purpose of the commandments? How does that help us to live as Christians?” Please be patient – we are trying to build the argument piece by piece. It is all necessary for our understanding, and you will see why as we go through.

In the next chapter we will look at the sad case of the Pharisees and see how misunderstanding the law leads to the wrong view about the Christian life.