

Costly Grace versus Cheap Grace: From My Perspective

Allie Johnson, Apple Valley, MN

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”. These words come from the gospel of John, chapter 3 verse 16. I have found that these words are instrumental in understanding the concept of costly grace. The idea of costly grace comes from the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He wrote of costly grace versus cheap grace. This can be a confusing concept at first. However, as I came to unravel the meaning, I found that this idea of costly grace helps to define our lives as Christians. As I began to grasp the concept, I was intrigued to follow this theology myself. There are many different ways to interpret Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s concept of costly grace and cheap grace, but the most efficient way to come to understand its true meaning is to apply it to one’s own life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes cheap grace versus costly grace in a variety of ways. Foremost, he plays the two concepts against each other. He states that we, as Christians, need to see the grace that God has given us as costly. The grace God has granted us originates from the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus gave himself up so that our sins could be forgiven; thus he granted us this grace that would forgive our sins in the eyes of God. Jesus sacrificed himself for all the people of the world, so that we may have eternal life, this act was costly to him because it cost him his life. Therefore, as Bonhoeffer teaches, we must follow after Jesus, even if it is costly to us. He gives us a call to action; He calls us to give up or sacrifice ourselves, although not necessarily in the dramatic way of Jesus, for our grace. This is how Bonhoeffer describes costly grace. Living our lives as Christians, following Jesus, even if it costly to us. Thus, Bonhoeffer distinguishes the difference between cheap grace and costly grace as a call to sacrificial action. Cheap grace is described as the opposite of costly grace. According to the book, *Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians*, “‘Cheap grace... is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.’ It is grace without the constant knowledge and hope of life and death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” While I find Bonhoeffer’s theology of cheap grace and costly grace as the most influential concept I learned at the Augsburg College Youth Theology Institute, I myself went about interpreting it in a way that had the most meaning to me.

From my perspective, cheap grace is essentially exactly how it sounds; it is grace that is cheap. When Bonhoeffer describes it as “grace without the cross,” people who live on cheap grace don’t make the connection between the sacrifice of Jesus and the grace we have been granted by God. It means that people are not truly sacrificing anything for the grace God has granted them. It is cheap in the way that it is not costing people anything! I see it as not going beyond. People are not truly taking the call of God into their own lives. One way to describe this is through the example of people who only go to church, and do little else in their lives as Christians. People who believe that going to church is all that they need to do to be Christians. They keep God and their Christian lives in church on Sunday mornings. This is cheap grace. It is accepting the grace, but not going beyond, not understanding what forgiving our sins and granting us this grace cost *God*. Cheap grace is living as a Christian without attempting to follow Jesus. When people are accepting cheap grace, they are taking the grace that God has granted them for granted. They see it as a given thing, and therefore believe they need not to go out of their way to live as Christians in their daily lives (Bonhoeffer 43). It is forgiveness from God without repentance. People who accept cheap grace are not going beyond, which is really what God has called us to do when he gave up his son.

Costly grace, on the other hand, is about sacrificing one’s self and living as a true Christian. That is really what God intended for his children when he granted us this grace. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” This bible verse from John 3:16 displays the concept of costly grace. Costly grace is most important because it cost Jesus his life and it cost God his son. God gave up his only son in order for us to be saved, so that we

could be granted grace. It shows the cost of our grace. Costly grace means that we should not just accept this grace as a given thing; we should make it costly to ourselves as well. Grace is a gift from God that we did not deserve and by bestowing upon his children this gift, God is calling us to follow Jesus even if it costs us. However, this means more than just going to church. I see costly grace as taking what we learn from the bible and applying it to our lives. We can put what God has taught us into action. Costly grace is costly to us because it can cost us our lives and it is costly in the eyes of God because it cost him his son.

As I came to terms with the idea of costly grace versus cheap grace, I began to ponder something important. Which type of grace was I living? I think that before the Augsburg College Youth Theology Institute, I did not truly understand what it meant to be a Christian, but through Bonhoeffer's teaching of costly grace I now think that I can really live my life as a true Christian. Previously, I went to church on Sunday and I participated in other faith related activities, but I could hardly call those things following Jesus. I believe that I accepted cheap grace. I took God's grace for granted. I tried to live as a Christian but I wasn't making any costly efforts for God. I was sitting in the classroom during the Augsburg College Youth Theology Institute and something struck a chord in my mind when we were discussing costly grace and cheap grace. I began to scribble my thoughts furiously in my journal as it all came together. I began to realize that I needed to live with costly grace—something I don't believe I had been doing before. I had been called to action.

Now that I understand costly grace, I think that I have realized my vocation. First, all I want now is to follow Jesus. I will make sacrifices for God. I want to live out the bible and live out his word. I have realized that the grace God has granted us, the grace he has granted me, is a gift. If we are going to take this gift, we need to let it change us and let it cost us something. I am willing to let my grace from God cost me something. I plan to begin to fully live out my life as a Christian and take action. Ever since I came back from a mission trip last summer I have realized that I want nothing more than to help people, to help God's children. After discovering costly grace, I have realized that I can follow Jesus by helping people the way he did. During the Theology Institute, I made this connection and I believe that I was called by God. I think that God is calling me to help others in this world, because we are all God's children. He is calling me to take what I learn from His word and put it to use. It is my call to action; I want to try to right the wrongs in this world, although it might be costly to me. I am now going to live with costly grace. This summer I have begun to put what I have learned and apply it to my life. I traveled down to the Texas Gulf Coast in the middle of July to aid in helping hurricane relief with my church. This action was costly to me because it cost me time out of my summer and even some of the comforts of home. And while I am not sure if that is what Bonhoeffer meant when he said that grace should be costly to us, I felt that I was truly where God wanted me. I was helping people and while I was there I was also helping to spread the word of God. I was following after Jesus and I will continue to follow after Jesus and live in the way of costly grace. I know that following Jesus can be costly; it cost Dietrich Bonhoeffer his life. But I am willing to accept the gift of God's grace and the call to sacrificial action that accompanies it. I am willing to allow it to change and shape me and I will accept the transformation. I am ready and willing and have already begun to take what I have learned about cheap grace versus costly grace and put these ideas into action in my daily life.

I discovered many new things during the Augsburg College Youth Theology Institute, but none seemed to have as great of an impact as the theological concept of costly grace versus cheap grace. Through my understanding of this idea I also came to understand my vocation. By applying Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology to my own life I have finally come to terms with the true meaning of costly grace, and I plan to follow this theology for the rest of my life and discover what it means to truly be a Christian.

Works Cited

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. The Cost of Discipleship. New York: SCM Press Ltd., 1959.

Haynes, Stephan R. and Lori Brandt Hale. Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.