



Reformation Ministries

Stephen N. Johnson

GRACE TO YOU! “The Rest of Grace” (Autobiographical)

In my last “Grace To You” Bible study I said, “purity didn’t seem to matter much with Jesus.”

It’s not that our struggle against sin and evil is inconsequential (Romans 7); it isn’t. However, Jesus used every opportunity He had to teach and demonstrate that personal purity is simply not required for us to have a relationship with Him. Understanding that is *vital* (L. “to live”). Let me show you why.

I remember attending Vacation Bible School one summer when I was seven or eight years old. All the kids met in the auditorium of the church and every day for a week we recited Psalm 24. I remember nothing else about the week, but I remember that.

“Who shall ascend unto the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory.”

Oh, man! Did that stir the heart of this little boy! The Lord strong and mighty, mighty in battle! The King of glory! (What that was, I had no idea, but it sounded magical and mysterious and I knew it had to be good.)

But there was this problem, a huge problem that lasted for most of a lifetime. Even as a little shaver, I knew my hands were not clean (and not just from the Elmer’s glue used on the VBS popsicle sticks) and my heart was not pure.

So I began my exhaustive and futile struggle to become clean and pure enough to be able to “ascend unto the hill of the Lord” and have this majestic King as part of my life. I really wanted that. The struggle lasted for some fifty years. I sincerely loved God and from my earliest remembrances wanted to serve, please, obey, and honor Him.

I am sure we were told about Jesus and the cross at that VBS, and in those heydays of Southern Baptist evangelism, I

know we were told that we needed to be “saved from our sins.” But somehow I never got that it was all by grace, by the kindness, goodness, and mercy of God rather than by me living a morally virtuous life, keeping my hands clean and my heart pure.

So I struggled. I failed, of course. I just couldn’t manage to keep clean hands or a pure heart for very long. But I would do better the next time. Tenacious. Determined. Devoted. After all, doing right—morality—was the *summum bonum* (L. “highest attainable good”) of all Christian living, wasn’t it?

And so it was for most of my life: godly desire followed by failure followed by determination to do better the next time followed by godly desire followed by failure, followed by determination ad infinitum, ad nauseam. Discouraging. Frustrating. Condemning. Debilitating. Exhausting. My conscious faith would not let me abandon or deny God. What was I to do? Purity was the required path, but I was impure. Like the Myth of Sisyphus, I was condemned to achieve the impossible. But, damn it, I persevered.

Saint Augustine was right: “The heart is unceasingly restless until it finds rest in Thee.” I had passed my fiftieth birthday before I began to find rest in the transforming truth of the grace of God. Through a renewed study of the New Testament and some marvelous contemporary Christian authors who understand the Gospel, I began to experience a Copernican revolution. A lifetime of struggling to become pure enough gave way to the rest of grace. Like Martin Luther whose life was transformed when he was captured by the truth of the Gospel,

“I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise If you have true faith that Christ is your Savior, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God’s heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon His fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness, He who sees God as angry does not see Him rightly but looks only upon a curtain, as if a dark cloud had been drawn across his face.”

The logo for Reformation Ministries features a square icon on the left containing a stylized flame or fire. To the right of the icon, the word "Reformation" is written in a bold, gold-colored, serif font, and the word "Ministries" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

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The curtain and cloud had lifted, and my heart began to soar. If you wonder why I am so focused on God's grace, there are two reasons. First, this is the preeminent message Jesus came to reveal. I'll explain this in the next *Grace To You*. Second, like Paul and Luther, God's grace has set me free. After a lifetime of struggles and failings: Freedom! The gift of grace is transforming my life. How can I not magnify God's grace?

When I was pastoring and preaching every Sunday on the grace of God, my critics would say, "Steve, we've heard enough about grace. You need to get on to something else." And, I'm thinking, "Why?" Why would you want to get on to something other than the saving, liberating, transforming message of God's grace? God's grace is our breath, our blood, our life. That's like telling a fish to get on to something besides the water. How? Impossible! Jesus came to reveal that God's heart is a heart of grace. If you get onto something else you get onto something other than God.

But sometimes we are so absorbed in religion and petrified by tradition, we cannot even feel the fresh breeze of springtime life blowing on our faces nor smell the beauty of its fragrance in our nostrils. The Christian life is not about believing the right teachings (doctrine) nor following rules and keeping commandments (morality). The Christian life is about a love relationship with God on a journey that will transform your life.

In the next *Grace To You*, I will show how Jesus actually "indicted the purity system" of His day and championed transformational love. Don't miss it.

Amen.

Grace to you.