

PLAIN TRUTH[®]

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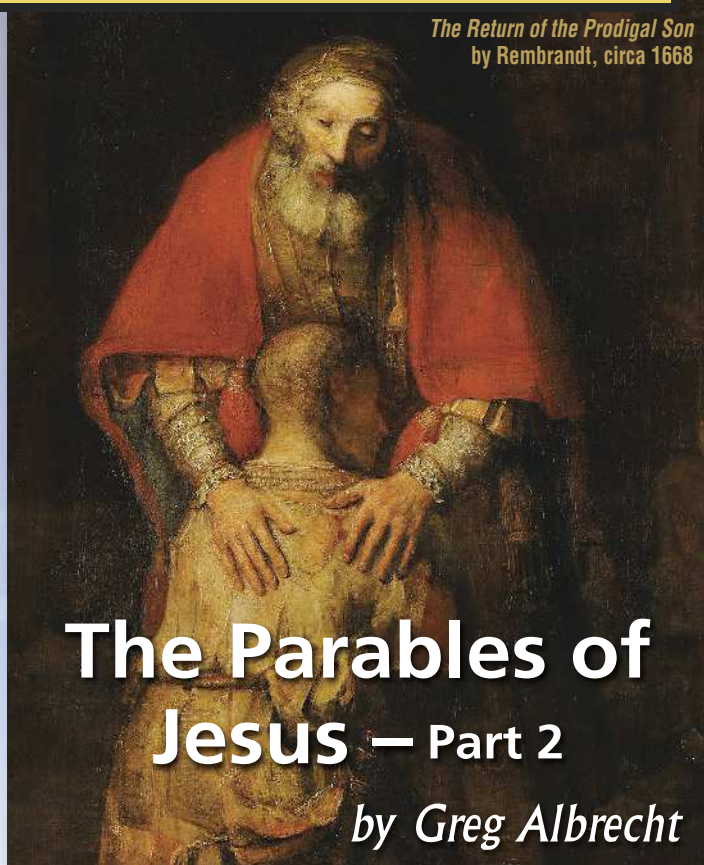
CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

m any attempt to sanitize the parables of Jesus into shrink-wrapped, pre-packaged stories about good and evil. But parables are not about living happily-ever-after with the good guys always winning and the bad guys always losing. Parables are not feel-good story-telling devices about God's love and grace. The parables of Jesus are not morality plays. In fact, sometimes parables seem more like methods Jesus used to completely avoid dogmatic conclusions in favor of challenging and provoking questions.

Jesus' parables contain the wild, untamed free-flowing grace of God which leads us to freedom in Christ. In its zeal to proclaim its own values, Christ-less religion offers interpretations of Jesus' parables that domesticate them, putting them into a religious cage where they can be contained, maintained and understood so that they serve the goals and objectives of big business religion.

*With Jesus, however, the device of parabolic utterance is used not to explain things to people's satisfaction but to call attention to the unsatisfactoriness of all their previous explanations and understandings.— Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom**

The word "parable" often evokes thoughts of moral teachings, lessons and platitudes—conventional wisdom perceives the best learning atmosphere for parables to be a



*The Return of the Prodigal Son
by Rembrandt, circa 1668*

The Parables of Jesus – Part 2

by Greg Albrecht

Sunday school lesson followed by milk and cookies. But the setting for most of the parables finds Jesus and his disciples in the middle of an antagonistic, hostile and scheming religious crowd that is

The parables of Jesus are not morality plays. In fact, sometimes parables seem more like methods Jesus used to completely avoid dogmatic conclusions in favor of challenging and provoking questions.

conniving to trip him up, embarrass him and ultimately to give themselves, as the established religion of his day, a justification for killing him.

Within the life and teachings of Jesus the parables often respond to or proactively address a hostile and bitter audience—controversy is in the air. On those occasions when Jesus spoke in parables and the

audience was not angry or upset, the listeners were often clueless about the values of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed. When Jesus gave his parables he often saw hostility, disbelief or confusion in the eyes of his listeners. We can safely assume that Jesus rarely if ever saw people enraptured by his teaching, nodding their heads in understanding and approval or frequently interrupting him with applause.

Did Parables "Really" Happen?

A parable is a true-to-life story, true to the historical context of its original audience. The parables are not literal historical events—they

didn't actually happen, but they could have.

The word "parable" is a combination of two Greek terms that together mean "to throw along side of." A parable is a story thrown along side of true-to-life details and examples in order to make one, or at the most, two central points.

Parables are not designed to be understood as detailed architectural



For Those Who are Banged Up a Little

Laura Hillebrand begins her best-selling book *Seabiscuit*: *In 1938, near the end of a decade of monumental turmoil, the year's number-one newsmaker was not Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Hitler or Mussolini. It wasn't Pope Pius XI, nor was it Lou Gehrig, Howard Hughes or Clark Gable. The subject of most newspaper column inches in 1938 wasn't even a person. It was an undersized, crooked-leg racehorse named Seabiscuit.*

A movie followed the book, with the same title, “Seabiscuit.” In that Academy Award nominated film, we meet Tom Smith, a trainer who specialized in rehabilitating injured and abused horses. He is hired to work for Charles Howard, who, played by Jeff Bridges, was beginning to acquire a stable of race horses.

Tom Smith, the trainer, saw potential in Seabiscuit. Even though this horse had many weaknesses and negatives Smith convinced Charles Howard to buy him, as Smith had assured Howard “You don’t throw away a whole life just because he’s banged up a little.”

In the book and the movie we learn about three men and a horse who are all “banged up a little.”

The rich owner, Charles Howard, was banged up—he had just lost his son in a tragic accident and he was struggling to move on with his life, in spite of his overwhelming grief.

The trainer, Tom Smith, was a banged up non-conformist who did not do things the way horse trainers were expected to. Tom Smith saw every horse as having potential of some kind, regardless of how “banged up” that horse was. Given his unorthodox methods

and views, Tom Smith was definitely different and he was rejected and viewed as inferior to other conventional trainers.

The jockey, Red Pollard (played in the movie by Tobey Maguire), had a checkered past. As a child Red was abandoned by his parents, who left him with a horse trainer at a race track. Red had to fight his way through life, making money through illegal boxing matches, one of which left him blind in one eye.

But, when Howard the owner and Smith the trainer were looking for a jockey to ride Seabiscuit, they saw potential in this little regarded, partly blind scrapper of a man named Red Pollard. After all, “You don’t throw away a life just because they’re banged up a little.”

Here’s how Laura Hillebrand describes Seabiscuit in her book:

The horse was a train wreck. He paced his stall incessantly. He broke into a lather at the sight of a saddle. He was two hundred pounds overweight and chronically tired. Seabiscuit didn't run, he rampaged. When the rider asked him for speed, the horse slowed down. When he tried to rein him in, the horse bolted. Asked to go left, he'd dodge right; tugged right, he'd dart left.

As I look back on my life I can see that there were times when God wanted me to go right, but I went left—and when he wanted me to go left, there were many times when I insisted on going in precisely the opposite direction.

I am not exaggerating to say that there were many times in my life when it seemed that God wanted me to run, but I stopped. And there were many times when it seemed God wanted me to stop, but I insisted on running away.

But the good news is that Jesus comes to me, and to you, not because of how well we have performed on the race track of life. He comes to us because of God’s love—a love we can never deserve or earn.

Jesus came then, in his earthly ministry, and still comes now, to the downtrodden and the rejected, the marginalized and the forgotten. The fact that someone is “a little banged up” makes no difference to Jesus. That’s part of the backstory and the significance of the incarnation—when God in Christ came to be with us and one of us.

As far as God in Christ is concerned, no one is outside of his grace. No one is a throw-away. No one is beyond hope. Like Seabiscuit, your life might resemble a train wreck. Like Seabiscuit, you may feel or be overweight—you may be chronically tired and all you want to do is eat and sleep.

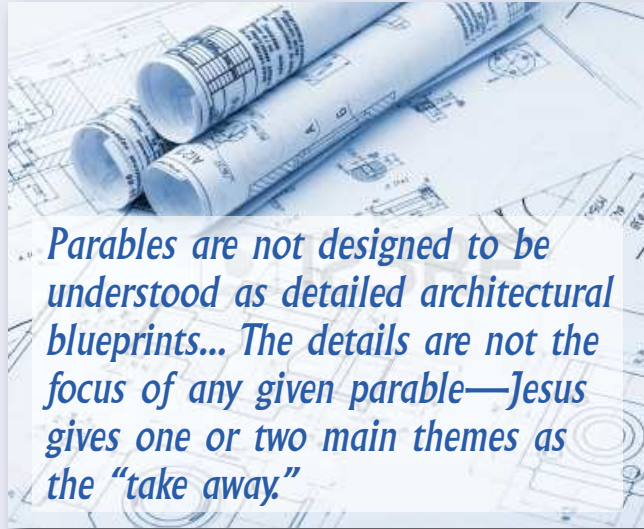
Jesus is willing to come into the lives of those who are “banged up a little”—who feel like they are ready for the glue factory. There but for the grace of God every one of us is worthy of little more than the proverbial glue factory, where old broken down horses are sent.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ is wonderful news for you and me—and for everyone who is a little “banged up.” The good news is that God doesn’t throw us away just because we’re “banged up a little.” □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for the complete message “For Those Who Are Banged Up a Little” at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of December 4, 2016.

blueprints—and indeed, one of the primary mistakes many make in trying to understand parables is attaching meaning to all of the details in the parables Jesus provides. The details are not the focus of any given parable—Jesus gives one or two main themes as the “take away.”



Parables are not designed to be understood as detailed architectural blueprints... The details are not the focus of any given parable—Jesus gives one or two main themes as the “take away.”

Allegorizing was one of the earliest ways to explain and interpret parables. An allegory is a story whose constituent parts all have specific definition and meaning. For example, John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* depicts the journey of Pilgrim through life. In this allegory every obstacle Pilgrim encounters is given a symbolic name, and the details of all his encounters are written in such a way that they must be understood as metaphors of real life.

Here’s an example of how early Christians (“fathers”) offered extended allegories of Jesus’ parable of The Good Samaritan from Archibald Hunter’s book *Interpreting the Parables*:

The man who fell among thieves is Adam. As Jerusalem represents heaven, so Jericho, to which the traveler journeyed, is the world. The robbers are men’s enemies, the devil and his minions. The priest stands for the Law, the Levite for the prophets. The good Samaritan is Christ himself. The beast, on which the wounded man was set, is Christ’s body which bears the fallen Adam. The inn is the

Church; the two pence, the Father and the Son; and the Samaritan’s promise to come again, Christ’s Second Advent.—Origin, 185-254 A.D.

Emil Brunner, a respected 20th century scholar comments on this method of allegorizing that was popular in the early church (Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrines of Creation and Redemption*):

Their [the early church fathers] uncritical method of exposition cannot be our example or our norm any more than their view of the world. To some extent they were not afraid of the wildest methods of allegorical exposition because they knew as little about a critical method as about a scientific view of the world.

Allegorizing parables completely overlooks the fact that details in a parable only provide a stage setting for the salient point Jesus is making. Jesus uses details in a parable to paint a backdrop—a scene—for the teaching he gives. Jesus does not invite readers (and original listeners) to scrutinize the details for meaning, because the parable that unfolds on the stage generally has one main teaching point.

This is not to say that Jesus never employed allegories—for example, instead of a parable the Gospel of John gives an allegory about shepherds: “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11). Reading an allegory as an allegory is of course correct, but allegorizing a parable that makes a central point leads to misunderstandings.

Like a play, some longer parables have several acts, and thus one might say several points emerge, but while Jesus uses metaphors like kings, virgins, servants, harvests, seeds, etc.—they only help to set the stage and are not the point of the parable. Jesus used images of the natural world of agriculture, of daily life like baking and cleaning,

of family and family life and money. The details of the story are factual but they are interwoven into the parable in order to support the primary message conveyed by the parable. ***If details of the parable are subject to detailed analysis, the meaning of the parable will often be distorted, for the details do not belong front and center, but in the background, as part of the stage setting.***

Why Did Jesus Teach Using Parables?

Stories delight, enchant, motivate and inspire us. Stories imprint a picture on our minds. We love stories—they are the stuff of our lives, from the books we read to the television and movies we watch—even the most effective commercials on television tell a short story.

He, Jesus, speaks in parables, and though we have approached these parables reverentially all these many years and have heard them expounded as grave and reverent vehicles of holy truth, I suspect that many if not all of them were originally not grave at all but were antic, comic, often more than a little shocking.—Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: the Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*

The stories in Jesus’ parables take us to a dimension we can never enter, apart from the grace of God and the insight provided through Jesus, our Master-Teacher. This new dimension is the kingdom of God, (or the kingdom of heaven as the Gospel of Matthew calls it).

Why parables? Because **the shortest distance between a human heart and the heart and core of the kingdom of God is a grace-based story.**

Parables are more readily embraced by our heart and digested as spiritual nourishment for our soul, far more than they are unquestionably accepted by our mind. The bedrock truths taught in Jesus’ parables address the deep-seated issues with which we all wrestle—injustice, hurt, pain, suffering and anxiety. The parables are emotional stories of love, mercy and grace.

Matthew 13:34 says that Jesus said nothing to them without using a parable. That doesn't mean that everything he said, on every occasion, was a story, but Matthew is saying, perhaps with a bit of hyperbole, virtually all of the basic principles Jesus taught were (in one way or another) expressed through one of his stories.

Many parables have surprise endings that turn our attention away from the safe and secure world of religion where everything is neatly ordered—parables present spiritual realities that are far from dogmatic answers for every question. Parables depict and explain the kingdom of heaven as a spiritual dimension where things are mysterious and strange and often don't turn out the way we humans think they should.

Perhaps it's better to think of parables as ways of teaching us about the real and vital presence of God in our daily lives. He is here, with us—not far away. He knows the framework, the details, the tedium, the stress, the repetition and the suffering of what it means to be human—because he is with us in the person of Jesus.

Parables don't intend to help us understand all the questions we have about life, and its struggles and dilemmas, but they are intended to assure us that God knows what we are experiencing—he understands our struggles and suffering and he is always with us.

When Jesus implements and imports commonly known everyday elements that are part of our lives, or at least the lives of his original listeners and readers, he is not always doing so to help us understand all the answers to the world in which we live, but rather to assure us that he is always with us and near us.

Parables of the Upside Down Kingdom of God

The parables of Jesus can be mysterious, because they speak of a humanly unknown spiritual dimension that God reveals by his grace—let's put it this way: *the*

parables of Jesus, who is God in the flesh, reveal the upside down nature of the kingdom of God (kingdom of heaven) compared with the kingdoms of our world.

The parables of Jesus help us to realize that we cannot control or tame God—he is beyond our power to control him. This vivid and stark contrast is noted in Luke 16:15, as Jesus was explaining a parable he had just given: "What people value highly is detestable in God's sight."

God is love and he works in mysterious ways—a way of life called "grace." Grace is the divine, eternal dimension that defies our human way of looking at right and wrong. Here are some examples of the upside-down, counter-intuitive conclusions reached by Jesus in his parables:

- **The Prodigal Son** (Luke 15:11-32)

At first it seems like the prodigal son is living large, but his libertine ways quickly lead to poverty and misery. He decides to go home expecting to be treated like nothing more than a servant, but instead he receives unanticipated, unexpected and out-of-this-world grace. The hard-working older brother is scandalized and refuses to participate in the celebration of grace because he cannot condone the rebellious life of his brother.

The insider son who never left home becomes an outsider, while by God's grace the outsider becomes an insider.

- **The Great Banquet** (Luke 14:16-24)

The respected A-list guests who receive the first invitation to the great banquet find reasons not to come, while the poor, crippled and lame whom no one would expect to receive an invitation readily respond.

The insiders refuse, the outsiders accept.

- **The Pharisee and the Tax Collector** (Luke 18:10-14)

The Pharisee, used as a symbol of all the righteousness and perfection that religion can produce and boast of, is contrasted with the tax collector, widely considered to be a low life, cheating, thieving traitor.

Ironically, those who are esteemed

Why parables? Because the shortest distance between a human heart and the heart and core of the kingdom of God is a grace-based story.

as religiously pure and blameless are defiled, while those given no respect, seeming to be crooked and dishonest, may well be authentic and true.

- **Lazarus and the Rich Man** (Luke 16:19-31)

On this side of eternity a rich man lives in luxury while Lazarus, a hungry, impoverished, homeless, covered-with-sores beggar lays, day after day, on the other side of the rich man's gate. The roles are poetically reversed on the other side of eternity—the rich man begs for Lazarus to just dip his finger in water and cool his tongue.

The poor and homeless who are looked down on and ignored by the rich and powerful are first, while the privileged elite are last.

- **The Rich Fool** (Luke 12:16-21)

A rich man appears to prudently plan for the future by building bigger barns to store his increasing resources, but his sooner-than-expected sudden demise exposes the futility of his best laid plans and reveals his greed and misplaced priorities.

Those who seek to save their lives lose them, while those willing to lose their lives will be given life.

- **The Good Samaritan** (Luke 10:25-37)

Two religious authorities, who appear to be the paragon of virtue and righteousness, are actually worthy of scorn and derision because they didn't stop to help a man in distress. On the other hand, a Samaritan, despised both racially and religiously by the Jewish culture at that time, is unexpectedly praised for his willingness to render service and healing.

Those who appear to be religiously moral and upright may well be corrupt and degenerate, while those who appear to be the lowest of the low may actually be servants of Jesus. □



“No” to Wrath and “Yes” to Love – Part 2

BY GREG ALBRECHT

When it comes to the Cross of Christ—the singular and foundational act that demonstrates God’s love to us and the invitation to an eternal loving relationship—Christendom at large can tell us is that God crucified his Son in payment for sin. The vast majority of Christendom would have us believe that the Father was so offended by sin that his Son had to die to appease and placate the wrath of the Father, so that the Father

The vast majority of Christendom would have us believe that the Father was so offended by sin that his Son had to die to appease and placate the wrath of the Father, so that the Father would not send us all to be eternally tortured in hell.

would not send us all to be eternally tortured in hell.

Are we expected to believe that this is the love of God the Father? This sounds more like pagan child sacrifice than it does the teachings of Jesus, who came to reveal the Father. **Christ-less religion is effectively teaching that God has a psychological need that can only be fulfilled by violence.**

Real, authentic Christianity has to be without religion because, amazing as it may be to recognize and accept, **religion and government are both founded on the same premise of violence.** When we carefully read the teachings of Jesus contained in the Four Gospels we must come to the final conclusion that Jesus is truly *ir*-religious. His kingdom is neither of this world’s governments and political systems nor is it of our world religions.

- Jesus is the Prince of peace, but Christ-less religion justifies and blesses violence in the name of what some call “just war.”

- Jesus reveals God as love, but Christ-less religion teaches a God who insists on his honor and holiness

being “satisfied” through violence.

- Jesus proclaims grace, Christ-less religion insists on law.

- Jesus offers forgiveness, Christ-less religion demands the eternal torture of hell for those it claims deserve it.

- Respectable religion, masquerading as Christianity, attempts to explain that God is just, and his justice demands a payment for sin, because he cannot co-exist with sin. We must ask who is

demanding what?

- The Bible reveals Jesus as the Lamb of God who voluntarily

accepted human wrath, produced by sin, but Christ-less religion insists that God the Father is angry, upset and consumed by divine wrath, and justifiably so. Therefore, reasons Christ-less religion, Jesus took our place to placate the wrath of the Father so we can escape.

The most dominant image of God within Christ-less religion today is of a vindictive judge of retribution. Here’s a response to that logic, which seems, on the surface, to be a reasonable explanation for the Cross of Christ. I’m quoting from a book titled *Unspoken Sermons*—Volume 3, “Righteousness,” written by George MacDonald, whose writings heavily influenced the highly esteemed Christian author, C.S. Lewis:

They say first, God must punish the sinner, for justice requires it; then they say he does not punish the sinner, but punishes a perfectly righteous man instead, attributes his righteousness to the sinner, and so continues just. Was

there ever such a confusion, such an inversion of right and wrong! Justice could not treat a righteous man as unrighteous; neither, if justice required the punishment of sin, could justice let the sinner go unpunished. To lay the pain upon the righteous in the name of justice is simply monstrous. No wonder unbelief is rampant. Believe in Moloch if you will, but call him Moloch, not Justice. Be sure that the thing God gives, the righteousness that is of God, is a real thing, and not a contemptible legalism.

MacDonald is saying that justice cannot be reduced to punishing the perpetrators. If my grandson is eating an apple, and his sister runs by, snatches the apple, and consumes it before he can recover it, will any punishment her parents give her restore her brother’s apple? The apple is gone—but more importantly, the trust and relationship they had as brother and sister has been seriously damaged. **Justice involves more than punishment**—justice involves the reconciliation of the victim and the perpetrator. Justice involves peace-making—justice involves turning the other cheek.

If my grandson decides to retaliate he will feel justified and vindicated because his sister ate his apple and

This sounds more like pagan child sacrifice than it does the teachings of Jesus, who came to reveal the Father. Christ-less religion is effectively teaching that God has a psychological need that can only be fulfilled by violence.

justice must be done. A cycle of violence begins. It’s the old eye-for-an-eye idea of retributive justice. And this idea is the very idea many theologians, authors and pastors say that *God needs* in order for divine justice to be served.

Jesus overcame evil on his cross by taking all evil on himself, effectively letting it run itself into the ground. He overcame sin and evil by refusing to retaliate—by saying, “Father, forgive them.” *Love overcomes evil by refusing to retaliate in kind.*

As this two-part series is titled, the message of the Cross is a resounding “No” to Wrath and “Yes” to Love.

What happened on the Cross was a never before or ever since event, once-in-all-of-history epic outpouring of selfless love on the part of God...

Jesus' teachings, exemplified in Matthew 5:38-45, are non-violent and non-coercive.

As we read the Bible from a Christ-centered perspective, we find that Jesus reveals God to us as love. God is love—that is the core of the gospel. Because of God's love and grace, he freely, for no reason that the mortal mind or heart can fathom, extends an invitation into his eternal kingdom of heaven.

- We do not earn his kingdom by our religious performance, **but only by God's grace.**

- We do not earn our way out of the eternal, flaming fires of hell (at least the "hell" invented/fabricated by religion) by our performance, **but only by God's grace.**

- Any suggestion, minimizing or watering down of the fundamental, key proposition of the gospel as the unmerited love and grace of God is a corruption of the gospel, and for that matter, a perversion of the very nature of God.

Justice cannot be arrived at simply by God (or better stated, by deluded, self-appointed religious professionals) shipping people off to eternal torture in hell.

Hell (whatever it may be, however long it may last, however hot it may be) doesn't bring peace. The fabricated hell of Christ-less religion doesn't reconcile nor does it heal the wounds of sin.

What is sin? Some people quote 1 John 3:4, saying it's *the transgression of God's law*. A discussion of sin based solely on this partial definition logically breaks down in attempts to precisely define and identify God's law. Sin is deeper than

actions or behaviors—sin has to do with the fundamental disposition of the human heart. Paul says that our fundamental nature is

antagonism toward God.

- We are the ones who are filled with wrath—we are the angry ones.

- We want God to leave us alone.

- **Sin is, among other things, our religious disposition to produce our own righteousness, because we are, by nature, opposed to the righteousness of God, by faith, through Christ.**

If and when we feel the need to be righteous, we are inclined to achieve righteousness on our own terms. We want to be able to become righteous by doing something religious. We are opposed to the idea that we need God—we are offended by the idea that God can do something for us that we cannot do for ourselves.

The idea of a penal substitution on the Cross is actually a case of mortal human beings making the immortal God into an image bringing him down to their level. *The teaching of penal substitution, that God was upset and Jesus had to bear his wrath so humans could be saved, is attractive and comfortable to the human mind.* We naturally desire, and even crave, to see wrong-doers punished. We want to see people get what's coming to them. The thought of a sinful person burning in hell, being eternally tortured forever, is an emotionally satisfying idea to a cold heart.

There is no doubt that judgment is taught in Scripture, therefore there can be no doubt that punishment occurs at the hands of God. But religion has no authority, even if it feels the end justifies the means, to insist on its blatantly fabricated threat of eternal torture. God disciplines us, says the book of Hebrews, as a loving parent, but he does not, out of his love, torture us. Nor did he pour out "his wrath" on his Son.

What happened on the Cross was

a "No" to wrath—and to retributive violence and the never-ending cycle of hatred spawned by *eye-for-an-eye* retributive justice. What happened on the Cross was a never before or ever since event, *once-in-all-of-history* epic outpouring of selfless love on the part of God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) declaring undying, unending, eternal love for you and me. The Cross of Christ is a "Yes" to Love, peace and mercy.

The Cross of Christ signaled the end of violence and hatred and war—it was the beginning of the end of evil and death. The Cross of Christ introduced a relationship with God that transcends the presumptive relationship of laws and penalties, concocted and promoted by Christ-less religion.

The cross of Christ offered a bridge from the death we live, apart from God—a bridge allowing us to be transformed, spiritually reborn, reconciled and given eternal life. Because Jesus absorbed the wrath of human sin, we may cross over from death to life (John 5:24).

- Apart from the love of God demonstrated on the Cross of Christ, we are dead men and dead women walking.

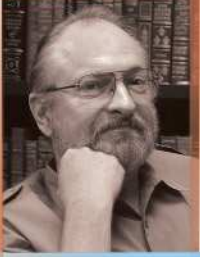
- Apart from the love of God demonstrated on the Cross of Christ, we have no hope.

- Apart from the love of God, demonstrated on the Cross of Christ, all we can experience is the *dog-eat-dog, do-unto-others-before-they-do-it-to-us* world in which we live.

- Jesus came to be one of us, to live, die and be resurrected, to heal the spiritually sick and to resurrect those who are spiritually dead.

- Jesus came to make spiritually dead people live—not to save us from the torment of eternal torture in hell, the "wrath of God" which the Father would have otherwise poured out on us.

- The good news is that we are liberated by the love of God, demonstrated for us on the Cross of Christ, from wrong-headed notions of who and what God is. The good news is that we are saved from Christ-less religion! □



A Little at a Time

I've been spending a lot of time on my knees lately. Frankly, I should have started doing this long ago. Then it would have been over and done with by now. But no—other, more urgent projects took priority, so here I am, redoing our living room floor.

A light-colored carpet just isn't practical for a forest home. You can never stop the mud, leaves and Douglas-fir needles tracked in—in addition to the normal doggy accidents, coffee and food mishaps, and in our case, ink, paint and other art-and-ceramics-related substances. As I looked at the cost of repeated carpet cleanings, I thought, "Wouldn't it be better to invest in a more permanent floor?" That's why I'm on my knees, laying porcelain tile.

Yes, I know—in my last column I made a case for calling in professional help when needed. But I have a bit of tiling experience, I have the equipment (including knee pads) and I know the basics. Oh, sure, the result might not be as flawless as a professional would do, but my work has charm and *folksiness*. And it's way cheaper!

The time and material cost for 650 square feet (living room, dining room and hallways) would be gargantuan if I did it all at once. So that's why my strategy is *a little at a time*. It's a strategy I follow for every big project. See, if I do things all at once, about halfway into the job my motivation evaporates. But *a little at a time* works into your daily routine. Brush your teeth. Walk the dog. Pay some bills. Lay some tile. Eventually, in a few months, the job will be done.

Being on my knees and all, I can't help but consider that *a little at a time* is the way God usually works—but for far different reasons. After all, he doesn't live in time and is not constrained by limited funds. But he does work in *our* time.

He can do instantaneous miracles whenever he wants. But history, Scripture and the physical universe suggest that's not the norm. He usually does things over much longer spans of time than we would prefer. So long that we wonder if he's even working at all. But he is.

When I stand back and look at the floor, it doesn't look like I'm making much progress. But I *am* making progress, and sometime in the not-

too-distant future we will have a new floor, impervious to the ravages of spilled coffee or lasagna. I just need enough patience to keep working until then.

Ironically, patience (the capacity to tolerate delay) can be developed only *a little at a time*. **It's almost like you have to be patient in order to acquire patience.** Maybe that's why real patience is getting to be rare in our instant culture.

Popular religious culture is no exception. You've probably heard televangelists touting "breakthroughs," jaw-dropping interventions, dazzling miracles and sudden "outpourings" of blessings. Such preachers tell us these miracles are

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conditional on the faith we can muster (and how much "seed money" we can fork over to their ministries). But if an instant fix like \$250,000 appeared in the mail, or if your stage-four lung cancer vanished overnight, faith and patience wouldn't have much to do with it.

By contrast, **faith and patience are very much in play when we're enduring financial hardship or suffering the ravages of chronic illness.** Those times seem to be optimal for God growing and producing his patience in us. We are his workmanship/handiwork (Ephesians 2:10), and as we mature in him we realize God is working—*a little at a time*.

As I write this, I have about 180 square feet of tile laid. Two things keep me going: 1) A partly-tiled living room looks awkward, and 2) I keep visualizing the finished project, and it looks great!

Likewise, only God knows how awkward we look when we're in the process of being remade into his image. But he also knows exactly what we'll look like when he's through—and that right there should be enough to keep us going! □

—Monte Wolverton



Quotes & Connections



"For God wants you as you are, not desiring anything from you—a sacrifice, a good deed—but you alone."—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

"Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst."
—C.S. Lewis

"With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil—that takes religion."
—Steven Weinberg

"The gospel of grace is the end of religion, the final posting of the 'closed' sign on the sweatshop of the human race's perpetual struggle to think well of itself. For that, at bottom, is what religion is: the human species' well-meant but dim-witted attempt to gain approval of its unapprovable condition by doing odd jobs it thinks some important Something will thank it for.... You won't learn anything positive about religion from Christianity and if you look for Christianity in religion, you'll never find it."
—Robert Farrar Capon

"I have a hunch that I would be put out if certain notoriously evil people ended up nestled in the bosom of the Savior. Something in me does not want Nero, Hitler, Stalin and the other monsters of history to share the joys of heaven with St. Francis and Mother Teresa. My moral sense demands that God require an accounting from them."
—Lewis Smedes

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