

## Speaking the Truth in Love to the “*Greasy Grace Gospel*” Proponents: A Biblical Theology on Grace and Obedience

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### Abstract

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While on earth, Jesus Christ declared that He would build His church, and the gates of Hades would not overcome it (Matt 16:18). However, one of the ways the church of Jesus Christ is threatened is through false teachings. A recent teaching that has spread like wildfire is that of “cheap grace,” in this paper termed the “*Greasy Grace Gospel*.” Those who propagate this teaching have an unhealthy perspective on the grace of God. They overemphasize the forgiveness of sin through the atoning sacrifice of Christ. However, they overlook the dimension of God’s grace that leads to a new life of sanctification through obedience. This paper gives a biblical response to this teaching. The methodology used is the canonical approach. A biblical theology on grace and obedience is traced from creation to new creation, emphasizing the centrality of obedience in the life of a believer. The paper argues that obedience is a believer’s loving response to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It demonstrates that Jesus, the One full of grace and truth, taught and modelled obedience on earth. Therefore, every true believer in Jesus Christ should reject the “*Greasy Grace Gospel*” and embrace biblical costly grace and discipleship, which are critical in their journey toward Christlikeness.

**Keywords:** Cheap Grace, Greasy Grace Gospel, Repentance, Obedience, Biblical Theology

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## Introduction

Over the past few years, the *Greasy Grace Gospel* has been growing in prominence. This teaching is widely known as “cheap grace,” a term defined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his classic, *The Cost of Discipleship*. According to Bonhoeffer, cheap grace means “grace as a doctrine, a principle, and a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian “conception” of God.”<sup>1</sup> At first glance, it sounds quite biblical; however, it takes a keen observer to discern where the discrepancies are. However, the greater problem is what Harvey notes that as people created in God’s image, we desire to believe the truth but also are prone to abhor the idea that what we have believed is false and may end up insisting that we are in truth while in error.<sup>2</sup> This often leads to a foolish defense of heresy in the name of defending the truth, and unfortunately, many proponents of the Greasy Grace Gospel may have fallen into this trap.

To be clear, the Bible teaches about the grace of God. Luther also wrote extensively about it during the Reformation after studying Paul’s epistle to the Romans. He taught that biblical grace is costly and demands the utter destruction of self-will after experiencing God’s free forgiveness.<sup>3</sup> A great weight was lifted off his shoulders when he grasped this truth. As a result, he taught against the prevalent “salvation by works” doctrine, which claimed that one could earn salvation. He also taught against the “indulgences”- a means by which the Roman Catholic church taught that people could save their departed loved ones from purgatory and secure them a place in heaven. For Luther, it was the costly grace of God<sup>4</sup> that transformed his life and demanded a costly commitment on his part, leaving all behind to follow Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, Luther’s teaching that grace alone can save degenerated into cheap grace when his followers repeated the words *only grace could save* while leaving out the call to discipleship. According to Bonhoeffer, this twist in his teaching “spelt the end and destruction of the Reformation as the revelation on earth of the costly grace of God. The justification of

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Revised Edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1979), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Barry Harvey, “Cheap Grace, American Style: Confession, Racism, and the ‘Gentler’ Medicine of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 48, no. 3 (2021): 277.

<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 53.

<sup>4</sup> Robbie Castleman, “The Skim-Milk Gospel of Cheap Grace,” *Themelios* 30, no. 1 (2004): 53.

<sup>5</sup> John T Carroll, “Welcoming Grace, Costly Commitment: An Approach to the Gospel of Luke,” *Interpretation* 57, no. 1 (January 2003): 16.



the sinner in the world degenerated into the justification of sin and the world. Costly grace was turned into cheap grace without discipleship.”<sup>6</sup> This led to the propagation of a gospel which Harold refers to as being a “reductionist” gospel. It promises forgiveness and “a one-way ticket to heaven” while we live “like hell until one gets there” (58). It is a gospel of salvation that teaches justification for the sinner without calling for sanctification.”<sup>7</sup> This was contra-Calvin, who understood the whole gospel as “the reception of the two-fold grace of God in Christ by faith. This double grace comprises justification and sanctification, which are the crux of our redemption through faith in Christ, even though justification precedes sanctification.”<sup>8</sup> In justification, one experiences reconciliation with the heavenly Father on account of Christ’s blamelessness, while through sanctification, the justified Christian cultivates a life of blamelessness and purity through the working of the Spirit of Christ.<sup>9</sup> This is the pure, unadulterated gospel proclaimed through the Scriptures, which is not taught by the Greasy Grace Gospel proponents.

Thus, cheap grace, as Bonhoeffer describes it, is “the grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs. Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves.”<sup>10</sup> It really is a false gospel that masquerades as the truth of the Bible. Although defined in this way several decades ago, Castleman makes it clear that cheap grace is prevalent even today; thus the term Greasy Grace Gospel: “Bonhoeffer’s idea of ‘cheap grace’ is flourishing...and we don’t even see it for what it is. Salvation is sold as fire insurance, Jesus is reduced to correct propositional formulas, and worship is all about us... Cheap grace substitutes the fear of the Lord for fear of the world.”<sup>11</sup> Whichever way one analyzes this teaching, it is clear to see the self-centred characteristic is mutually exclusive from a Christ-centered gospel.

This controversy is not in any way minute. The eternal destiny of many believers and potential believers is at stake when they fail to embrace the costly grace that requires biblical

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<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 53.

<sup>7</sup> Harold Jantz, “Looking for Grace and the Gospel,” *Direction* 35, no. 2 (2006): 236.

<sup>8</sup> Cornelis P Venema, “Calvin’s Understanding of the ‘Twofold Grace of God’ and Contemporary Ecumenical Discussion of the Gospel,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 18 (2007): 70–71.

<sup>9</sup> Venema, 70.

<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Castleman, “The Skim-Milk Gospel of Cheap Grace,” 52.



discipleship as Jesus taught in Luke 9:23–26.<sup>12</sup> The name of Christ can and is being profaned among unbelievers because of the Greasy Grace Gospel followers who profess Christ and persist in living a life of sin. If this is the case, then didn't Christ die in vain? Shouldn't He have left us to live in sin and then die on the cross at the end of the age?

To address the Greasy Grace Gospel, this paper offers a biblical response by providing a biblical theology on grace and obedience from creation to new creation. It will highlight the centrality of Jesus Christ, who Himself was obedient unto death. This will form the foundation for discounting the contemporary Greasy Grace Gospel and offer the antidote for this prevailing illness among many believers embracing costly grace and discipleship.

## **The Meaning of Grace and Obedience**

Grace refers to “unmerited benevolence,” a proper theological explanation of grace starts by acknowledging “the unearned favor that God extends to all humanity and to his chosen people.”<sup>13</sup> In His relations with man, God's grace is evident through His goodness toward all creation (Ps 33:5), His compassion (Ps 103:8), His patience and forbearance toward sinful and rebellious humankind (Exo 34:6), and in His redemptive salvation through Christ (Tit 2:11–14). A keen reading of the aforementioned scripture in Titus indicates that the grace of God teaches us to deny ungodliness and live soberly, righteously, and godly lives in this present age. This emphasis is ignored by the Greasy Grace Gospel proponents. Moreover, grace can also be defined as God's empowerment to do what one would otherwise be unable to do (2 Cor 12:7–10). With this understanding, God's grace enables and empowers His people to live according to His will through obedience.

The simple meaning of obedience, according to the OT, signifies “to hear” or “to listen,” but it also bears “the ethical significance of hearing with reverence and obedient assent.”<sup>14</sup> While in the NT, the meaning suggests “subordinating one's self to the person or thing heard, hence, “to obey.”<sup>15</sup> In light of the subject of this paper, obedience refers to following God's commandments, by which God intends to conform His people to His

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<sup>12</sup> Unless otherwise stated, this and all subsequent references are from the NASB, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al., eds., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 2005), 268.

<sup>14</sup> James Orr et al., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, vol. IV (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 2175.

<sup>15</sup> Orr et al., IV:2175.



character through sanctification (Rom 8:29). The believer's call to obedience should not be mistaken to be reverting to the aforementioned "salvation by works" as is the argument given by those who proclaim the grace gospel. For the Scriptures rightly testify that "...there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). It is without a doubt that no one can pay for their sins or redeem themselves. In fact, in the eyes of a holy God, "all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment" (Isa 64:6).

Yet, the gracious call to follow Christ requires repentance and obedience, a turning away from a life of sin. MacLennan rightly put it that repentance and faith can only be seen through obedience and living as one who propagates God's agenda in the world.<sup>16</sup> Once again, this sense of costly grace characterized by repentance and a new life does not feature in the Greasy Grace Gospel and thus does not demonstrate the knowledge of or love for God.

### **Obedience as seen in Creation and the Fall of Mankind**

In Genesis 1, God creates the world and everything through His command. He orders, "Let there be," and we see that whatever He spoke came into being. Simply put, all creation came into existence in obedience to its Maker.

Later in Genesis 2, God puts man in the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it (2:15), and then we see the first command that God explicitly gave to man, Adam, not to eat from the forbidden tree (2:16-17). The Bible is silent on the duration of time in which Adam and his wife ate freely of all the other trees in the garden and thus obeyed the command that God had given. However, in Genesis 3, the account is given of how the serpent directly challenged God's command and twisted His words by telling the woman, "You will *not* surely die!" (3:4) (Emphasis mine), and this is the same twisting of God's word that we see in the Greasy Grace Gospel. The woman was deceived into taking the forbidden fruit and eating it, and she then gave it to her husband, and he, too, ate it.

The following consequences followed Adam and Eve's disobedience: (i) Enmity between the seed of the serpent and of the woman (3:15), (iii) The woman's pain in childbirth was greatly multiplied, (iv) her desire would be for her husband, and he will rule over her (3:16), (v) the ground was cursed for the man, and toiling was introduced (3:17), and finally,

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<sup>16</sup> W G D MacLennan, "The New Norm of Life: The Biblical Doctrine of Obedience," *Interpretation* 4, no. 3 (July 1950): 284.



(vi) death came into the picture (3:19). There was a destruction of relationships between God and humankind, man and woman, as well as man and creation.

In view of the repercussions of Adam and Eve's choice of not obeying what God had instructed them, there is nothing glamorous or desirable from the outcome. This sad turn of events is a far cry from God's perfect will, and it was a result of disobedience, which is common among the Greasy Grace Gospel followers. Kaplan also concludes that the serpent tempted the woman with a promise of freedom (a twisting of the truth), but this was "superfluous" since man was already free. He further states that the temptation to gain knowledge was misplaced because the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7), and any thought that the fruit would provide knowledge is a pagan thought.<sup>17</sup> The man was thus tricked into believing that Satan, and not God, had his best interests at heart. This is quite similar to the trickery in the Greasy Grace Gospel.

Additionally, Armitage notes the reality behind Adam's action in that he coveted "an inordinate likeness with God," which constituted relying on himself rather than on God.<sup>18</sup> It can be said that choosing not to obey God is, in reality, choosing to be self-reliant, as is the case with those who propagate the Greasy Grace Gospel. Bonhoeffer's statement clearly captures this: "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."<sup>19</sup> It is an outright denial of the work of Christ on the cross.

Even so, within the account of mankind's disobedience and fall, we see God's grace being demonstrated to Adam and Eve. First, while cursing the serpent, God promises that a seed from the woman would bruise his head (3:15); this seed would later be the Lamb of God, who would take away the sin of the world and defeat the serpent. Second, the Lord made

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<sup>17</sup> Kalman J Kaplan, "Obedience and Disobedience/Rebellion in Biblical versus Greek Narratives: Toward a Biblical Psychology," *Pastoral Psychology* 60, no. 5 (October 2011): 663-64, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-011-0343-x>.

<sup>18</sup> J Mark Armitage, "Obedient unto Death, Even Death on a Cross: Christ's Obedience in the Soteriology of St. Thomas Aquinas," *Nova et Vetera* 8, no. 3 (2010): 509.

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 47.



garments of skin for Adam and his wife- He clothed them (3:21).<sup>20</sup> Third, the Lord sent them away from the garden so they would not eat from the Tree of Life and live forever in their sin (3:22).

Indeed, it would be absurd to turn the table around, overlook all the consequences or results of man's disobedience and refuse to emphasize a life of repentance after encountering God's grace. Yet, according to Bonhoeffer, that is what the Greasy Grace Gospel preachers purport. Beach refers to Calvin's teaching on the offer of the gospel and divine grace, stating that "sinners—all sinners—have no reason to believe that God is not calling them repent and believe; on the contrary, they have every reason to believe that he is."<sup>21</sup> For Calvin, this universal call "brings simultaneously a blessing to the godly and a rebuff to the ungodly: while the consciences of the godly are consoled, the excuses of the wicked are subverted, for they reject, "out of their own ungratefulness," an offer of freedom from the bondage of sin."<sup>22</sup> Therein lies the tragedy of the cheap grace teaching, for it denies the adherents an opportunity to experience freedom from sin. Even so, we shall now consider the crucial role of grace and obedience in redemption within the OT.

### **The Place of Grace and Obedience in Redemption in the OT**

After Adam and Eve left the garden, man's downward spiral ensued because of sin. In Genesis 4, Cain kills Abel because he did not listen to God's gracious warning (4:7b). By the time of Noah, there was so much wickedness on the earth. God was grieved in his heart because of the wickedness of man (6:6).

*God's Grace and Noah's Obedience:* The story shifts because one man, Noah, found grace in the eyes of the Lord (6:8) and was also a righteous man, blameless in his time (6:9). Through his obedience, his family and a remnant of the animals were spared from the flood. Kaplan views this as God's reward to Noah for His obedience,<sup>23</sup> which we can also interpret as God's grace toward Noah. This, however, should not be taken to mean that salvation by works was evident here (for Noah and his family, the salvation they experienced was

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<sup>20</sup> Kalman J Kaplan, "Obedience and Disobedience/Rebellion in Biblical versus Greek Narratives: Toward a Biblical Psychology," *Pastoral Psychology* 60, no. 5 (October 2011): 664, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-011-0343-x>.

<sup>21</sup> J Mark Beach, "Calvin's Treatment of the Offer of the Gospel and Divine Grace," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 22 (2011): 74.

<sup>22</sup> Beach, 74.

<sup>23</sup> Kaplan, "Obedience and Disobedience/Rebellion in Biblical versus Greek Narratives," October 2011, 665.





temporal and physical in nature rather than eternal and holistic). God's grace still plays a more prominent role in the narrative. God established a covenant with Noah, and he, in turn, did everything that God commanded him (6:22). For McCann, Genesis 1-9 shows that from the beginning, the story of the Bible is really the story of God's grace. He argues that "the rest of the Bible will be about the same thing that Genesis 1-9 and Exodus 19-34 are about- God's relationship with the whole world, exemplified by God's relationship with Israel and founded quintessentially upon grace." He then asserts that all "that follows in the Bible- not just in Genesis and Exodus- should be heard in the context of the God who graciously creates, claims, and cares for the whole creation."<sup>24</sup>

*God's Grace and Abraham's obedience:* In what seemed to be a vicious cycle of disobedience and judgement in the world, God was still committed to his redemptive plan, as He foretold in the garden of Eden. He spoke to Abram and made a covenant with him, which would bring blessings to all the nations (12:1-3). Although God took on the responsibility for fulfilling the promises in the covenant (15:8-21), Abraham's obedience was required to demonstrate his faith in God's promises. He circumcised all males in his household (17:1-16) and was willing to sacrifice his Son when tested by God (22:1-2). This resulted in God's approval (22:12), indicating the centrality of obedience in mankind's relationship with God. Furthermore, God kept His promise to Abraham to make his descendants as numerous as the stars (22:17), and that they would become slaves but afterwards, they would be delivered (15:13).

*Grace and obedience through the Sinai covenant:* Once the Israelites had been delivered from Egypt, Moses led them into the wilderness. At Sinai, God made a covenant with them, and their obedience would set them apart as holy (19:5-6). McCann notes that from Exodus 19-34, we see again how God acts graciously towards a rebellious Israel, revealing Himself to Moses as a "merciful and gracious" covenant keeper rather than an angry and vengeful God.<sup>25</sup> The condition for them was obedience (19:8) as a loving response to God's gracious deliverance from slavery. MacLennan notes that Moses plainly set forth obedience to the declared will of God. Man's duties under the covenant were laid down in the

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<sup>24</sup> J Clinton Jr. McCann, "The Hermeneutics of Grace: Discerning the Bible's Single Plot," *Interpretation* 57, no. 1 (January 2003): 7.

<sup>25</sup> McCann, 8.





Ten Commandments and in all additions to and deductions from that code.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, God’s plan for redemption was rolled out through the Torah.

God was clear about the results of obedience (Deut 11:26–28), that they would lead to His gracious blessings (Lev 23:22, Deut 27:10, 28:1–2, 30:2), and the results of disobedience are curses (Lev 26:14, 18, 21, 27; Deut 28:15, 45, 62). Even children were required to obey their parents, and failure to do so would lead to their death (Deut 21:18–20). God gave the Israelites the law to set them apart from all other nations of the earth. God’s laws governed all aspects of their life; their worship (Deut 8:19–20), their relationships with each other (Deut 16:19–20) and even their relationship with creation (Deut 20:19–20). God’s laws were given to them in order to restore what was lost in Eden. Blanton explains that the failure to observe the laws in Deuteronomy is equated to sin and would lead to exile (Deut 28:25, 36–37, 41, 47–57), whereas repentance would lead to restoration (30:1–5).<sup>27</sup> This, again, is a clear indication that the Greasy Grace Gospel, which overlooks the consequences of continual sin, is contrary to the revealed will of God in the Scriptures.

*Grace and obedience in the Historical Books (Joshua–2 Kings):* McCann traces the continuing story of God’s grace in the book of Joshua as the fulfilment of God’s covenant promises to Israel – to possess the promised land. The Israelites, however, did not respond in obedience as is evident in the book of Judges, which shows their utter disobedience and the consequences of their actions,<sup>28</sup> for when Joshua died, they began to do whatever they wanted and lived a life of disobedience (Judg. 2:10–14). As a result, they went through vicious cycles of disobedience, judgement, repentance, and deliverance under the various judges. This was not God’s intention for them. Unfortunately, they rejected God as their king (1 Sam 8:7–9) by asking for a king like other nations had. In His grace, God gave them what they demanded but forewarned them of how their earthly king would rule over them (1 Sam 8:11–18), which was contrary to what God had instructed about kings (Deut 17:14–20). We immediately see the continuing downward spiral when the first king, Saul, disobeyed God (1 Sam 15:19). In describing the essence of obedience and its preference over sacrifice (1 Sam 15:22). Armitage

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<sup>26</sup> W G D MacLennan, “The New Norm of Life: The Biblical Doctrine of Obedience,” *Interpretation* 4, no. 3 (July 1950): 286.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas R Blanton and Thomas R IV Blanton, “Saved by Obedience: Matthew 1:21 in Light of Jesus’ Teaching on the Torah,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132, no. 2 (2013): 401.

<sup>28</sup> McCann, “The Hermeneutics of Grace,” 11.



refers to Aquinas' reflections quoting Gregory the Great who said, "obedience is rightly preferred to sacrifices, because by sacrifices another's body is slain whereas by obedience, we slay our own will."<sup>29</sup> This slaying of our own will requires the call of Christ and costly grace. He taught that whoever desires to follow Him must deny oneself, take up their cross daily and follow him (Lk 9:23), and a major part of slaying our will is by renouncing and turning away from the sinful desires of the flesh and living according to the will of the Spirit of God (Gal 5:16-26).

In Saul's place, David was chosen because he was a man after God's own heart. He followed the Lord and experienced great victory from when he killed Goliath (1 Samuel 17:50-51) to when he was old. God made a covenant with him (2 Sam 7:16), promising him that his kingdom would be established forever through his sons after him. However, Psalm 89:30-32 clarifies that although the covenant will stand forever, there would be consequences if his sons did not keep His commandments. In this, we see the call to obedience for the sons of David even when He had graciously made a covenant with him. However, David disobeyed the Lord by killing Uriah and committing adultery with Bathsheba. Through genuine repentance, God graciously forgave him, even though the consequences of his actions were not erased (2 Sam 12:10).

Afterwards, Solomon was born and became king. Blanton notes that in Solomon's early years, he prayed (1 Kings 8:56-61), encouraging the Israelites "to walk in all his way, and to keep his commandments, his statutes, and his (legal) judgments, which he commanded our forefathers" which was an echo of what was written in Deuteronomy 4:1, 5, 8; 5:31; 6:1; 8:11.<sup>30</sup> His kingdom enjoyed peace, but when he disobeyed (1 Kings 11:2), he fell away from God's perfect will. Another downward spiral of wicked kings continued after Solomon onwards. Israel sunk into idol worship and other detestable practices that showed their contempt for God, eventually leading them into exile.

*Grace and obedience in the Prophetic books:* The Israelites were exiled and no longer in the promised land. McCann notes that the "Latter Prophets- Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve (*commonly known as the Minor Prophets*) disclose that exile is *not*

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<sup>29</sup> Armitage, "Obedient unto Death, Even Death on a Cross," 511.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas R Blanton, "Saved by Obedience: Matthew 1:21 in Light of Jesus' Teaching on the Torah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132, no. 2 (2013): 401.



what God willed for God's (sic.) people. It happened because God's will had *not* been heard or heeded, and it will *not* be the end of the story."<sup>31</sup> Even so, God continued to speak of their restoration from exile into their own land, where they would once again submit to God's laws wholeheartedly. He prophesied through Daniel that all nations would one day obey God (Dan 7:27), and during the restoration of Israel back to their promised land, the temple building would be possible due to their obedience (Zech 6:15).

From Israel's experience, we clearly see that the failure to respond in obedience to God's revealed will result in undesirable consequences, which is not God's perfect will for His people. And even though each time the Israelites failed to obey, God's gracious provision created a way to restore their relationship with Him; it would be a tragedy to go around and teach that the grace of God makes forgiveness possible without emphasizing repentance. This is one of the great errors of the Greasy Grace Gospel.

### **Grace and Obedience in NT Redemption**

In fulfilment of the prophecy God uttered about the seed of the woman and the serpent, Jesus was born to redeem humanity from their perpetual nature of disobedience and rebellion against God's commands. Redemption is now found by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Eph 2:8), resulting in good works prepared beforehand for each believer to do (Eph 2:10). God's redemption, therefore, should result in a loving submission through obedience to His commands, following the example of the One who fully submitted Himself to God and became obedient to the point of death (Phil 2:8) even though He was the Son of God.

*Grace and Obedience of Jesus Christ:* The beloved disciple gave witness to the abundant grace of Christ, stating that Jesus was "full of grace and truth" and also that He gives us "grace upon grace" because, unlike Moses, who brought law, Jesus brought "grace and truth" (Jn 1:14-17). In light of this testimony from John, the question is, how did Christ live out His life? The resounding answer is that He both taught and lived a life of obedience, fully submitting Himself to the will of God. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that obedience is the outworking of grace, as is discussed below.

*Jesus' obedience prior to public ministry:* Hebrews 5:8 records that Jesus learned obedience through suffering- in that, he experienced the difficulty and experience of denying

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<sup>31</sup> McCann, "The Hermeneutics of Grace," 12.



his own will.<sup>32</sup> He was obedient to his earthly parents (Lk 2:51); before He began ministering publicly, He asked John the Baptist to baptize Him so that they could fulfil all righteousness (Matt 3:15). God's testimony at His baptism shows that obedience pleases God (Matt 3:17). He was then led to the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted by the devil. He obeyed the Spirit of God by always doing what the Scriptures said rather than what the devil tempted him to do (4:1–10).

*Jesus' teaching on obedience:* Jesus taught that He had come to fulfil the Law and the Prophets and not to destroy them (Matt 5:17). He even equated greatness in the kingdom of heaven to obeying and teaching the commandments (5:19). He taught that obedience is wisdom, and disobedience can be likened to foolishness (Matt 7: 24–27). By this, He again showed that obedience is paramount for everyone who claims to believe in God.

*Jesus' obedience during His ministry:* Jesus did not just teach about obedience; he obeyed even during his ministry on earth,<sup>33</sup> distinguishing himself from religious teachers who did not practice what they preached (Matt 23:1–3).<sup>34</sup> He testified that He could do nothing except what He saw the Father doing (John 5:19) and that His food was to do His Father's will (John 4:34). Although He was full of the Holy Spirit and was powerful, He entirely depended on His Father and did what pleased Him (5:30).

According to Aquinas, it is paramount to consider Christ's passion in light of his obedience since He came to un-do what Adam did through disobedience.<sup>35</sup> His obedience on the cross brought humanity back to God and instituted a new covenant of grace with all humanity. His resurrection from the dead followed his obedience, and thus He conquered the grave. From then on, anyone who believed in Jesus Christ would have everlasting life (John 3:16). This is the justification for obedience to Christ. Moreover, throughout the epistles, we see a great emphasis on repentance from dead works (Heb 6:1; James 1:21–27), belief in Christ (Acts 16:31), and a life of obedience that demonstrates the transformation that comes from faith in Christ (Col 3:1–17).

To be sure, obedience as a virtue remains constant from the old covenant to the new one. However, whereas the Israelites were required to obey all the laws in the Torah (Deut

<sup>32</sup> Armitage, "Obedient unto Death, Even Death on a Cross," 518.

<sup>33</sup> Armitage, 519.

<sup>34</sup> MacLennan, "The New Norm of Life," July 1950, 288.

<sup>35</sup> Armitage, "Obedient unto Death, Even Death on a Cross," 508–9.



28), believers are now to obey Jesus Christ (Jn 14:6). This springs forth as the evidence of their faith in His salvific work on their behalf, He who fulfilled all the Law and the Prophets (Matt 5:17). It is because Jesus Christ fully obeyed His Father, that He can impute righteousness on those who believe in Him.

### **Obedience in the New Creation**

In the New Creation, all the former things will have passed away. Creation will be restored and renewed. Everything that defiles shall be away from the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:27). All the disobedient will have their part in the lake of fire- which is the second death (Rev 21:8). The New Creation will be characterized by loving obedience to the Savior King, Jesus Christ, who was the perfection of obedience that springs from love (Rev 22:14–15).

### ***Greasy Grace Gospel versus Costly Grace***

Having defined cheap grace and tracing the themes of grace and obedience in the Bible, we observe that the Greasy Grace Gospel is erroneous and differs from the costly biblical grace. Cheap grace breeds a heathen church with a hardened heart of unbelief and disobedience, whose only duty is to “leave the world for an hour or so on a Sunday morning and go to church to be assured that all my sins are forgiven.”<sup>36</sup> What’s worse is that cheap grace teaches a “self-imparted absolution,” which leads to persistence in disobedience while pleading ignorance of God’s kindness and commandments. As a result, a person loses all capacity to hear the Word of God and thus can neither have the faith that leads to true salvation (Rom 10:17)<sup>37</sup> nor communion with Christ that comes by receiving His word of grace.<sup>38</sup>

Bonhoeffer explains that costly grace is the gospel that should be diligently sought because it is the hidden treasure in Jesus’ parable, which is worth selling everything else to gain (Matt 13:44); it is Christ’s kingly rule and call to which the disciples heeded and left everything for.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, why is biblical grace referred to as costly grace? Bonhoeffer explains as follows:

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<sup>36</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 58–59.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 47–48.



Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: “ye were bought at a price,” and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.<sup>40</sup>

Biblical costly grace calls for self-denial, taking up one’s cross daily, and following Christ (Lk 9:23–26). This involves persecution and suffering for the sake of the truth, facing rejection by the world, and even death, just like Jesus Christ the Messiah, who fulfilled the will of God (Lk 9:18–22).<sup>41</sup>

Cheap grace differs from biblical costly grace in the following ways: (i) it teaches justification of sin rather than the justification of the sinner,<sup>42</sup> (ii) it overemphasizes forgiveness<sup>43</sup> and overlooks the blatant consequences of sin throughout the biblical account, thus teaching Jesus as Savior only and not as Lord, (iii) it teaches salvation as fire-insurance<sup>44</sup> or a one-way ticket to heaven, thus is a seeker-friendly gospel,<sup>45</sup> (iv) it fails to emphasize sanctification as an outworking of God’s grace,<sup>46</sup> (v) it fails to emphasize repentance from dead works<sup>47</sup> and a new life of obedience in Christ, thus is a self-centered rather than Christ-centered gospel, (vi) it fails to understand the motivation for obedience as expressed in the life of Christ – love for the Father (Jn 14:21)<sup>48</sup> (vii) it mistakes obedience for salvation by works,<sup>49</sup> and overlooks the obedience empowered by salvation (Eph 2:8–10), (viii) it fails to see that lack of obedience is equal to hatred of God<sup>50</sup> and defiance of His will (Matt 7:21–23) and, (ix) it fails to see that through obedience we become conformed into Christlikeness through sanctification (Luke 6:40)<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bonhoeffer, 47–48.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 96–100.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>43</sup> Jantz, “Looking for Grace and the Gospel,” 236.

<sup>44</sup> Castleman, “The Skim-Milk Gospel of Cheap Grace,” 52.

<sup>45</sup> Jantz, “Looking for Grace and the Gospel,” 236–37.

<sup>46</sup> Venema, “Calvin’s Understanding of the ‘twofold Grace of God’ and Contemporary Ecumenical Discussion of the Gospel,” 70–71.

<sup>47</sup> Carroll, “Welcoming Grace, Costly Commitment,” 18.

<sup>48</sup> Armitage, “Obedient unto Death, Even Death on a Cross,” 519.

<sup>49</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 74.

<sup>50</sup> Carroll, “Welcoming Grace, Costly Commitment,” 16.

<sup>51</sup> Venema, “Calvin’s Understanding of the ‘twofold Grace of God’ and Contemporary Ecumenical Discussion of the Gospel,” 70.



## Refuting the Claims of the “Greasy Grace Gospel”

*Justification:* According to the Anchor Bible Dictionary, justification is “a term that describes the event whereby persons are set or declared to be in right relation to God” and that it is a summary of the gospel’s central message taught by Paul.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, justification happens through faith alone, as Calvin taught,<sup>53</sup> a truth upheld by the Scripture (Rom 10:9–10, NIV). The Greasy Grace Gospel get it wrong, as Bonhoeffer argues, that cheap grace “amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs.”<sup>54</sup> Accordingly, sin is no longer to be avoided; anyone can indulge in it because it is simply a weakness in human nature. This idea is closely related to the next claim and will be treated together.

*Forgiveness overlooking sin’s consequences:* The skewed understanding of justification taught by the Greasy Grace Gospel proponents is based on the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross, through which forgiveness of sin is made possible. However, these two claims can be sufficiently refuted by the warning in Hebrews 10:26 that there is no atonement for those persisting in sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, but only a fearful judgement awaits them.

*No need for sanctification:* This closely follows the hyper-forgiveness teaching above. Sanctification, according to Calvin, is the second part of the two-fold grace of God, following justification closely, and through it, a believer can cultivate a life of blamelessness and purity.<sup>55</sup> Paul taught and prayed that the believers would be sanctified completely and that their body, soul, and spirit would be kept blameless (1 Thess 5:23).

*Salvation as a one-way ticket to heaven:* This has no biblical merit, for Jesus Himself taught that it is not everyone who calls Him “Lord, Lord” who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of God the Father (Matt 7:21). This shows that faithful and wholehearted obedience to God’s will is what guarantees entry into the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:20).

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<sup>52</sup> David Noel Freedman et al., eds., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 485.

<sup>53</sup> Venema, “Calvin’s Understanding of the ‘twofold Grace of God’ and Contemporary Ecumenical Discussion of the Gospel,” 76.

<sup>54</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 47.

<sup>55</sup> Venema, “Calvin’s Understanding of the ‘twofold Grace of God’ and Contemporary Ecumenical Discussion of the Gospel,” 70–71.





*A self-centred gospel without repentance:* Any gospel that does not emphasize repentance from ungodliness and fleshly lusts (Titus 2:11-12) is essentially teaching people to indulge in the carnal nature. One often invisible characteristic of this kind of life is that it blinds a person from the diverse expressions of sin at a personal and societal level. Alexander states that cheap grace can lead to complacency, avoidance, and giving excuses in the face of human brokenness and moral failure in society.<sup>56</sup> He remarks that the true grace of God refuses to accept the status quo and instead despairs in such a way that leads to a greater dependence on God because of the realization of our sinfulness.<sup>57</sup> A truly Christian life is totally dependent on Christ for the complete redemption of all expressions of brokenness at individual and societal levels.

*Obedience as 'works':* Part of the reason the Greasy Grace Gospel proponents do not emphasize obedience is a wrong understanding of obedience. We have already seen that obedience, as demonstrated by Christ, was motivated by love, not as a way of gaining merit or credit before God (Jn 5:19-20). Even fear-driven obedience does not attract God's approval because, in such a case, if there were no consequences, then obedience would not be chosen.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, Beach notes that the offer of the gospel, as explained by Calvin, is open to all and that this offer "brings simultaneously a blessing to the godly and a rebuff to the ungodly: while the consciences of the godly are consoled, the excuses of the wicked are subverted, for they reject, "out of their own ungratefulness," what is offered to them, namely sanctuary from their bondage to sin."<sup>59</sup> Obedience to God really is freedom from the bondage of sin. This is lost to the cheap grace adherents in their ingratitude and rebellion against God's will.

## Conclusion

The Greasy Grace Gospel proponents are in error and in danger of misleading many to a possible future eternally separated from God because it teaches the justification of sin rather than the sinner. It overemphasizes forgiveness at the expense of repentance from the dead

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<sup>56</sup> Jeremy Rehwaldt-Alexander, "Avoiding Cheap Grace: Luther and the Need for Moral Despair," *Dialog* 45, no. 4 (2006): 380-81.

<sup>57</sup> Rehwaldt-Alexander, 381.

<sup>58</sup> Phillip Cary, "The Lutheran Codicil: From Augustine's Grace to Luther's Gospel," *Logia* 20, no. 4 (2011): 6.

<sup>59</sup> Beach, "Calvin's Treatment of the Offer of the Gospel and Divine Grace," 74.



works of sin and fails to emphasize sanctification through which people can be saved from the power of sin. Moreover, it misunderstands the importance of obedience in a believer's life and thus misses out on its blessings, the greatest being conformation into Christlikeness through sanctification. Through a proper biblical theology on grace and obedience, we see that the Greasy Grace Gospel is erroneous, and obedience plays a central role in the relationship between God and humanity. Its claims have been identified and revoked through the Scriptures and doctrine. Hopefully, this will deter many from cheap grace but embrace costly grace and discipleship.

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