



## DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

TITUS 2:11-14

APRIL 2017

# Grace Is Hard

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*One of the participants in an event at the ranch confessed, "I have read your books and listened to other teachers saying what you've said, and I know it is right. But I'm telling you, grace is hard."*

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I chuckled at the irony of that statement, but had to agree. When we have been programmed to live with guilt and shame, *grace is hard*. It is both counter-intuitive and counter-cultural. As many have said, "It is too good to be true." Why is it so hard?

It is counter-intuitive. We, like our forebears, have ingested the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We are oriented to believe that we can become so knowledgeable as to be independent, in control of our lives, and determining the basis of morality. We think we know what is good and bad and can do the good and avoid the bad. After all, that was the promise

the serpent made to Eve. We would not need God because we would be like God—knowing good and evil. That religion has been spread to every culture in the world. Its dogma includes these assumptions: (1) Goodness is the goal; (2) We can be good by eliminating the bad; and (3) God loves good people and might even delight in tormenting the bad ones. This leads to a kind of moralism that might allow people to co-exist, but it does not produce people who enjoy God and his world as fully human people.

Grace teaches us (Titus 2:11-14) that trust is the goal rather than goodness. Being *fully* human is better than

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being *really* good. We are created to be image-bearers of God. We are to reflect his true character to the world. We reflect the eternal love that is within the Trinity. We demonstrate the partnership of the Trinity as we walk with and work with God in developing his creation. We exhibit the true nature of the Creator and the created. One is worshipped, and the other worships. All of this works as we humans trust God supremely. He is our source. He is our master. He is our glory. We don't have to know everything when we are living with the One who does. Being good is too small a goal. Our goal is to know and be known by the God who loves us and guides us to what will bring our greatest delight.

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We even blame the physical body for our troubles since **our desires** are located there.

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The Pharisees of Jesus' time were prime examples of those infected with the religion of shame. They interpreted God's laws in such a way as to conclude that God's goal was for them to be good. They tried to be good by eliminating external evil. "Thou shalt

not" echoed in their head both day and night. Jesus mocked their perspective when he told them to cut off their hands if they did acts of evil with them, and to pluck out their eyes if they were used in evil. In the end, they would be nothing but a bloody blob of flesh lying on the floor . . . but still harboring a sinful heart. Not only is being good not the goal—you can't get there by eliminating external acts of evil. We read of the Pharisees and wonder that they could be so self-righteous, yet we continue to measure our own spirituality by which actions we have stopped. We even blame the physical body for our troubles since our desires are located there. We try suppressing it. We demean it and hope for the day when we fly away from it. In an effort to curb our distorted desires, we denounce all desires entirely, following the example of the stoics. We sometimes even blame technical advances for our troubles. They distract us and steal our time. We are now too busy to stop and love those around us. Some even throw their cell phones away—trying to be good by eliminating evil.

But God loves sinners. He is full of mercy and loves to display it. It is best displayed when we are very needy,

even sinful. Jesus said that the healthy don't need a physician, but the sick do. He came (and still comes) as the great physician. When Peter had failed the Lord the night before his crucifixion, he was exposed about his own ability to be faithful. Jesus met him on the seashore and refused to talk about his failure. He talked of love and destiny. It was not the "good" Peter that Jesus loved, but the sinful one. He was now qualified to dispense grace. He was loved when there was nothing in him to merit it.

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Jesus Christ **opens blind eyes to truth** that cannot be discerned by observation alone.

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Grace is not only counter-intuitive. It is counter-cultural. If you are expecting the dominant culture to encourage you, you will be disappointed. Cultures are made of people whose original parents ate from the same tree. The major religions of the world feature the good and evil motif. Millions are busy trying to figure out how to please or appease whatever gods there may be. They are trying to be good according to what they think that means in their

religion. Even those who recognize the validity of natural law in creation will misinterpret how it works unless they are touched by the grace revealed in Jesus Christ who opens blind eyes to truth that cannot be discerned by observation alone. Those who try to find God in the Bible but refuse to accept Jesus as the Son of God will not experience the grace that restores us to true humanity. "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

God has created a people where the culture is saturated with the aroma of grace. It is the church of the firstborn. The people of God who are defined by their unity in Christ Jesus live by grace. They preach the gospel daily and encourage each other so that they will not be drawn into the deception of man-made religion (Hebrews 10:24-25). Trying to live in the grace of the gospel without the fellowship of the community of faith is futile. Eternal life is designed to be lived in community.

We struggle with grace because it seems too good. We have felt the pangs of guilt and the blanket of shame. When we hear that there are no charges against us, we can't believe it. It doesn't

seem just. But it is. Jesus has taken our guilt and shame and absorbed all the wrath that goes with them. We are cleared on the basis of eternal justice. "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). We feel like failures while God calls us sons. We try to worship, and it doesn't feel authentic. We are aware of so much that does not qualify as good. But his blood has cleansed our conscience, and we are free to enjoy him without a sense of debt. Gratitude has replaced obligation and fear. Worship is our delight. When we go to work, we can exult in our vocation. God is our partner, and we are displaying his image in whatever we put our hands to.

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Our repentance involves giving up the old way of thinking and **adopting the new way.**

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If you were to observe such a grace-oriented person for a while, you might conclude that "she is a good person." But she is not trying to be good. She is just enjoying being a liberated human who can worship and work with equal joy. People who are captured by the love of

God do loving things. Love expressed is good.

Grace is hard if we continue to feed upon the false reality presented by fallen thinking. It is the culture of heaven, and God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts. We do set our minds to think the new way because this is a new day when God has begun a new creation through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our repentance involves giving up the old way of thinking and adopting the new way. It is a change, but refusing the grace offered in Christ is hard in a whole different way.



P.O. Box 2022  
Colleyville, TX 76034  
(817) 267-9224  
Fax: (817) 354-5522  
Email: [Mail@KerygmaVentures.com](mailto:Mail@KerygmaVentures.com)  
[www.KerygmaVentures.com](http://www.KerygmaVentures.com)