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## Costly Grace

Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace.

Cheap grace means grace as bargain-basement goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament; grace as the church's inexhaustible pantry, from which it is doled out by careless hands without hesitation or limit. It is grace without a price, without costs. It is said that the essence of grace is that the bill for it is paid in advance for all time. Everything can be had for free, courtesy of that paid bill. The price paid is infinitely great and, therefore, the possibilities of taking advantage of and wasting grace are also infinitely great. What would grace be, if it were not cheap grace?

Cheap grace means grace as doctrine, as principle, as system. It means forgiveness of sins as a general truth; it means God's love as merely a Christian idea of God. Those who affirm it have already had their sins forgiven. The church that teaches this doctrine of grace thereby confers such grace upon itself. The world finds in this church a cheap cover-up for its sins, for which it shows no remorse and from

which it has even less desire to be set free. Cheap grace is, thus, denial of God's living word, denial of the incarnation of the word of God.

Cheap grace means justification of sin but not of the sinner. Because grace alone does everything, everything can stay in its old ways. "Our action is in vain." The world remains world and we remain sinners "even in the best of lives." Thus, the Christian should live the same way the world does. In all things the Christian should go along with the world and not venture (like sixteenth-century enthusiasts) to live a different life under grace from that under sin! The Christian better not rage against grace or defile that glorious cheap grace by proclaiming anew a servitude to the letter of the Bible in an attempt to live an obedient life under the commandments of Jesus Christ! The world is justified by grace, therefore—because this grace is so serious! because this irreplaceable grace should not be opposed—the Christian should live just like the rest of the world! Of course, a Christian would like to do something exceptional! Undoubtedly, it must be the most difficult renunciation not to do so and to live like the world. But the Christian has to do it, has to practice such self-denial so that there is no difference between Christian life and worldly life. The Christian has to let grace truly be grace enough so that the world does not lose faith in this cheap grace. In being worldly, however, in this necessary renunciation required for the sake of the world—no, for the sake of grace!—the Christian can be comforted and secure (*securus*) in possession of that grace which takes care of everything by itself. So the Christian need not follow Christ, since the Christian is comforted by grace! That is cheap grace as justification of sin, but not justification of the contrite sinner who turns away from sin and repents. It is not forgiveness of sin which separates those who sinned from sin. Cheap grace is that grace which we bestow on ourselves.

Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.

Costly grace is the hidden treasure in the field, for the sake of which people go and sell with joy everything they have. It is the costly pearl, for whose price the merchant sells all that he has; it is Christ's sovereignty, for the sake of which you tear out an eye if it causes you to stumble. It is the call of Jesus Christ which causes a disciple to leave his nets and follow him.

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.

It is costly, because it calls to discipleship; it is grace, because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly, because it costs people their lives; it is grace, because it thereby makes them live. It is costly, because it condemns sin; it is grace, because it justifies the sinner. Above all, grace is costly, because it was costly to God, because it costs God the life of God's Son—"you were bought with a price"—and because nothing can be cheap to us which is costly to God. Above all, it is grace because the life of God's Son was not too costly for God to give in order to make us live. God did, indeed, give him up for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God.

Costly grace is grace as God's holy treasure which must be protected from the world and which must not be thrown to the dogs. Thus, it is grace as living word, word of God, which God speaks as God pleases. It comes to us as a gracious call to follow Jesus; it comes as a forgiving word to the fearful spirit and the broken heart. Grace is costly, because it forces people under the yoke of following Jesus

Christ; it is grace when Jesus says, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Twice the call went out to Peter: Follow me! It was Jesus’ first and last word to his disciple (Mark 1:17; John 21:22). His whole life lies between these two calls. The first time, in response to Jesus’ call, Peter left his nets, his vocation, at the Sea of Galilee and followed him on his word. The last time, the Resurrected One finds him at his old vocation, again at the Sea of Galilee, and again he calls: Follow me! Between the two lies a whole life of discipleship following Christ. At its center stands Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ of God. The same message is proclaimed to Peter three times: at the beginning, at the end, and in Caesarea Philippi, namely, that Christ is his Lord and God. It is the same grace of Christ which summons him—Follow me! This same grace also reveals itself to him in his confessing the Son of God.

Grace visited Peter three times along his life’s path. It was the one grace, but proclaimed differently three times. Thus, it was Christ’s own grace, and surely not grace which the disciple conferred on himself. It was the same grace of Christ which won Peter over to leave everything to follow him, which brought about Peter’s confession which had to seem like blasphemy to all the world, and which called the unfaithful Peter into the ultimate community of martyrdom and, in doing so, forgave him all his sins. In Peter’s life, grace and discipleship belong inseparably together. He received costly grace.

The expansion of Christianity and the increasing secularization of the church caused the awareness of costly grace to be gradually lost. The world was Christianized; grace became common property of a Christian world. It could be had cheaply. But the Roman church did keep a remnant of that original awareness. It was decisive that monasticism did not separate from the church and that the church

had the good sense to tolerate monasticism. Here, on the boundary of the church, was the place where the awareness that grace is costly and that grace includes discipleship was preserved. People left everything they had for the sake of Christ and tried to follow Jesus' strict commandments through daily exercise. Monastic life thus became a living protest against the secularization of Christianity, against the cheapening of grace. But because the church tolerated this protest and did not permit it to build up to a final explosion, the church relativized it. It even gained from the protest a justification for its own secular life. For now monastic life became the extraordinary achievement of individuals, to which the majority of church members need not be obligated. The fateful limiting of the validity of Jesus' commandments to a certain group of especially qualified people led to differentiating between highest achievement and lowest performance in Christian obedience. This made it possible, when the secularization of the church was attacked any further, to point to the possibility of the monastic way within the church, alongside which another possibility, that of an easier way, was also justified. Thus, calling attention to the original Christian understanding of costly grace as it was retained in the Roman church through monasticism enabled the church paradoxically to give final legitimacy to its own secularization. But the decisive mistake of monasticism was not that it followed the grace-laden path of strict discipleship, even with all of monasticism's misunderstandings of the contents of the will of Jesus. Rather, the mistake was that monasticism essentially distanced itself from what is Christian by permitting its way to become the extraordinary achievement of a few, thereby claiming a special meritoriousness for itself.

During the Reformation, God reawakened the gospel of pure, costly grace through God's servant Martin Luther by leading him through the monastery. Luther was a monk. He had left everything

and wanted to follow Christ in complete obedience. He renounced the world and turned to Christian works. He learned obedience to Christ and his church, because he knew that only those who are obedient can believe. Luther invested his whole life in his call to the monastery. It was God who caused Luther to fail on that path. God showed him through scripture that discipleship is not the meritorious achievement of individuals, but a divine commandment to all Christians. The humble work of discipleship had become in monasticism the meritorious work of the holy ones. The self-denial of the disciple is revealed here as the final spiritual self-affirmation of the especially pious. This meant that the world had broken into the middle of monastic life and was at work again in a most dangerous way. Luther saw the monk's escape from the world as really a subtle love for the world. In this shattering of his last possibility to achieve a pious life, grace seized Luther. In the collapse of the monastic world, he saw God's saving hand reaching out in Christ. He seized it in the faith that "our deeds are in vain, even in the best life." It was a costly grace, which gave itself to him. It shattered his whole existence. Once again, he had to leave his nets and follow. The first time, when he entered the monastery, he left everything behind except himself, his pious self. This time even that was taken from him. He followed, not by his own merit, but by God's grace. He was not told, yes, you have sinned, but now all that is forgiven. Continue on where you were and comfort yourself with forgiveness! Luther had to leave the monastery and reenter the world, not because the world itself was good and holy, but because even the monastery was nothing else but world.

Luther's path out of the monastery back to the world meant the sharpest attack that had been launched on the world since early Christianity. The rejection which the monk had given the world was child's play compared to the rejection that the world endured

through his returning to it. This time the attack was a frontal assault. Following Jesus now had to be lived out in the midst of the world. What had been practiced in the special, easier circumstances of monastic life as a special accomplishment now had become what was necessary and commanded for every Christian in the world. Complete obedience to Jesus' commandments had to be carried out in the daily world of work. This deepened the conflict between the life of Christians and the life of the world in an unforeseeable way. The Christian had closed in on the world. It was hand-to-hand combat.

Luther's deed cannot be misunderstood more grievously than by thinking that through discovering the gospel of pure grace, Luther proclaimed a dispensation from obeying Jesus' commandments in the world. The Reformation's main discovery would then be the sanctification and justification of the world by grace's forgiving power. For Luther, on the contrary, a Christian's secular vocation is justified only in that one's protest against the world is thereby most sharply expressed. A Christian's secular vocation receives new recognition from the gospel only to the extent that it is carried on while following Jesus. Luther's reason for leaving the monastery was not justification of the sin, but justification of the sinner. Costly grace was given as a gift to Luther. It was grace, because it was water onto thirsty land, comfort for anxiety, liberation from the servitude of a self-chosen path, forgiveness of all sins. The grace was costly, because it did not excuse one from works. Instead, it endlessly sharpened the call to discipleship. But just wherein it was costly, that was wherein it was grace. And where it was grace, that was where it was costly. That was the secret of the Reformation gospel, the secret of the justification of the sinner.

Nonetheless, what emerged victorious from Reformation history was not Luther's recognition of pure, costly grace, but the alert