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Cheap Grace?

In *The Cost of Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes against what he calls “cheap grace” and in favor of what he calls “costly grace.” In part he says this:

Cheap grace means grace as bargain basement goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament. . . It is grace without a price, without costs. . .

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 again and again.

I sympathize with what (I think) Bonhoeffer is saying. He seems to be trying to counteract the disturbing trend of “laziness” in Christianity. We are disturbed that many believers seem to not take their sin and the Father’s love very seriously. I would agree with those who say that there is a lethargy in the Church. That symptom seems readily obvious to me. But I believe that Bonhoeffer has identified the wrong underlying disease which is the cause of this symptom. Don’t get me wrong. I respect Bonhoeffer, he is a great saint and martyr of the Church. But we should also think critically about what our brothers in the faith say.

Bonhoeffer seems to think that our problem is not appreciating how costly grace is and what work it takes for us to experience it. I think our real problem is that we are trained to think of our relationship with our Dad in heaven in monetary terms like “cheap” and “costly”. Instead of thinking of grace in relational terms we think in debits and credits, laws and punishments. When we discuss grace this way it leads us to a performance-based, legalized, monetary theology. When we can’t perform, can’t keep the law, and run out of spiritual cash, we become lethargic and resentful. Christian lethargy results from this legalized theology that saps us of the will to “perform” and “deliver” for the God of our mythology - the great, all-seeing eye in the sky.

Think of this: do you want your kids to think of your love as something costly, as something that must be sought again and again, as something that must be asked for? (Bonhoeffer’s words) You would rather your kids see your love for them as a never ending relationship that surrounds and envelops them wherever they may be!

I would hit the roof if I walked in on my 9-year old telling my 4-year old “you take Dad’s love for granted, you need to understand how costly his love is and work harder to be a good boy and show that you appreciate all he’s done for you.”

Both “cheap grace” and “costly grace” should be contrasted with “relational grace.” By grace we are embraced in the relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit. By grace the Son includes us in this relationship of life, passion, and excitement.

When we see that all we are and all we love is flowing out of the Triune relationship into which we are adopted, then our hearts begin to overflow with life, passion, and excitement for the relational grace the Son’s incarnation brings to us.

~ Jonathan Stepp