
Costly Grace

Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace.

Cheap grace means grace as bargain-basement goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament; grace as the church's inexhaustible pantry, from which it is doled out by careless hands without hesitation or limit. It is grace without a price, without costs. It is said that the essence of grace is that the bill for it is paid in advance for all time. Everything can be had for free, courtesy of that paid bill. The price paid is infinitely great and, therefore, the possibilities of taking advantage of and wasting grace are also infinitely great. What would grace be, if it were not cheap grace?

Cheap grace means grace as doctrine, as principle, as system. It means forgiveness of sins as a general truth; it means God's love as merely a Christian idea of God. Those who affirm it have already had their sins forgiven. The church that teaches this doctrine of grace thereby confers such grace upon itself. The world finds in this church a cheap cover-up for its sins, for which it shows no remorse and from

DISCIPLESHIP

which it has even less desire to be set free. Cheap grace is, thus, denial of God's living word, denial of the incarnation of the word of God.

Cheap grace means justification of sin but not of the sinner. Because grace alone does everything, everything can stay in its old ways. "Our action is in vain." The world remains world and we remain sinners "even in the best of lives." Thus, the Christian should live the same way the world does. In all things the Christian should go along with the world and not venture (like sixteenth-century Enthusiasts) to live a different life under grace from that under sin! The Christian better not rage against grace or defile that glorious cheap grace by proclaiming anew a servitude to the letter of the Bible in an attempt to live an obedient life under the commandments of Jesus Christ! The world is justified by grace, therefore—because this grace is so serious! because this irreplaceable grace should not be opposed—the Christian should live just like the rest of the world! Of course, a Christian would like to do something exceptional! Undoubtedly, it must be the most difficult renunciation not to do so and to live like the world. But the Christian has to do it, has to practice such self-denial so that there is no difference between Christian life and worldly life. The Christian has to let grace truly be grace enough so that the world does not lose faith in this cheap grace. In being worldly, however, in this necessary renunciation required for the sake of the world—no, for the sake of grace!—the Christian can be comforted and secure (*securus*) in possession of that grace which takes care of everything by itself. So the Christian need not follow Christ, since the Christian is comforted by grace! That is cheap grace as justification of sin, but not justification of the contrite sinner who turns away from sin and repents. It is not forgiveness of sin which separates those who sinned from sin. Cheap grace is that grace which we bestow on ourselves.

Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.

Costly grace is the hidden treasure in the field, for the sake of which people go and sell with joy everything they have. It is the costly pearl, for whose price the merchant sells all that he has; it is Christ's sovereignty, for the sake of which you tear out an eye if it causes you to stumble. It is the call of Jesus Christ which causes a disciple to leave his nets and follow him.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which has to be asked for, the door at which one has to knock.

It is costly, because it calls to discipleship; it is grace, because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly, because it costs people their lives; it is grace, because it thereby makes them live. It is costly, because it condemns sin; it is grace, because it justifies the sinner. Above all, grace is costly, because it was costly to God, because it costs God the life of God's Son—"you were bought with a price"—and because nothing can be cheap to us which is costly to God. Above all, it is grace because the life of God's Son was not too costly for God to give in order to make us live. God did, indeed, give him up for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God.

Costly grace is grace as God's holy treasure which must be protected from the world and which must not be thrown to the dogs. Thus, it is grace as living word, word of God, which God speaks as God pleases. It comes to us as a gracious call to follow Jesus; it comes as a forgiving word to the fearful spirit and the broken heart. Grace is costly, because it forces people under the yoke of following Jesus

DISCIPLESHIP

Christ; it is grace when Jesus says, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Twice the call went out to Peter: Follow me! It was Jesus' first and last word to his disciple (Mark 1:17; John 21:22). His whole life lies between these two calls. The first time, in response to Jesus' call, Peter left his nets, his vocation, at the Sea of Galilee and followed him on his word. The last time, the Resurrected One finds him at his old vocation, again at the Sea of Galilee, and again he calls: Follow me! Between the two lies a whole life of discipleship following Christ. At its center stands Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ of God. The same message is proclaimed to Peter three times: at the beginning, at the end, and in Caesarea Philippi, namely, that Christ is his Lord and God. It is the same grace of Christ which summons him—Follow me! This same grace also reveals itself to him in his confessing the Son of God.

Grace visited Peter three times along his life's path. It was the one grace, but proclaimed differently three times. Thus, it was Christ's own grace, and surely not grace which the disciple conferred on himself. It was the same grace of Christ which won Peter over to leave everything to follow him, which brought about Peter's confession which had to seem like blasphemy to all the world, and which called the unfaithful Peter into the ultimate community of martyrdom and, in doing so, forgave him all his sins. In Peter's life, grace and discipleship belong inseparably together. He received costly grace.

The expansion of Christianity and the increasing secularization of the church caused the awareness of costly grace to be gradually lost. The world was Christianized; grace became common property of a Christian world. It could be had cheaply. But the Roman church did keep a remnant of that original awareness. It was decisive that monasticism did not separate from the church and that the church

had the good sense to tolerate monasticism. Here, on the boundary of the church, was the place where the awareness that grace is costly and that grace includes discipleship was preserved. People left everything they had for the sake of Christ and tried to follow Jesus' strict commandments through daily exercise. Monastic life thus became a living protest against the secularization of Christianity, against the cheapening of grace. But because the church tolerated this protest and did not permit it to build up to a final explosion, the church relativized it. It even gained from the protest a justification for its own secular life. For now monastic life became the extraordinary achievement of individuals, to which the majority of church members need not be obligated. The fateful limiting of the validity of Jesus' commandments to a certain group of especially qualified people led to differentiating between highest achievement and lowest performance in Christian obedience. This made it possible, when the secularization of the church was attacked any further, to point to the possibility of the monastic way within the church, alongside which another possibility, that of an easier way, was also justified. Thus, calling attention to the original Christian understanding of costly grace as it was retained in the Roman church through monasticism enabled the church paradoxically to give final legitimacy to its own secularization. But the decisive mistake of monasticism was not that it followed the grace-laden path of strict discipleship, even with all of monasticism's misunderstandings of the contents of the will of Jesus. Rather, the mistake was that monasticism essentially distanced itself from what is Christian by permitting its way to become the extraordinary achievement of a few, thereby claiming a special meritoriousness for itself.

During the Reformation, God reawakened the gospel of pure, costly grace through God's servant Martin Luther by leading him through the monastery. Luther was a monk. He had left everything

DISCIPLESHIP

and wanted to follow Christ in complete obedience. He renounced the world and turned to Christian works. He learned obedience to Christ and his church, because he knew that only those who are obedient can believe. Luther invested his whole life in his call to the monastery. It was God who caused Luther to fail on that path. God showed him through scripture that discipleship is not the meritorious achievement of individuals, but a divine commandment to all Christians. The humble work of discipleship had become in monasticism the meritorious work of the holy ones. The self-denial of the disciple is revealed here as the final spiritual self-affirmation of the especially pious. This meant that the world had broken into the middle of monastic life and was at work again in a most dangerous way. Luther saw the monk's escape from the world as really a subtle love for the world. In this shattering of his last possibility to achieve a pious life, grace seized Luther. In the collapse of the monastic world, he saw God's saving hand reaching out in Christ. He seized it in the faith that "our deeds are in vain, even in the best life." It was a costly grace, which gave itself to him. It shattered his whole existence. Once again, he had to leave his nets and follow. The first time, when he entered the monastery, he left everything behind except himself, his pious self. This time even that was taken from him. He followed, not by his own merit, but by God's grace. He was not told, yes, you have sinned, but now all that is forgiven. Continue on where you were and comfort yourself with forgiveness! Luther had to leave the monastery and reenter the world, not because the world itself was good and holy, but because even the monastery was nothing else but world.

Luther's path out of the monastery back to the world meant the sharpest attack that had been launched on the world since early Christianity. The rejection which the monk had given the world was child's play compared to the rejection that the world endured

through his returning to it. This time the attack was a frontal assault. Following Jesus now had to be lived out in the midst of the world. What had been practiced in the special, easier circumstances of monastic life as a special accomplishment now had become what was necessary and commanded for every Christian in the world. Complete obedience to Jesus' commandments had to be carried out in the daily world of work. This deepened the conflict between the life of Christians and the life of the world in an unforeseeable way. The Christian had closed in on the world. It was hand-to-hand combat.

Luther's deed cannot be misunderstood more grievously than by thinking that through discovering the gospel of pure grace, Luther proclaimed a dispensation from obeying Jesus' commandments in the world. The Reformation's main discovery would then be the sanctification and justification of the world by grace's forgiving power. For Luther, on the contrary, a Christian's secular vocation is justified only in that one's protest against the world is thereby most sharply expressed. A Christian's secular vocation receives new recognition from the gospel only to the extent that it is carried on while following Jesus. Luther's reason for leaving the monastery was not justification of the sin, but justification of the sinner. Costly grace was given as a gift to Luther. It was grace, because it was water onto thirsty land, comfort for anxiety, liberation from the servitude of a self-chosen path, forgiveness of all sins. The grace was costly, because it did not excuse one from works. Instead, it endlessly sharpened the call to discipleship. But just wherein it was costly, that was wherein it was grace. And where it was grace, that was where it was costly. That was the secret of the Reformation gospel, the secret of the justification of the sinner.

Nonetheless, what emerged victorious from Reformation history was not Luther's recognition of pure, costly grace, but the alert

DISCIPLESHIP

religious instinct of human beings for the place where grace could be had the cheapest. Only a small, hardly noticeable distortion of the emphasis was needed, and that most dangerous and ruinous deed was done. Luther had taught that, even in their most pious ways and deeds, persons cannot stand before God, because they are basically always seeking themselves. Faced with this predicament, he seized the grace of free and unconditional forgiveness of all sins in faith. Luther knew that this grace had cost him one life and daily continued to cost him, for he was not excused by grace from discipleship, but instead was all the more thrust into it. Whenever Luther spoke of grace, he always meant to include his own life, which was only really placed into full obedience to Christ through grace. He could not speak of grace any other way than this. Luther said that grace alone did it, and his followers repeat it literally, with the one difference that very soon they left out and did not consider and did not mention what Luther always included as a matter of course: discipleship. Yes, he no longer even needed to say it, because he always spoke as one whom grace had led into a most difficult following of Jesus. The followers' own teaching ["by grace alone"] was, therefore, unassailable, judged by Luther's teaching, but their teaching meant the end and the destruction of the Reformation as the revelation of God's costly grace on earth. The justification of the sinner in the world became the justification of sin and the world. Without discipleship, costly grace would become cheap grace.

When Luther said that our deeds are in vain, even in the best of lives, and that, therefore, nothing is valid before God "except grace and favor to forgive sins," he said it as someone who knew himself called to follow Jesus, called to leave everything he had up until this moment, and in the same moment called anew to do it again. His acknowledgment of grace was for him the final radical break with the sin of his life but never its justification. Grasping at forgiveness

was the final radical rejection of self-willed life; the acknowledgment of grace itself his first really serious call to discipleship. It was a "conclusion" for him, although a divine conclusion, not a human one. His descendants made this conclusion into a principled presupposition on which to base their calculations. That was the whole trouble. If grace is the "result" given by Christ himself to Christian life, then this life is not for one moment excused from discipleship. But if grace is a principled presupposition of my Christian life, then in advance I have justification of whatever sins I commit in my life in the world. I can now sin on the basis of this grace; the world is in principle justified by grace. I can thus remain as before in my bourgeois-secular existence. Everything remains as before, and I can be sure that God's grace takes care of me. The whole world has become "Christian" under this grace, but Christianity has become the world under this grace as never before. The conflict between a Christian and a bourgeois-secular vocation is resolved. Christian life consists of my living in the world and like the world, my not being any different from it, my not being permitted to be different from it—for the sake of grace!—but my going occasionally from the sphere of the world to the sphere of the church, in order to be reassured there of the forgiveness of my sins. I am liberated from following Jesus—by cheap grace, which has to be the bitterest enemy of discipleship, which has to hate and despise true discipleship. Grace as presupposition is grace at its cheapest; grace as a conclusion is costly grace. It is appalling to see what is at stake in the way in which a gospel truth is expressed and used. It is the same word of the justification by grace alone, and yet false use of the same statement can lead to the complete destruction of its essence.

When Faust says at the end of his life of seeking knowledge, "I see that we can know nothing," then that is a conclusion, a result. It is something entirely different than when a student repeats this

DISCIPLESHIP

statement in the first semester to justify his laziness (Kierkegaard). Used as a conclusion, the sentence is true; as a presupposition, it is self-deception. That means that knowledge cannot be separated from the existence in which it was acquired. Only those who in following Christ leave everything they have can stand and say that they are justified solely by grace. They recognize the call to discipleship itself as grace and grace as that call. But those who want to use this grace to excuse themselves from discipleship are deceiving themselves.

But doesn't Luther himself come dangerously close to this complete distortion in understanding grace? What does it mean for Luther to say: "Pecca fortiter, sed fortius fide et gaude in Christo"—"Sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly!" So you are only a sinner and can never get out of sin; whether you are a monk or a secular person, whether you want to be pious or evil, you will not flee the bonds of the world, you will sin. So, then, sin boldly, and on the basis of grace already given! Is this blatant proclamation of cheap grace *carte blanche* for sin, and rejection of discipleship? Is it a blasphemous invitation to sin deliberately while relying on grace? Is there a more diabolical abuse of grace than sinning while relying on the gift of God's grace? Isn't the Catholic catechism right in recognizing this as sin against the Holy Spirit?

To understand this, everything depends on how the difference between result and presupposition is applied. If Luther's statement is used as a presupposition for a theology of grace, then it proclaims cheap grace. But Luther's statement is to be understood correctly not as a beginning, but exclusively as an end, a conclusion, a last stone, as the very last word. Understood as a presupposition, *pecca fortiter* becomes an ethical principle. If grace is a principle, then *pecca fortiter* as a principle would correspond to it. That is justification of sin. It turns Luther's statement into its opposite. "Sin boldly"—that could be

for Luther only the very last bit of pastoral advice, of consolation for those who along the path of discipleship have come to know that they cannot become sin-free, who out of fear of sin despair of God's grace. For them, "sin boldly" is not something like a fundamental affirmation of their disobedient lives. Rather, it is the gospel of God's grace, in the presence of which we are sinners always and at every place. This gospel seeks us and justifies us exactly as sinners. Admit your sin boldly; do not try to flee from it, but "believe much more boldly." You are a sinner, so just be a sinner. Do not want to be anything else than what you are. Become a sinner again every day and be bold in doing so. But to whom could such a thing be said except to those who from their hearts daily reject sin, who every day reject everything that hinders them from following Jesus and who are still unconsolated about their daily unfaithfulness and sin? Who else could hear it without danger for their faith than those who are called anew by such consolation to follow Christ? In this way, Luther's statement, understood as a conclusion, becomes that costly grace which alone is grace.

Grace as a principle, pecca fortiter as a principle, cheap grace—all these are finally only a new law, which neither helps nor liberates. Grace as a living word, pecca fortiter as comfort in a time of despair and a call to discipleship, costly grace alone is pure grace, which really forgives sins and liberates the sinner.

Like ravens we have gathered around the carcass of cheap grace. From it we have imbibed the poison which has killed the following of Jesus among us. The doctrine of pure grace experienced an unprecedented deification. The pure doctrine of grace became its own God, grace itself. Luther's teachings are quoted everywhere, but twisted from their truth into self-delusion. They say if only our church is in possession of a doctrine of justification, then it is surely a justified church! They say Luther's true legacy should be

DISCIPLESHIP

recognizable in making grace as cheap as possible. Being Lutheran should mean that discipleship is left to the legalists, the Reformed, or the Enthusiasts, all for the sake of grace. They say that the world is justified and Christians in discipleship are made out to be heretics. A people became Christian, became Lutheran, but at the cost of discipleship, at an all-too-cheap price. Cheap grace had won.

But do we also know that this cheap grace has been utterly unmerciful against us? Is the price that we are paying today with the collapse of the organized churches anything else but an inevitable consequence of grace acquired too cheaply? We gave away preaching and sacraments cheaply; we performed baptisms and confirmations; we absolved an entire people, unquestioned and unconditionally; out of human love we handed over what was holy to the scornful and unbelievers. We poured out rivers of grace without end, but the call to rigorously follow Christ was seldom heard. What happened to the insights of the ancient church, which in the baptismal teaching watched so carefully over the boundary between the church and the world, over costly grace? What happened to Luther's warnings against a proclamation of the gospel which made people secure in their godless lives? When was the world ever Christianized more dreadfully and wickedly than here? What do the three thousand Saxons whose bodies Charlemagne killed compare with the millions of souls being killed today? The biblical wisdom that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children unto the third and fourth generation has become true in us. Cheap grace was very unmerciful to our Protestant church.

Cheap grace surely has also been unmerciful with most of us personally. It did not open the way to Christ for us, but rather closed it. It did not call us into discipleship, but hardened us in disobedience. Moreover, was it not unmerciful and cruel when we were accosted by the message of cheap grace just where we had

once heard the call to follow Jesus as Christ's call of grace, where we perhaps had once dared to take the first steps of discipleship in the discipline of obedience to the commandments? Could we hear this message in any other way than that it tried to block our way with the call to a highly worldly sobriety which suffocated our joy in discipleship by pointing out that it was all merely the path we chose ourselves, that it was an exertion of strength, effort, and discipline which was unnecessary, even very dangerous? For, after all, everything was already prepared and fulfilled by grace! The glowing wick was mercilessly extinguished. It was unmerciful to speak to such people since they, confused by such a cheap offer, were forced to leave the path to which Christ called them clutching instead at cheap grace. Cheap grace would permanently prevent them, from recognizing costly grace. It could not happen any other way but that possessing cheap grace would mislead weaklings to suddenly feel strong, yet in reality, they had lost their power for obedience and discipleship. The word of cheap grace has ruined more Christians than any commandment about works.

In everything that follows, we want to speak up on behalf of those who are tempted to despair, for whom the word of grace has become frightfully empty. For integrity's sake someone has to speak up for those among us who confess that cheap grace has made them give up following Christ, and that ceasing to follow Christ has made them lose the knowledge of costly grace. Because we cannot deny that we no longer stand in true discipleship to Christ, while being members of a true-believing church with a pure doctrine of grace, but no longer members of a church which follows Christ, we therefore simply have to try to understand grace and discipleship again in correct relationship to each other. We can no longer avoid this. Our church's predicament is proving more and more clearly to be a question of how we are to live as Christians today.

DISCIPLESHIP

Blessed are they who already stand at the end of the path on which we wish to embark and perceive with amazement what really seems inconceivable: that grace is costly, precisely because it is pure grace, because it is God's grace in Jesus Christ. Blessed are they who by simply following Jesus Christ are overcome by this grace, so that with humble spirit they may praise the grace of Christ which alone is effective. Blessed are they who, in the knowledge of such grace, can live in the world without losing themselves in it. In following Christ their heavenly home has become so certain that they are truly free for life in this world. Blessed are they for whom following Jesus Christ means nothing other than living from grace and for whom grace means following Christ. Blessed are they who in this sense have become Christians, for whom the word of grace has been merciful.