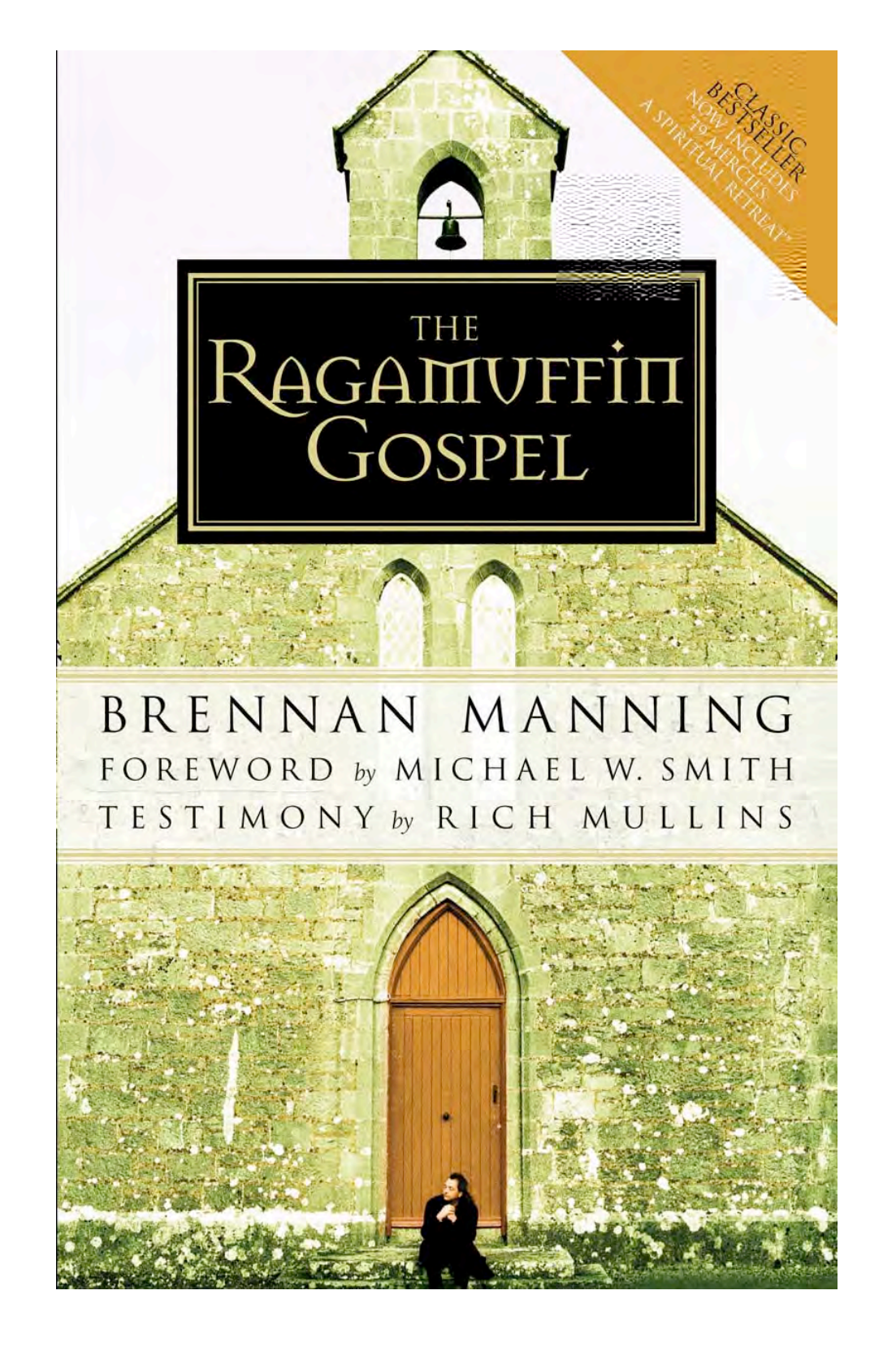


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THE
RAGAMUFFIN
GOSPEL

BRENNAN MANNING

FOREWORD *by* MICHAEL W. SMITH

TESTIMONY *by* RICH MULLINS

“Brennan Manning does a masterful job of blowing the dust off of shop-worn theology and allowing God’s grace to do what only God’s grace can do—amaze.”

—MAX LUCADO

Bestselling author of
Come Thirsty and *The Gift for All People*

“I found deep comfort in realizing that Jesus loves even me, a ragamuffin, just as I am and not as I should be; that he accepts me, though I am most unacceptable. I came to this book hungry; I tasted and saw afresh that our God truly is good and that He is, after all, for us.”

—MICHAEL CARD

Musician, recording artist, and author

“So much religion is conveyed to us as bad news or bland news that we are immensely grateful when it is spoken freshly as good news. This is a zestful and accurate portrayal that tells us unmistakably that the gospel is good, dazzlingly good.”

—EUGENE PETERSON

Author of *The Message*

THE
RAGAMUFFIN
GOSPEL

BRENNAN MANNING



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FOREWORD

by Michael W. Smith

I probably first heard the word *ragamuffin* while sitting in school listening with less-than-rapt attention to an English teacher reading from a Dickens novel or some other three-inch-thick book. The word really didn't grab my attention.

The next time the word came into my life was through music. My friend and fellow singer-songwriter Rich Mullins assembled a ragtag crew of musician friends and dubbed them the Ragamuffin Band. They celebrated the unconditional love of God, and the more their lives and music exemplified the idea of ragamuffinness, the more intriguing and appealing that word became to me.

Then I discovered Brennan Manning's *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, the same rich treasure chest where Rich had found the word. The first time I sat down with the book, I devoured it. Between the words of its pages I found a new freedom. I

discovered how little I had to do to deserve and receive the love of God and that He loved me more than I had ever imagined. Suddenly, instead of fearing and denying all of my real or imagined shortcomings, I could embrace my humanness. I could see God pursuing me through it and in spite of it.

Here was the purest picture I'd ever seen of God's relentless pursuit of His raggedy creation. Not that I could sin more so grace might abound (see Romans 6:15), but grace abounded more because I could find it in the darkness as much as in the light. God wanted me just as I am. I am loved. Brennan took every cliché I had ever spouted or had had spouted at me and turned it into gold.

Ever since that first magical moment of discovery when the radical message of the unconditional, immeasurable, life-changing love of God jumped out at me from the pages of *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, I couldn't wait to tell everyone about it. I can't even remember how many copies I have given away. Much like the gospel, once it captures your heart, you can't wait to have it embrace everyone else's.

Since then I've met hundreds of other *Ragamuffin* fans. Our stories are all pretty much the same. For the first time in our walks of faith, we found something so old and so basic that it seemed stunningly new and profound. We are all ragamuffins, and we are all endlessly wrapped in God's arms of grace.

Recently I attended a two-day retreat led by Brennan Manning. Brennan's gentle spirit was the perfect reflection of what I needed to learn, and the retreat was a refreshing time of reminding us of the truth that God is always *with* us and *for* us. The touchstone was, "Abba, I belong to you." Lovingly,

Brennan drilled into us that message—the father-love and acceptance we are so prone to forget. I found myself repeating those words over and over again long after the weekend had passed. It was not unlike the weeks after I first read *The Ragamuffin Gospel*. I found myself marveling out loud at those wonderful, powerful glimpses of the Creator and His unfathomable love for me.

Some books are a great read. Some have taught me life-long lessons that have made my life more of what I'm sure God intended it to be. And, of course, some have impressed my friends but gathered dust on my shelves. *The Ragamuffin Gospel* was and is different. It transformed me. I will never be the same.

Don't let the cover fool you: This is a dangerous book. It will shake you to your core and shuffle every idea you've neatly arranged in your brain. As for me, I welcomed the intrusion.

Thank you, Brennan, for awakening the ragamuffin in all of us. And to you lucky readers about to plunge in, drink deeply. You are in for an incredible experience!

TESTIMONY

by Rich Mullins

I owe Brennan Manning thirty dollars for lecture tapes I bought from him on an IOU. I'm not writing this testimony because of that debt. I simply mention it because indebtedness is a condition indicative of ragamuffins—a condition we all share, until we lose ourselves in the liberating, healing, invigorating truth to which these pages bear testimony.

My introduction to Brennan Manning's work came on a drive south from Manhattan, Kansas, through the edge of the Flinthills. It is a beautiful drive, best accompanied by the music of Aaron Copeland. Or by pure silence. When a friend put a tape of one of Manning's lectures in my truck's tape player, I objected. But my friend said, "Just give it ten minutes."

Five minutes later, I steered the truck onto the shoulder of the road. My eyes were so full of tears, I could not see to drive.

I have attended church regularly since I was less than a week

old. I've listened to sermons about virtue, sermons against vice. I have heard about money, time management, tithing, abstinence, and generosity. I've listened to thousands of sermons. But I could count on one hand the number that were a simple proclamation of the gospel of Christ.

That proclamation is the message I heard that day. And it did what the gospel can't help but do: It broke the power of mere "moralistic religiosity" in my life and revived a deeper acceptance that had long ago withered in me.

In our society, we tend to swear unyielding allegiance to a rigid position, confusing that action with finding an authentic connection to a life-giving Spirit. We miss the gospel of Christ: the good news that, although the holy and all-powerful God knows we are dust, He still stoops to breathe into us the breath of life—to bring to our wounds the balm of acceptance and love. No other author has articulated this message more simply or beautifully than Brennan Manning.

I owe Brennan Manning thirty dollars, and I expect to get it to him soon. But I owe him an even bigger debt for the freedom he helped me find through this book . . . and the greatest debt of all to the God whose grace extends to—and especially for—the ragamuffins of this world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Evelyn Underhill said, “Spiritual reading is, or at least can be, second only to prayer as a developer and support of the inner life.” And *The Message of the Wesleys* contains this striking sentence: “It cannot be that people should grow in grace unless they give themselves to reading.” Surely a gracious God provides for the illiterate in other ways, but for most of us, the Scriptures and varied spiritual writings guide us to a deeper understanding of the truth that sets us free.

Humbly and happily, I express my gratitude to several Christian authors upon whom I have relied for deeper insight into Jesus Christ and the gospel of grace: Edward Schillebeeckx, Walter Burghardt, Hans Küng, Donald McCullough, Leonard Foley, Eugene Kennedy, Albert Nolan, Jaroslav Pelikan, Sean Caulfield, Anthony De Mello, Lloyd Ogilvie, and others quoted in these pages.

Finally, my thanks to John van Diest and Liz Heaney, whose enthusiasm over the first few pages of this book fueled the desire to finish it.

A WORD BEFORE

The Ragamuffin Gospel was written with a specific reading audience in mind.

This book is not for the superspiritual.

It is not for muscular Christians who have made John Wayne, and not Jesus, their hero.

It is not for academics who would imprison Jesus in the ivory tower of exegesis.

It is not for noisy, feel-good folks who manipulate Christianity into a naked appeal to emotion.

It is not for hooded mystics who want magic in their religion.

It is not for Alleluia Christians who live only on the mountaintop and have never visited the valley of desolation.

It is not for the fearless and tearless.

It is not for red-hot zealots who boast with the rich young ruler of the Gospels, "All these commandments I have kept from my youth."

It is not for the complacent who hoist over their shoulders

a tote bag of honors, diplomas, and good works, actually believing they have it made.

It is not for legalists who would rather surrender control of their souls to rules than run the risk of living in union with Jesus.

If anyone is still reading along, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* was written for the bedraggled, beat-up, and burnt-out.

It is for the sorely burdened who are still shifting the heavy suitcase from one hand to the other.

It is for the wobbly and weak-kneed who know they don't have it all together and are too proud to accept the handout of amazing grace.

It is for inconsistent, unsteady disciples whose cheese is falling off their cracker.

It is for poor, weak, sinful men and women with hereditary faults and limited talents.

It is for earthen vessels who shuffle along on feet of clay.

It is for the bent and the bruised who feel that their lives are a grave disappointment to God.

It is for smart people who know they are stupid and honest disciples who admit they are scalawags.

The Ragamuffin Gospel is a book I wrote for myself and anyone who has grown weary and discouraged along the Way.

—Brennan Manning

Chapter One

SOMETHING IS RADICALLY WRONG

*O*n a blustery October night in a church outside Minneapolis, several hundred believers had gathered for a three-day seminar. I began with a one-hour presentation on the gospel of grace and the reality of salvation. Using Scripture, story, symbolism, and personal experience, I focused on the total sufficiency of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ on Calvary. The service ended with a song and a prayer.

Leaving the church by a side door, the pastor turned to his associate and fumed, “Humph, that airhead didn’t say one thing about what we have to do to earn our salvation!”

Something is radically wrong.

The bending of the mind by the powers of this world has

twisted the gospel of grace into religious bondage and distorted the image of God into an eternal, small-minded bookkeeper. The Christian community resembles a Wall Street exchange of works wherein the elite are honored and the ordinary ignored. Love is stifled, freedom shackled, and self-righteousness fastened. The institutional church has become a wounder of the healers rather than a healer of the wounded.

Put bluntly, the American church today accepts grace in theory but denies it in practice. We say we believe that the fundamental structure of reality is grace, not works—but our lives refute our faith. By and large, the gospel of grace is neither proclaimed, understood, nor lived. Too many Christians are living in the house of fear and not in the house of love.

Our culture has made the word *grace* impossible to understand. We resonate to slogans such as:

“There’s no free lunch.”

“You get what you deserve.”

“You want money? Work for it.”

“You want love? Earn it.”

“You want mercy? Show you deserve it.”

“Do unto others before they do unto you.”

“Watch out for welfare lines, the shiftless street people, free hot dogs at school, affluent students with federal loans—it’s a con game.”

“By all means, give others what they deserve but not one penny more.”

A friend told me she overheard a pastor say to a child, “God loves good little boys.” As I listen to sermons with their pointed emphasis on personal effort—no pain, no gain—I

get the impression that a do-it-yourself spirituality is the American fashion.

Though the Scriptures insist on God's initiative in the work of salvation—that by grace we are saved, that the Tremendous Lover has taken to the chase—our spirituality often starts with self, not God. Personal responsibility has replaced personal response. We talk about acquiring virtue as if it were a skill that can be attained, like good handwriting or a well-grooved golf swing. In the penitential seasons we focus on overcoming our weaknesses, getting rid of our hang-ups, and reaching Christian maturity. We sweat through various spiritual exercises as if they were designed to produce a Christian Charles Atlas. Though lip service is paid to the gospel of grace, many Christians live as if only personal discipline and self-denial will mold the perfect me. The emphasis is on what I do rather than on what God is doing. In this curious process God is a benign old spectator in the bleachers who cheers when I show up for morning quiet time. We transfer the Horatio Alger legend of the self-made man into our relationship with God. As we read Psalm 123, “Just as the eyes of slave are on their masters' hand, or the eyes of a slave-girl on the hand of her mistress,” we experience a vague sense of existential guilt. Our eyes are not on God. At heart we are practicing Pelagians. We believe that we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps—indeed, we can do it ourselves.

Sooner or later we are confronted with the painful truth of our inadequacy and insufficiency. Our security is shattered and our bootstraps are cut. Once the fervor has passed, weakness and infidelity appear. We discover our inability to add even a

single inch to our spiritual stature. There begins a long winter of discontent that eventually flowers into gloom, pessimism, and a subtle despair—subtle because it goes unrecognized, unnoticed, and therefore unchallenged. It takes the form of boredom, drudgery. We are overcome by the ordinariness of life, by daily duties done over and over again. We secretly admit that the call of Jesus is too demanding, that surrender to the Spirit is beyond our reach. We start acting like everyone else. Life takes on a joyless, empty quality. We begin to resemble the leading character in Eugene O’Neill’s play *The Great God Brown*: “Why am I afraid to dance, I who love music and rhythm and grace and song and laughter? Why am I afraid to live, I who love life and the beauty of flesh and the living colors of the earth and sky and sea? Why am I afraid to love, I who love love?”¹

Something is radically wrong.

Our huffing and puffing to impress God, our scrambling for brownie points, our thrashing about trying to fix ourselves while hiding our pettiness and wallowing in guilt are nauseating to God and are a flat denial of the gospel of grace.

Our approach to the Christian life is as absurd as the enthusiastic young man who had just received his plumber’s license and was taken to see Niagara Falls. He studied it for a minute and then said, “I think I can fix this.”²

The word itself, *grace*, has become trite and debased through misuse and overuse. It does not move us the way it moved our early Christian ancestors. In some European countries certain high ecclesiastical officials are still called “Your Grace.” Sportswriters spoke of Michael Jordan’s “easy

grace,” while business mogul Donald Trump has been described as “lacking in grace.” A new perfume appears with “Grace” on the label, and a child’s report card is called a “disgrace.” The word has lost its raw, imaginative power.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky caught the shock and scandal of the gospel of grace when he wrote:

At the last Judgment Christ will say to us, “Come, you also! Come, drunkards! Come, weaklings! Come, children of shame!” And he will say to us: “Vile beings, you who are in the image of the beast and bear his mark, but come all the same, you as well.” And the wise and prudent will say, “Lord, why do you welcome them?” And he will say: “If I welcome them, you wise men, if I welcome them, you prudent men, it is because not one of them has ever been judged worthy.” And he will stretch out his arms, and we will fall at his feet, and we will cry out sobbing, and then we will understand all, we will understand the Gospel of grace! Lord, your Kingdom come!³

I believe the Reformation actually began the day Martin Luther was praying over the meaning of Paul’s assertion that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God to us—it shows how faith leads to faith. In other words, the righteous shall find life through faith (see Romans 1:17). Like many Christians today, Luther wrestled through the night with this core question: How could the gospel of Christ be truly called “good news” if God is a righteous judge who rewards the good and punishes the evil? Did

Jesus really have to come to reveal that terrifying message? How could the revelation of God in Christ Jesus be accurately called “news” since the Old Testament carried the same theme, or for that matter, “good” with the threat of punishment hanging like a dark cloud over the valley of history?

But as Jaroslav Pelikan notes:

Luther suddenly broke through to the insight that the “righteousness of God” that Paul spoke of in this passage was not the righteousness by which God was righteous in himself (that would be passive righteousness) but the righteousness by which, for the sake of Jesus Christ, God made sinners righteous (that is, active righteousness) through the forgiveness of sins in justification. When he discovered that, Luther said it was as though the very gates of Paradise had been opened to him.⁴

What a stunning truth!

“Justification by grace through faith” is the theologian’s learned phrase for what Chesterton once called “the furious love of God.” He is not moody or capricious; He knows no seasons of change. He has a single relentless stance toward us: He loves us. He is the only God man has ever heard of who loves sinners. False gods—the gods of human manufacturing—despise sinners, but the Father of Jesus loves all, no matter what they do. But of course, this is almost too incredible for us to accept. Nevertheless, the central affirmation of the Reformation stands: Through no merit of ours, but by His mercy, we have been restored to a right relationship with God through the life,

death, and resurrection of His beloved Son. This is the Good News, the gospel of grace.

With his characteristic *joie de vivre*, Robert Capon puts it this way:

The Reformation was a time when men went blind, staggering drunk because they had discovered, in the dusty basement of late medievalism, a whole cellarful of fifteen-hundred-year-old, two-hundred-proof grace—of bottle after bottle of pure distillate of Scripture, one sip of which would convince anyone that God saves us single-handedly. The word of the gospel—after all those centuries of trying to lift yourself into heaven by worrying about the perfection of your bootstraps—suddenly turned out to be a flat announcement that the saved were home before they started... Grace has to be drunk straight: no water, no ice, and certainly no ginger ale; neither goodness, nor badness, nor the flowers that bloom in the spring of super spirituality could be allowed to enter into the case.⁵

Matthew 9:9–13 captures a lovely glimpse of the gospel of grace:

As Jesus was walking on from there he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. Now while he was at table in the house it happened that a number of tax collectors and sinners came to sit at the table with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees

saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When he heard this he replied, “It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. Go and learn the meaning of the words: Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice. And indeed I came to call not the upright, but sinners.”

Here is revelation bright as the evening star: Jesus comes for sinners, for those as outcast as tax collectors and for those caught up in squalid choices and failed dreams. He comes for corporate executives, street people, superstars, farmers, hookers, addicts, IRS agents, AIDS victims, and even used-car salesmen. Jesus not only talks with these people but dines with them—fully aware that His table fellowship with sinners will raise the eyebrows of religious bureaucrats who hold up the robes and insignia of their authority to justify their condemnation of the truth and their rejection of the gospel of grace.

This passage should be read, reread, and memorized. Every Christian generation tries to dim the blinding brightness of its meaning because the gospel seems too good to be true. We think salvation belongs to the proper and pious, to those who stand at a safe distance from the back alleys of existence, clucking their judgments at those who have been soiled by life. In the name of Grace, what has been the verdict of the Christian community on the stained life of the late Rock Hudson? To the disclosure (the \$4.5 million settlement to his lover Marc Christian notwithstanding) that he called a priest to his deathbed, confessed his sins, and cried out to God for forgiveness?

Jesus, who forgave the sins of the paralytic (thereby claim-

ing divine power), proclaims that He has invited sinners and not the self-righteous to His table. The Greek verb used here, *kalein*, has the sense of inviting an honored guest to dinner. In effect, Jesus says the kingdom of His Father is not a subdivision for the self-righteous nor for those who feel they possess the state secret of salvation. The kingdom is not an exclusive, well-trimmed suburb with snobbish rules about who can live there. No, it is for a larger, homelier, less self-conscious caste of people who understand they are sinners because they have experienced the yaw and pitch of moral struggle.

These are the sinner-guests invited by Jesus to closeness with Him around the banquet table. It remains a startling story to those who never understand that the men and women who are truly filled with light are those who have gazed deeply into the darkness of their imperfect existence. Perhaps it was after meditating on this passage that Morton Kelsey wrote, “The church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners.”

The Good News means we can stop lying to ourselves. The sweet sound of amazing grace saves us from the necessity of self-deception. It keeps us from denying that though Christ was victorious, the battle with lust, greed, and pride still rages within us. As a sinner who has been redeemed, I can acknowledge that I am often unloving, irritable, angry, and resentful with those closest to me. When I go to church I can leave my white hat at home and admit I have failed. God not only loves me as I am, but also knows me as I am. Because of this I don't need to apply spiritual cosmetics to make myself presentable to Him. I can accept ownership of my poverty and powerlessness and neediness.

As C. S. Lewis says in *The Four Loves*, “Grace substitutes a full, childlike and delighted acceptance of our need, a joy in total dependence. The good man is sorry for the sins which have increased his need. He is not entirely sorry for the fresh need they have produced.”

As the gospel of grace lays hold of us, something is radically right. We are living in truth and reality. We become as honest as the ninety-two-year-old priest who was venerated by everybody in town for his holiness. He was also a member of the Rotary Club. Every time the club met, he would be there, always on time and always seated in his favorite spot in a corner of the room.

One day the priest disappeared. It was as if he had vanished into thin air. The townsfolk searched all over and could find no trace of him. But the following month, when the Rotary Club met, he was there as usual sitting in his corner.

“Father,” everyone cried, “where have you been?”

“I just served a thirty-day sentence in prison.”

“In prison?” they cried. “Father, you couldn’t hurt a fly. What happened?”

“It’s a long story,” said the priest, “but briefly, this is what happened. I bought myself a train ticket to go into the city. I was standing on the platform waiting for the train to arrive when this stunningly beautiful girl appears on the arm of a policeman. She looked at me, turned to the cop and said, ‘He did it. I’m certain he’s the one who did it.’ Well, to tell you the truth, I was so flattered I pleaded guilty.”⁶

There’s a touch of vanity in even the holiest men and women. They see no reason to deny it. And they know that reality bites back if it isn’t respected.

When I get honest, I admit I am a bundle of paradoxes. I believe and I doubt, I hope and get discouraged, I love and I hate, I feel bad about feeling good, I feel guilty about not feeling guilty. I am trusting and suspicious. I am honest and I still play games. Aristotle said I am a rational animal; I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer.

To live by grace means to acknowledge my whole life story, the light side and the dark. In admitting my shadow side, I learn who I am and what God's grace means. As Thomas Merton put it, "A saint is not someone who is good but who experiences the goodness of God."

The gospel of grace nullifies our adulation of televangelists, charismatic superstars, and local church heroes. It obliterates the two-class citizenship theory operative in many American churches. For grace proclaims the awesome truth that all is gift. All that is good is ours, not by right, but by the sheer bounty of a gracious God. While there is much we may have earned—our degree, our salary, our home and garden, a Miller Lite, and a good night's sleep—all this is possible only because we have been given so much: life itself, eyes to see and hands to touch, a mind to shape ideas, and a heart to beat with love. We have been given God in our souls and Christ in our flesh. We have the power to believe where others deny, to hope where others despair, to love where others hurt. This and so much more is sheer gift; it is not reward for our faithfulness, our generous disposition, or our heroic life of prayer. Even our fidelity is a gift. "If we but turn to God," said St. Augustine, "that itself is a gift of God." My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it.

In my ministry as a vagabond evangelist, I have extolled certain saints and contemporary Christians, speaking of at what cost they have struggled to surpass lesser men and women. O God, what madness I have preached in sermons! The Good News of the gospel of grace cries out: We are all, equally, privileged but unentitled beggars at the door of God's mercy!

Besides, as Henri Nouwen notes, the greater part of God's work in the world may go unnoticed. There are a number of people who have become famous or widely known for their ministries, but much of God's saving activity in our history could remain completely unknown. That is a mystery difficult to grasp in an age that attaches so much importance to publicity. We tend to think that the more people know and talk about something, the more important it must be.

In Luke 18, a rich young man comes to Jesus, asking what he must *do* to inherit eternal life. He wants to be in the spotlight. It is no coincidence that Luke juxtaposes the passage of Jesus and the children immediately preceding the verses on the young aristocrat. Children contrast with the rich man simply because there is no question of their having yet been able to merit anything. Jesus' point is, there is nothing that any of us can do to inherit the kingdom. We must simply receive it like little children. And little children haven't done anything. The New Testament world was not sentimental about children and had no illusion about any pretended innate goodness in them. Jesus is not suggesting that heaven is a huge playground for Cajun infants. Children are our model because they have no claim on heaven. If they are close to God, it is because they are incompetent, not because

they are innocent. If they receive anything, it can only be as a gift.

Paul writes in Ephesians, “Because it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith; not by anything of your own, but by a gift from God; not by anything that you have done, so that nobody can claim the credit” (2:8–9).

If a random sampling of one thousand American Christians were taken today, the majority would define faith as belief in the existence of God. In earlier times it did not take faith to believe that God existed—almost everybody took that for granted. Rather, faith had to do with one’s relationship to God—whether one trusted in God. The difference between faith as “belief in something that may or may not exist” and faith as “trusting in God” is enormous. The first is a matter of the head, the second a matter of the heart. The first can leave us unchanged; the second intrinsically brings change.⁷

Such is the faith described by Paul Tillich in his famous work *The Shaking of the Foundations*:

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life... It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you

do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything, do not perform anything, do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.” If that happens to us, we experience grace.⁸

And Grace calls out, *You are not just a disillusioned old man who may die soon, a middle-aged woman stuck in a job and desperately wanting to get out, a young person feeling the fire in the belly begin to grow cold. You may be insecure, inadequate, mistaken, or potbellied. Death, panic, depression, and disillusionment may be near you. But you are not just that. You are accepted.* Never confuse your perception of yourself with the mystery that you really are accepted.

Paul writes, “The Lord said, ‘My grace is enough for you: my power is at its best in weakness.’ So I shall be very happy to make my weaknesses my special boast so that the power of Christ may stay over me” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Whatever our failings may be, we need not lower our eyes in the presence of Jesus. Unlike Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame, we need not hide all that is ugly and repulsive in us. Jesus comes not for the super-spiritual but for the wobbly and the weak-kneed who know they don’t have it all together, and who are not too proud to accept the handout of amazing grace. As we glance up, we are astonished to find the eyes of Jesus open with wonder, deep with understanding, and gentle with compassion.

Something is radically wrong when the local church rejects a person accepted by Jesus—when a harsh, judgmental, and

unforgiving sentence is passed on homosexuals; when a divorcée is denied communion; when the child of a prostitute is refused baptism; when an unlaicized priest is forbidden the sacraments. Jesus comes to the ungodly, even on Sunday morning. His coming ends ungodliness and makes us worthy. Otherwise, we are establishing at the heart of Christianity an utterly ungodly and unworthy preoccupation with works.

Jesus sat down at table with anyone who wanted to be present, including those who were banished from decent homes. In the sharing of a meal they received consideration instead of the expected condemnation. A merciful acquittal instead of a hasty verdict of guilty. Amazing grace instead of universal disgrace. Here is a very practical demonstration of the law of grace—a new chance in life.

Any church that will not accept that it consists of sinful men and women, and exists for them, implicitly rejects the gospel of grace. As Hans Küng says:

It deserves neither God's mercy nor men's trust. The church must constantly be aware that its faith is weak, its knowledge dim, its profession of faith halting, that there is not a single sin or failing which it has not in one way or another been guilty of. *And though it is true that the church must always dissociate itself from sin, it can never have any excuse for keeping any sinners at a distance.* If the church remains self-righteously aloof from failures, irreligious and immoral people, it cannot enter justified into God's kingdom. But if it is constantly aware of its guilt and sin, it can live in joyous awareness of

forgiveness. The promise has been given to it that anyone who humbles himself will be exalted.⁹

The story goes that a public sinner was excommunicated and forbidden entry to the church. He took his woes to God.

“They won’t let me in, Lord, because I am a sinner.”

“What are you complaining about?” said God. “They won’t let Me in either.”

Often hobbling through our church doors on Sunday morning comes grace on crutches—sinners still unable to throw away their false supports and stand upright in the freedom of the children of God. Yet their mere presence in the church on Sunday morning is a flickering candle representing a desire to maintain contact with God. To douse the flame is to plunge them into a world of spiritual darkness.

There is a myth flourishing in the church today that has caused incalculable harm: once converted, fully converted. In other words, once I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, an irreversible, sinless future beckons. Discipleship will be an untarnished success story; life will be an unbroken upward spiral toward holiness. Tell that to poor Peter who, after three times professing his love for Jesus on the beach and after receiving the fullness of the Spirit at Pentecost, was still jealous of Paul’s apostolic success.

Often I have been asked, “Brennan, how is it possible that you became an alcoholic after you got saved?” It is possible because I got battered and bruised by loneliness and failure; because I got discouraged, uncertain, guilt-ridden, and took my eyes off Jesus. Because the Christ-encounter did not transfigure

me into an angel. Because justification by grace through faith means I have been set in right relationship with God, not made the equivalent of a patient etherized on a table.

We want ever-sharp spirituality—push, pull, click, click, one saint that quick—and attempt to cultivate a particular virtue at a given point in time. Prudence in January, humility in February, fortitude in March, temperance in April. Score cards are provided for toting up gains and losses. The losses should diminish if you expect to meet charity in May. Sometimes May never comes. For many Christians, life is a long January.

According to an ancient Christian legend, a saint once knelt down and prayed, “Dear God, I have only one desire in life. Give me the grace of never offending You again.”

When God heard this, He started laughing out loud. “That’s what they all ask for. But if I granted everyone this grace, tell Me, whom would I forgive?”

Because salvation is by grace through faith, I believe that among the countless number of people standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palms in their hands (see Revelation 7:9), I shall see the prostitute from the Kit-Kat Ranch in Carson City, Nevada, who tearfully told me she could find no other employment to support her two-year-old son. I shall see the woman who had an abortion and is haunted by guilt and remorse but did the best she could faced with grueling alternatives; the businessman besieged with debt who sold his integrity in a series of desperate transactions; the insecure clergyman addicted to being liked, who never challenged his people from the pulpit and longed for unconditional love; the sexually abused teen molested by his

father and now selling his body on the street, who, as he falls asleep each night after his last “trick,” whispers the name of the unknown God he learned about in Sunday school; the deathbed convert who for decades had his cake and ate it, broke every law of God and man, wallowed in lust, and raped the earth.

“But how?” we ask.

Then the voice says, “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

There they are. There *we* are—the multitude who so wanted to be faithful, who at times got defeated, soiled by life, and bested by trials, wearing the bloodied garments of life’s tribulations, but through it all clung to the faith.

My friends, if this is not good news to you, you have never understood the gospel of grace.