

LIBERATING GRACE
Good News About Grace - Part 5 of 10
Galatians 3:3 (NCV)
Rick Warren

"You began your life in Christ by the Spirit. Now are you trying to make it complete by your own power? That is foolish." Galatians 2:3 (NCV)

Perfectionism:
"Trying to prove my worth by being perfect."

HOW PERFECTIONISM HARMS

* **IT DEFEATS MY** _____

"If you wait for perfect conditions, you'll never get anything done." Eccl. 11:4 (LB)

* **IT DAMAGES MY** _____

"Love forgets mistakes; nagging about them parts the best of friends." Prov. 17:9 (LB)

* **IT DESTROYS MY** _____

"Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself?" Eccl. 7:16 (NNAS)

HOW TO R.E.L.A.X. IN GOD'S GRACE

REALIZE _____

"Nothing is perfect except (God's) Word." Ps. 119:96 (LB)

"There is no one on earth who does what is right all the time and never makes a mistake." Eccl. 7:20 (GN)

ENJOY _____

"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!" 1 John 3:1 (LB)

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" Romans 8:31 (NIV)

LET GOD _____

"Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you." 1 Peter 5:7 (NIV)

"A relaxed attitude lengthens a man's life." Prov. 14:30 (LB)

ACT _____

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith..." Eph. 2:8 (NIV)

"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him." Col. 2:6 (NIV)

EXCHANGE _____

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to Me. Get away with Me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest... Learn the unforced rhythms of grace." Matt. 11:28-29 (Mes)

"Be careful that no one fails to receive God's grace..." Heb. 12:15 (NCV)

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I want to begin with a little self evaluation quiz this morning. Consider how you'd answer these questions:

- Do you ever feel guilty when you relax, knowing you've got a lot to do?
- Do you often feel dissatisfied or discontent with yourself or your situation?
- Do you have a tendency to see something wrong with things rather than what's right?
- Do you ever find yourself using these phrases regularly, "I have to... I must.. I ought to... I should be able to..."?
- Do you ever feel frustrated or maybe even angry at God feeling that His expectations on you are unreasonable?
- Does your relationship to God seem like a burden rather than a blessing?

If you can answer yes to any of these questions, you're probably afflicted with perfectionism. Perfectionism is trying to prove my worth by being perfect. It is a counterfeit of spiritual maturity. It's not the real thing, trying to prove my worth by being perfect. After years and years in ministry it's my opinion that perfectionism is the number one hang up of dedicated believers, dedicated Christians.

It happens like this: When you first become a Christian and you understand what grace is all about -- "This is some deal. I take all my sin and give it to God and He gives me heaven, forgiveness and power for today. I like that deal. And it's free. I don't earn my way into heaven, I don't work my way into heaven, I don't pay my way into heaven, I don't barter my way into heaven. It's just a free gift," when you understand grace and you start enjoying it, inevitably what happens is, as time goes by, you start thinking, "This has got to be too good to be true. Really, I ought to help God out a little big. Surely He expects something of me. Surely He expects something to gain His smile, His approval in my life."

You fall into one of two traps. There are two great enemies of grace. One of them is legalism -- trying to earn God's approval through rules. The other is perfectionism -- trying to prove my worth by being perfect. There is an entire book of the Bible written to combat these two enemies of grace -- the book of Galatians. In the book of Galatians, God says, When you try to earn God's smile on your life, God's pat on the back, God's approval, that's dumb.

Galatians 3:3 "You began your life in Christ by the Spirit. Now are you trying to make it complete by your own power. This is foolish."

Today I want us to look at Liberating Grace -- how to break out of the performance trap, how to break out of the prison of perfectionism. If you understand this, how to relax in God's grace, you will find a new level of joy in your life, you will find a new level of freedom that you've probably never experienced before except maybe when you first became a believer.

I want us to look at, How do you relax in God's grace.

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Before we do, I want to mention what perfectionism does to us. It's very destructive, very detrimental to your own life.

1. It defeats my initiative. Have you ever had a project you haven't seemed to get started on even though you know you want to start on it? It's a good thing, it's the right thing to do and you think, "One of these days I'm going to get around to it." But you never get it started.

One possible reason is perfectionism. In your mind you're waiting for the perfect circumstance, you're waiting for the perfect timing, you're waiting for the perfect environment, you're waiting til the kids get out of school, you're waiting until a certain amount of money comes in. You're waiting. As a result, perfectionism causes procrastination. You set your standards so high, and perfectionism causes paralysis and you can't get anything done.

The Bible says this in Ecclesiastes 11:4 *"If you wait for perfect conditions, you'll never get anything done."*

2. It damages my relationships. Do you enjoy being around somebody who's always correcting what you do? Nobody likes being nagged all the time, corrected all the time, perfected all the time, straightened all the time, etc. It's frustrating, it's irritating. The Bible says, *"Love forgets mistakes. Nagging about them parts the best of friends."* It damages relationships. Perfectionism -- this desire to always correct -- damages relationships.

All of us are perfectionists to one degree or another. We're all in this bag. What it does is cause us to look at the wrong thing. It's 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 me, I certainly don't want you liking you. I want us to all be miserable together. Perfectionists who are harsh and demanding on other people are really harsh and demanding on themselves. They're holding themselves to a high standard and because they are doing that to themselves they hold everybody else to that standard. They take great pains in their own work but they're also a pain to everybody else. It damages relationships.

3. It destroys my happiness. Ecclesiastes 7:16 *"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, does it? He's saying, You can take this thing to the extreme.

He's not talking about genuine righteousness. He's not talking about real wisdom. He's talking about perfectionism. You can take any virtue and make a vise out of it by taking it to the extreme and ignoring the balancing parts to it. He says, "Why ruin yourself?" I love God's Word translation: *"Why make yourself miserable?"*

In your mind you have this picture of your ideal self. That's what you put on the job application. That's your ideal self, not the real you. It's what you show on the first date. There is always a gap between the ideal and the real, between what you want to be, what you'd like to be, what you think you ought to be and what you are. There is a major gap between the ideal and the real. So the ideal is always nagging the real in your mind. There's this ongoing conversation in your mind all the time, "Shape up... Surely you could do better than that... Get with it... Why did you do that

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again? ... Aren't you ever going to change?" It's this little scolding going on in your mind when you're in the perfectionism mode. You're always saying to yourself, "I'm too skinny ... I'm too fat ... I'm too tall... I'm too short... I'm too uncoordinated ... I'm awkward ... I'm always late ... I'm never going to change ... I'm not good at this ... I'm dumb ... " On and on. You've got a tape playing over and over between the ideal and the real, thinking that you're going to nag yourself into perfection.

Does nagging work? No. It doesn't work at all. Nagging only makes you defensive. It makes the person you're nagging defensive.

Your worse nag lives under your skin. If you're typical, you are your own worst critic. Since we tend to resent and even dislike people who nag us, if you're always nagging yourself, what's that saying about you? You don't like you. That's what it's saying. You think you're not good enough. And you think by nagging yourself into what's wrong with you that's going to motivate you into doing the right thing. It's not. That's called perfectionism. And perfectionism causes you to constantly criticize yourself, put yourself down, demean yourself, degrade yourself and have this conversation.

The problem is, you learned perfectionism growing up. It may have been modeled for you. The good point is since you learned it you can unlearn it. But what happens is, many of you were perfectionists before you became believers and then you became a Christian. You stepped across the line and gave your life to Christ, but what you did is you took that little irritating voice that was always telling you what was wrong with you, you took it off your conscious, or you took it off your parents, culture, whatever, and make it God's voice. And now you've got God all the time saying to you, "Come on! Can't you do any better? Why aren't you doing that? Why aren't you doing this?" Always telling you what's wrong. And you've mistaken it for the voice of God. This constant big critic in the sky.

What is the antidote to that kind of perfectionism because we all have it to one degree or another? It's not found in any therapy and it's not found in any pill and it's certainly isn't found listening to Jerry Springer.

There's only one antidote to perfectionism. It's not in some tape series. It's not in some psychological, pull yourself up by your boot straps. There's only one antidote to perfectionism: Experience the grace of God. Learn to relax in the grace of God.

Californians, particularly Southern Californians, are supposed to be a chilled out, laid back, casual, Southern California lifestyle. Those of us who live here know that is a big sham. People who live in Orange County are some of the most stressed out people in the world. They are not chilled out and laid back. They're uptight, stressed out and pushing themselves constantly, always thinking, "I need more time in my day" and if you did have another hour in your day you'd use it to work. You wouldn't use it to relax, you'd use it to work.

How do you learn to relax in the grace of God? I made it into an acrostic for you R.E.L.A.X.

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REALIZE NOBODY'S PERFECT.

That's a no-brainer obviously but you've got to start somewhere. Realize nobody's perfect. Psalm 119:96 *"Nothing is perfect except God's Word."* That's why you need to build your life on God's Word because nothing else is perfect. What society tells you isn't perfect. What popular opinion tells you isn't perfect. What you learned growing up isn't perfect. But God's word is perfect. You get in the book, build your life on this foundation because this is perfect. Then you have a perfect foundation.

This would be a good verse for you to put on your refrigerator. If you are married to a perfectionist I give you permission to do it. *"Nothing is perfect except God's Word."* If you spend all your time trying to attain perfection, trying to make any project perfect, you're wasting your time. Ninety-two percent is still an A! You don't have the time and you don't have the money to be perfect in everything. And you can't anyway.

"There is no one on earth who does what is right all the time and never makes a mistake." Remember a number of years ago there was a book that came out called I'm OK, You're OK? That's a bunch of baloney. It isn't true. I am not ok and you're really not ok! I can say that all the time but inside I'm thinking, "Who am I kidding? There are areas in my life that are definitely not ok. There's some areas in your life that are definitely not ok. So all the little affirmations in the world are not going to make you ok. You're imperfect. I'm not perfect.

The point is -- the truth is -- I'm not OK, and you're not OK. But because of God's grace that's OK!

I'm imperfect and there's a lot of things in my life that are not ok. And you are imperfect and you have a lot of things in your life that are not ok. But when you accept God's grace, He says, "That's ok. You don't have to be perfect."

What does that mean? Does that mean God isn't interested in my growth? Of course He wants me to grow. Does that mean I don't have to repent? No, of course you have to repent. Does that mean God doesn't want me to change and work on areas. No, he wants you to change.

When God says, "You're ok because of My grace," that does not mean you can just keep on being a jerk the rest of your life. It just means that God isn't waiting for you to change for Him to love you. God is not waiting for you to change for Him to say, "You're ok." If you accept His grace. You realize nobody's perfect.

ENJOY

I need to enjoy God's unconditional love. 1 John 3:1 *"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."* Circle the word "children". When you become a believer, when you become a follower of Christ, you're not just a servant of God anymore. You are a child of God. A lot of people think, "I give my life to Christ and the rest of my life I'm going to serve Him." Sure you are. But you're more than a

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servant -- much, much more. You're now a child of the king. You've joined the royal family. You're one of God's family and you're a child of God.

Here's the difference. A servant is accepted and appreciated on the basis of what he does. A child is accepted and appreciated on the basis of who he is. A servant starts the day anxious and worried that his work will please his master. A child rests in the secure love of his family. A servant is accepted because of his workmanship. But a child is accepted because of his relationship. A servant is accepted because of his productivity and his performance. But a child is accepted because of his position in the family. At the end of the day a servant has peace of mind only if he's proven his worth by his work but the next morning the anxiety begins again. A child can be secure all day knowing that tomorrow won't change his status. When a servant fails his whole position is at stake. In fact, he might lose his job. But when a child fails, he is grieved because he's hurt his parents and he'll be corrected and disciplined but he's not afraid of being thrown out of the family and his confidence in belonging and in being loved is based not on his performance but on the stability of his position as a child of God.

God says, I want you to enjoy the unconditional love of God once you become a part of His family.

Those of you who are parents, are your kids perfect? Of course not. Do you still love them? Yes. You love them in spite of their imperfections. When your two or three year old brings you a picture and it's all messy and they say, "This is a picture of a cow", you say, "That's perfect!" What you're saying is, "That's perfect for that stage of your maturity." You're not saying it's Picasso. It's perfect for where you're at.

Eric, in his testimony, talked about teaching his daughter to walk. When my three kids were learning to walk, they stumbled a lot. They'd bump into things, they'd fall down. When my kids fell down, what do you think I'd say to them? "You dummy! Everybody walks! Why can't you walk? You ought to try harder. Get with it!" Do you think I'd scold my kids for stumbling? No. I'd just help them up again. I love them.

Do you love your children at every stage of their growth? Or are you waiting until they're mature first? Once they reach maturity you'll say, "Now, I love you."

Some of you think God's waiting on you to grow up before He's ever going to smile on you, before He's ever going to give you the thumbs up sign saying, "You're ok! I like you." No, God loves you at every stage of your growth because His unconditional love is unconditional.

I don't have to be perfect for God to love me. He understands you completely. He knows everything about you -- the good, the bad, the ugly -- and He still loves you. Romans 8:31 *"If God is for us, who can be against us."* Notice that God is not just with us. The Bible says God is for us. That is the essence of the doctrine of grace. Grace can be summed up in four words -- God is for us. God's on your side. God is not sitting up there in heaven looking down on you saying, "What can I punish next in their life?" If you have received God's grace and you've become part of God's family, God is for you. If you're thumbing your nose at God and saying, "God, I'm going to be my own god. I'm going to work my way into heaven. I don't need you,"

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then of course God is not for you. But when you come in sincerity and honesty and humility and say, "I admit it. I'm imperfect. I don't stand a chance getting into a perfect heaven except through You. Please show me Your grace." God is for us.

That's a hard thing to accept for some people because you were trained, customized, programmed to think of conditional love. All your life you felt like you could never measure up. You need to come to the grace of God and understand that He is for you. His love is unconditional and you don't have to measure up because Christ has measured up for you.

LET GOD HANDLE THINGS

That's very important. At the root of perfectionism is the desire to control. You think that if you can just control things, then they'll be perfect. If I can control my spouse, then we'll have a perfect marriage. If I can control my kids, they'll never get in trouble and always be safe. If I can control my career, my path will be assured. If I can control the people around me, the world will be a better place.

But as we've talked about many times, most of your life is out of your control. You can't control it. That's an attempt to play God. God is God and you aren't. And God can do a whole lot better job than you can.

So what do you do when you can't control the uncontrollable things in life? 1 Peter 5:7 "*Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.*" Circle "cast". Those of you who are fishermen know what it means to cast. When you cast a line or if you're a fly fisherman and you cast repeatedly, you're holding on to the line or the rod and reel and there comes a point in the cast where you have to take your finger off the button or the line and you have to let it go. If you don't, there's no casting.

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. Let God handle the things of your life.

I recommend that you sign up for our winter maturity conference which starts next Sunday night - a four day conference. We're going to talk about how do you let go. How do you cast all your cares on the Lord? It's a conference on prayer. Until you know how to pray effectively, you don't know how to let it all go. I highly encourage you. You'll get a binder of material -- Praying on Purpose. Joining Pastor Tom, Pastor Doug and myself will be Dick Eastman, one of the leading authorities in America on how to pray.

If you want to live a long time, you want to memorize Proverbs 14:30 "*A relaxed attitude lengthens a man's life.*"

Things don't have to be perfect for me to be happy. Things don't have to be perfect for me to enjoy them. There is no such thing as a perfect vacation. If you're waiting for one, you're never going to enjoy one. There is no such thing as the perfect marriage. You married a sinner and she married a bigger one. So there's no perfect marriage because you've got imperfect people. Who

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thinks you can put two imperfect people together and have a perfect relationship? There are no perfect kids. There is no such thing as a perfect body. There is no perfect church. There is no perfect job. The Bible says nothing is perfect except God's word. If you're waiting for that perfect environment for you to enjoy life, it's not going to happen. You must learn to enjoy life in the middle of imperfection under less than perfect circumstances.

Remember when Bret and Dee Eastman were giving their story about the Sustaining Grace of God in raising five kids and some of them with major disabilities -- cerebral palsy. I remember Dee Eastman talking about dealing with the chaos and the difficulty of having one child in particular who cannot even sit up on her own still and needs constant 24-hour care and the drain that is. Yet she said, "There are those moments and I'm learning to see more of them where I look into Megan's face and as I'm wrestling with the kids, tickling, walking in the sunlight, I'm thinking 'I am loving this moment.'"

Have you learned to do that? To love the moment in the midst? Everything does not have to be perfect for you to enjoy the moment. You're walking down the beach, you can still enjoy the moment, even if you can still hear the cars going by and you still have bills to pay. Learning to enjoy the moment, in spite of the imperfections of life.

Paul said it like this, *"I've learned to be content in whatever situation I am. I've learned to be content no matter what state I'm in."* Notice he says, "learned". I, by nature, am not a contented person. I, by nature, am discontented. So are you. It is not human nature to be content. It's something you have to learn. Of course we live in a society that's filled with consumerism and an entire industry called the ad industry which is designed to create discontent in your life so you'll buy their products. You see things on tv and think, "How in the world did I live without that? My life is incomplete until I get that product, use that service, have that experience, look like that model, etc." You have to learn to be content. It's learned.

We know Paul was a southerner. He says, *"I thank God for you all..."* We know he was not a Texan because he says, *"I've learned to be content in whatever state I am"* and no Texan would ever say that.

ACT IN FAITH, NOT FEAR

Remember how you got into God's family in the first place. In Ephesians 2:8 it says *"For it is by grace you have been saved through faith."* That is the only way you're going to ever get saved -- by grace. If you don't get saved by grace you're not saved. There's no other way to get into heaven except by grace. You'll never be good enough, you'll never be perfect enough, you'll never earn enough, you can't buy your way in. If you're not going in by grace, you're not going in. But it's a free gift of God. It's by grace, through faith. I put my faith in God's grace. That's how you get into the Christian life.

The way you got into the Christian life is the way you continue the Christian life. The way you became saved is the way you continue to be saved. The way you became a believer is the way you continue as a believer. By grace, through faith.

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"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him." The same way. You're not saved by grace and then live by works. A lot of people think that. "I'm saved by God's free gift and now I really have to work hard as a Christian to keep God's approval in my life." No, you don't. How were you saved? By promising to be perfect? No. How do you live the Christian life? By promising to be perfect? No. How did you come into the Christian life? By keeping the Ten Commandments and promising to obey every rule? How do you live the Christian life? By keeping the Ten Commandments and promising to obey every rule? No.

It's by grace, through faith. You need to understand that literally everything in your life is a gift from God. Everything in your life. Your own life... You wouldn't even be alive if it weren't for the grace of God. The air you breathe is a gift of grace. The mind that you have is a gift of grace. The ability to hear and see is a gift of God's grace -- you wouldn't have it, you certainly didn't earn it. Everything that God does in your life, He does for one reason -- grace. God teaches you by grace. God forgives you by grace. God guides you by grace -- not because you deserve it. God uses you by grace. God gives you gifts and talents by grace. God blesses your life by grace. God gives you friends and family and freedom by grace. Absolutely nothing in your life did you earn.

You say, "I earn my salary, my income." Where do you think you got the ability to make that money? The ability came from God. If He hadn't given you the ability and the hands and the brains, you wouldn't even do that. Everything in your life, you owe to God. It's all, all by grace.

Understanding this truth is one thing. It doesn't guarantee that you'll live by it. If you were a perfectionist before you became a believer, then the tendency is to take all those perfectionist tendencies and put them on God and make God the unpleasable parent. And then He's the one who always nags at you rather than your conscious or your culture or something else.

Some of you have been living in the prison of perfectionism for a long, long time. But today you're going to get clemency. Today is your day of pardon. Today is the day you're going to get set free. The jail door is going to be unlocked. You're going to be told, from God's word, you can walk out a free person. You don't have to live under or in the prison of perfectionism any more because grace is available. The only way you'll be able to walk out that prison door is to have faith, not fear. Trust in God's grace.

Have you been living in a prison of perfectionism? A self imposed prison? Have you been robbed of your joy and your freedom? You can walk out today.

One of the symptoms of perfectionism is constant fatigue. You're always trying to control everything. And that's tiring trying to be the general manager of the universe, holding all the strings together, trying to keep all the balls in the air. One day you realize, "It's not up to me. I can relax. I can let go. I don't have to try to make things perfect in order to prove my worth."

You can live in a self imposed prison of perfectionism or you can take step five and find liberation and freedom today.

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EXCHANGE MY PERFECTIONISM FOR GOD'S PEACE

Perfectionism destroys peace. You're going to live with one or the other -- perfectionism or peace. Here's the offer. This is the offer Jesus Christ makes and it's still valid today. It's an offer you really can't afford to refuse. Matthew 11 Jesus says, *"Are you tired, worn out, burnt out on religion? Come to Me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life."* That's real recovery -- recover your life. *"And I will show you how to take a real rest. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace."* What a deal!

God is perfect and because God is perfect He expects His children to be perfect. Jesus even said it. He said, *"Be ye perfect even as I am perfect."* But He also knows there's no chance you're going to be perfect. He knows that's impossible.

So He came up with grace. That's why God sent Jesus because Jesus was perfect. And we get in on His perfection. You can either try all you want to or you can just accept the perfection of Christ and say, Let me in on His ticket.

As you read the Bible, you read God's perfect standard of perfection. You read many things and you know there's no way you can measure up to that. There's no way I can keep all those principles, follow all those rules. There's no way I could be the kind of person God says a perfect person is. You don't have to worry because He's already taken care of that. By grace He has been the perfection for you. I invited you to receive God's offer today through Christ. Christian living is based on grace, not guilt.

You're going to fail a lot in life. You're going to fail many responsibilities that you've been given. You're going to fail to live up to the expectations that other people place on you. You're going to let them down. You're going to fail your own expectations. Of course, you're going to fail measuring up to God's standard of perfection. The Bible says *"All have sinned and fallen short."* But you don't have to worry about that if you've received God's grace. In fact, there's only one failure you ever need to worry about. It's the failure of Hebrews 12:15 *"Be careful that no one fails to receive God's grace."* I invite you to receive it right now.

Prayer:

Pray a prayer like this in your mind: "Dear God, I need Your grace. I realize I'm not perfect. In fact, I'm far from it. But I want to enjoy Your unconditional love. Thank You for Your grace. I put my trust in Your grace today. I ask You to make me a part of Your family. Make me Your child, not because I deserve it but because of Your unconditional love. Help me to believe that You're for me and not against me. Help me to let You handle things in my life, to relax and to cast my cares and anxiety on You. Lord, I know from today that it's just putting my faith in Your grace that saves me and so I do that. But I also ask You to help me put my faith in Your grace to live the life that You meant for me to live. I am tired and I am worn out, but I come to You today. Help me to learn the unforced rhythms of grace. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen."