

THE YOKE OF GRACE

He was very religious, even as a boy. He was intelligent and always received good grades in school. Mom and Dad were very proud! Dad, in particular, was ecstatic when his son decided to continue his education at the university and study to become a lawyer.

My son the lawyer! That's my boy!

Then the unexpected happened. This gifted, intelligent young man decided to change career paths. He quit law school to go into another vocation. To add insult to injury, he didn't just leave school to get a "regular" job. Instead, he took a vow of poverty, gave away all of his possessions, left family and friends, and secluded himself in an Augustinian monastery.

The young man I'm referring to is Martin Luther, the person who triggered the Protestant Reformation. 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of Luther's efforts to shape up the Roman Catholic Church and "protest" its excesses and corruptions. And it all began with his radical, life-altering decision to give up a lucrative future in law for a much less profitable (monetarily speaking) future serving God.

What a stark contrast it was for young Martin, between the university and monastery. He became a brother and began attending worship five to seven times a day. He often fasted three days a week. He slept without blankets in freezing weather and went to confess his sins to a priest several times a day. But why? Why did this gifted, intelligent law student give up a promising, well-paying career to withdraw from the world? Why did Martin Luther dive so feverishly, so fervently, so intensely, into the disciplines of monastic life, even going beyond the extremely strict requirements of the Augustinians?

The answer lies in Luther's perception of God—a perception that many present day Christians have bought into. Martin Luther believed God was an angry judge who demanded perfection from people before they would be allowed into heaven. It's easy to see where he got this idea. One of the most popular religious paintings in Luther's time depicted Christ the Judge sitting on a rainbow, a sword in one hand and a lily in the other. Below him, evil people were being pulled by their hair into the fiery pit of hell.

Luther took this image seriously. In fact, he was a virtual slave to it.

For years he attempted, with his whole being, to satisfy this demanding Lord, but it didn't work. No matter how hard he tried, his emotional and spiritual torment continued. There was no inner peace. It was an exceedingly heavy burden for Luther to bear.

Martin Luther wasn't the first to take on this kind of burden. Think about the Jewish people in New Testament times. Their concept of salvation was also centered on trying to satisfy what they perceived to be a demanding God. In addition to the Ten Commandments, there were 613 other laws they were warned to keep. The Pharisees and Sadducees were self-appointed guardians of these laws, and weren't at all bashful about scolding those who had intentionally or accidentally broken one of them.

Jesus had numerous disputes with these religious scorekeepers, some of which were recorded in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry. These passionate debates, which could get very personal, were probably the equivalent of today's daytime talk shows, like Jerry Springer or Oprah Winfrey, for the villagers who witnessed them. The crowds of listeners must have been entertained by their aggressive discussions.

In a nutshell, their disagreements ran along these lines: the Pharisees and Sadducees accused Jesus of hanging around with the many sinful lawbreakers who were clearly far from the Kingdom of God, while Jesus countered that the Pharisees and Sadducees were all about impressive looking sacrificial rituals, religious customs and ceremonial pomp, and ignored more important matters such as compassion, mercy and justice for the poor and needy.

This is how our Lord put it in the 23rd chapter of Matthew's Gospel: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a child of hell as you are." Jesus was saying that the Sadducees and Pharisees were the referees in religious matters, but they were also the ones who made up the rules and often changed them in the middle of the game to make it impossible for outsiders to win.

Church people back in Jesus' day weren't happy people. They were weighed down with "the yoke of the law." And it was to those unhappy people, burdened with all kinds of intricate, overwhelming, virtually impossible to keep religious regulations, that Jesus spoke the words in this morning's Gospel reading: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me . . . for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Jesus was inviting them, and he is inviting us, to trade one yoke for another. So it's our choice. Will we practice a religion that has as its primary

focus following to the letter a long list of legalistic rules? Or will our religion be one that's centrally focused on Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on the cross?

The religion of legalism is still very prevalent and quite popular today. And for those who subscribe to it, the yoke truly is heavy. It's also quite frightening, because it depends on doing enough good deeds to blot out our bad deeds; and there will always be doubts in our minds. Did I do enough to win God's favor? When I stand before my Maker, will God be angry with me or happy? Disappointed or proud? Disgusted or pleased? Will the good things I did in my life outweigh the bad things? Will the scale of divine judgment tilt in my favor, if only just barely?

That's how the religion of legalism works.

Is that the religion you subscribe to?

On the other hand, the religion that's focused on Jesus is a religion of grace. Grace means that God loves us, no matter how low we've fallen; and God will forgive us, no matter how bad the sin is, because we have placed our faith in Jesus Christ. We have turned back to God and are redeemed and saved because of Christ and his sacrificial love.

That's the yoke Jesus invites us to take.

Martin Luther eventually exchanged his yoke of legalism for Jesus' yoke of grace. The high position he reached in the Catholic Church as a professor of theology gave him access to the scarce, hand-written Bibles that belonged to the church. And as Luther read God's Word for himself he discovered the meaning and reality of God's grace, and felt the burdensome yoke of legalism lifted from him when he discovered that he didn't have to be perfect to enter God's kingdom, because Jesus had paid the price of perfection on his, and on the world's, behalf.

This is the statement from the Apostle Paul that touched Martin Luther and allowed him to take off the yoke of legalism and put on the yoke of grace.

"For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith—and this is not because of anything you yourself did, it is the gift of God—not by works, [not by any righteous action you took or any good act you have accomplished]—so that no one can boast."

In other words, we're not saved because of who we are and what we did, but because of who God is and what God did by sending Christ into the world.

Grace is one of the most beautiful words in the Bible, but it's also one of the most difficult concepts to accept and embrace because our society has pounded into us over and over again that you have to earn your reward. You can't just have something handed to you without somehow deserving it, because that would be unfair and unscrupulous. There's no such thing as a

free lunch. God's grace is completely contrary to such "legalistic" thinking, which is why, for many people, divine grace simply does not compute.

I want to share a story about grace with you.

It was a rainy night in New York City during the Great Depression of the 1930s. A frightened old man was hauled before the magistrate at a night court. The charge against him was petty larceny. He had been starving, so he stole a loaf of bread.

The person presiding over the court that night was Fiorello LaGuardia, the beloved Mayor of the city, for whom the LaGuardia Airport was named. He sometimes sat in for judges as a way of keeping close to the citizens of New York, and he just so happened to be doing that on this particular night.

As the presiding judge, LaGuardia listened to the charges brought against the poor man. He fined the man ten dollars, saying, "The law is the law, and it cannot be broken without consequences." Then he took a \$10 bill out of his wallet and told the man he would pay his fine for him.

LaGuardia then turned to the other people in the courtroom and fined each of them 50 cents for living in a city that didn't help its poor and elderly. He passed his famous fedora around to collect the fines and gave the contents of the hat to the amazed defendant. The hat contained almost fifty dollars. The old man who had been dragged before a judge to face condemnation and punishment left the courtroom with tears in his eyes because of the grace he had been shown by Fiorello LaGuardia.

I can imagine God's grace being something like that, only magnified infinitely.

Imagine yourself appearing before the Lord when your life comes to an end. You stand there terrified, expecting a stiff fine from the Almighty Judge, and wait in fear as God listens to the charges brought against you that have built up during the entirety your life. Some of the things brought up you had completely forgotten because they happened so long ago. But instead of being fined, you're handed a hat full of . . . Eternal Life.

Surprise! With deep gratitude and joy in your heart, you thank the Lord for the surprising and unexpected divine grace and mercy you were shown; and the Lord responds, "You're welcome," and reaches out his hand to clasp yours. And that's when you notice the nail wounds in the palms of each of them.

Divine grace. It's so astonishing and amazing and startling, I can imagine myself falling on my knees with tears in my eyes because of it. And all we have to do to receive it is, simply, reach out to the Lord and receive what he is so ready and willing to give us.

I will end my message today with this.

Have you ever heard this definition of what a friend is? “A true friend is someone who knows everything about you and loves you anyway.” There is a lot of grace in a genuine friendship. And that’s also true with God, only multiplied infinitely.

God knows us intimately, right down to the last detail. The good and bad, the right and wrong, the proud and shameful, our inner thoughts and our outer actions, none of it is hidden from God our Creator. If that startles and frightens you, don’t worry, you’re not alone. It frightens me, as well. After all, we’re only human and prone to mistakes and wrongdoings. But . . . and this is a huge, life-transforming “but” . . . despite the inside track God has about the shadowy side of our lives, God loves us anyway. Fully, completely, without hesitation, and without any catches.

Well, maybe there’s one catch. Jesus called it *the Great Commandment*. The only thing God wants is simply for us to love God in return, fully, completely, without hesitation, and without any catches; and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

That’s it. That’s the yoke Jesus Christ offers us: the yoke of grace that leads to Eternal Life. May we reach out to the Lord and take it. After all, it’s ours, a free, unearned, priceless gift from God. And when we accept that gift, another promise of Jesus will be fulfilled: we will find rest for our souls.

Thanks be to God. Amen.