

Understanding Costly Grace in the 21st Century

By Grace Lenhart, Chippewa Falls, WI

Deitrich Bonhoeffer, a widely known German Theologian who came to prominence at the height of Hitler's Third Reich. wrote with great clarity and passion on many theological ideas and principles. One of his most recognized principles is that of "costly grace". In 1937, Deitrich Bonhoeffer finished his book *Nachfolge* which has been translated into the book *Discipleship*, a work in which he exposed the idea of cheap grace and costly grace.

The bible depicts grace as a gift from God. In the New Testament, we learn that grace was given to us through Jesus Christ who died to save us from the consequences or cost of our sins. Said in another way, we are saved from our sins through the grace of God. In the recently published NRSV Lutheran Study Bible. grace is depicted as "God's unmerited love for humanity" (1856). An example of this definition can be found in the New Testament book of Romans chapter 3, verses 24 through 26. Writing to the Christian church in Rome, St. Paul says of all sinners:

they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

Bonhoeffer rooted his concept of costly grace in the theology of Martin Luther, and Luther's explicit acknowledgement of Christ's suffering on behalf of us all. Bonhoeffer made a distinction between cheap grace and costly grace that is important to keep in mind. Costly grace, "acknowledges the correlation of grace and discipleship". There is a relationship between receiving grace and following God. We are receiving grace so that we can continue to follow God and grow through our mistakes. Cheap grace on the other hand is "grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ." Bonhoeffer also says that cheap grace is the mortal enemy of the church. That idea is illustrated in this quote: "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" (pg.67). He also illustrates this as, "that grace we bestow on ourselves".

Cheap grace and costly grace are two very different things. A challenge that Bonhoeffer laid before believers was to encourage them to ask, *Which one am I embodying?* In this new century, it is easier than ever to be distracted from our discipleship to God. The media is blaring in every direction every hour of the day. In the Western World the message it often communicates is this: we can have everything without sacrifice or cost to self. Furthermore, we are told that these things are a right and privilege, not a gift. We are bombarded with these ideas—ideas that begin in popular culture but soon begin to filter into our theology. Before long, we look at God's grace as an obligation of God instead of a gift of God, with no thought at all given to discipleship. This point is illustrated in Scripture in Romans 6:1-2

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?...

This is not to say however, that we are to work for grace, this is illustrated in this passage from Romans 11:6:

But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

In this century with the ever present media and concentration on sin, we often become numb to the sin in our lives. We fail to recognize that God's gift of forgiveness calls forth from us some kind of response. For the Christian, that response comes in the form of discipleship. The question each and every Christian is invited to ask each and every day is this: *What will my response be today, to the goodness of Jesus Christ that I have received as a free gift?*

What are we to learn from this, and how might this lesson be lifted up for future generations? First, we must always remind one another that grace is a free and unearned gift from God. As much as we might like to earn it we can't; we can only receive it. And perhaps that too—when all is said and done—is grace as well. For even the ability to accept such a profound and life changing gift such as this is yet another gift of God. Perhaps only then shall we have the ability to move forward as new creations in Christ Jesus, into the new future and new hope that the Holy Spirit is daily inviting us.

For the gift of grace is meant not only to save us but to change us. To change us into creatures who no longer love sinning but creatures who love God. Creatures who discover that grace will now cost us our old ways, our friends, our carriers, and maybe our lives. That may seem harsh, but let us realize that life is only our life on earth. Our death is merely the beginning of a great life with God. As Bonhoeffer has illustrated, grace is costly.

Works Cited

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