

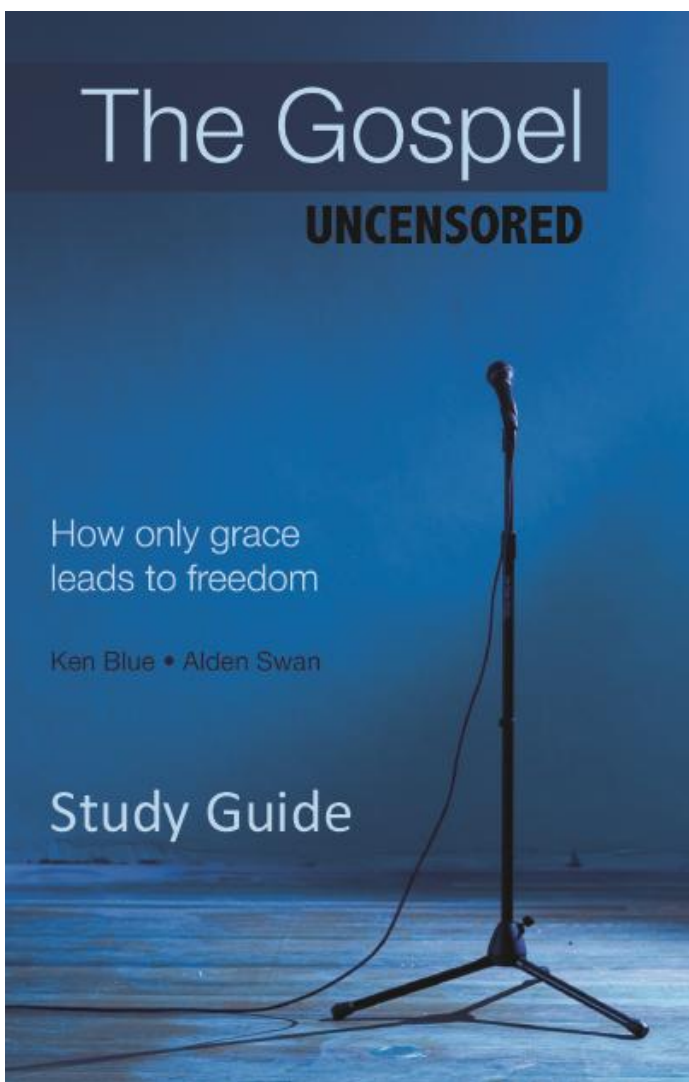
The Gospel

UNCENSORED

How only grace
leads to freedom

Ken Blue • Alden Swan

Study Guide



The Gospel **UNCENSORED**

How only grace leads to freedom

STUDY GUIDE

Alden Swan

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How to use this Study Guide

Since I have just written a book on grace and freedom, I won't give you a lot of rules here about how to use the study guide! But, I will give you a few ideas which hopefully you will find helpful.

The Study Guide is meant to provide "bonus" information to the text, not necessarily comment on the text directly. Often it will address a section's theme from a slightly different angle. The Discussion Questions given for each section will typically relate to the text of the book, not the additional thoughts provided in the Study Guide. Many of the questions are meant to stimulate thinking and discussion beyond the pages of the book. Occasionally a question is designed to get you thinking about the next chapter.

The Study Guide is divided up into 20 sections. For individual use, one option is to read the Study Guide section and questions first, then go back to the questions after you've read the applicable section. Or you may choose to read the Study Guide and questions after the chapter.

Ideas for Small Group Leaders

For church and small group use, you can easily use the book for a more formal 10-week study by doing two Study Guide sections per week. Group leaders may want all participants to have read the Study Guide and questions ahead of time, so you are ready to discuss the questions. Or, some leaders will prefer to use the guide to assist in leading the group discussion, picking and choosing discussion questions, or asking their own questions.

For those who are perhaps new or inexperienced at facilitating discussion groups, a facilitator's role is not to teach, but to facilitate and guide discussion. You may find the Study Guide helpful to provide some introductory comments—you may even choose to read one of the Study Guide sections out loud. Here are some other ideas you could try:

- Ask one or more participants to summarize a section or chapter (be careful not to put people “on the spot”).
- Ask one or more participants what in the chapter stood out to them, or what they agreed or disagreed with (always allow a certain amount of dissent, unless the person is trying to “steal” control of the group).

- Ask people to read a particular section that stood out to them.
- Ask follow-up questions, using opening phrases like:
 - Let's discuss why...
 - Tell us what you mean...
 - Tell us why you agree (or disagree) with...
 - What do you think about this statement (reading from the book)?
 - Let's discuss _____.
 - So what I hear you say is (rephrasing a person's comment to verify their meaning).
 - I'm wondering...
 - Tell us about that (in reference to what someone just stated).
- Keep a list of any questions raised in the group that need more research or follow up discussion.
- Keep your eye on the time, having a closing thought prepared for the group. This could be a summary of the material, a summary of any issues to follow-up, and/or a question for the group to consider as they read the next week's readings.
- Don't forget to have fun!

The 10-Week Schedule:

<u>Week</u>	<u>Read Chapters</u>	<u>Study Guide Sections</u>
One	0, 1	1, 2
Two	2, 3	3, 4
Three	4	5, 6
Four	5, 6	7, 8
Five	7	9, 10
Six	8, 9	11, 12
Seven	10, 11	13, 14
Eight	12, 13	15, 16
Nine	14, 15	17, 18
Ten	16, 17	19, 20

1. Chapter 1—Ken’s Story (pp 5-11)

In this chapter, Ken starts out telling his own story of becoming a Christian while in the Army, and how after becoming involved in “normal” church life, he lost his joy. The things that once gave him life—reading the Bible, prayer, evangelism—became drudgery when he was told that these were expectations, requirements for being “good” Christians.

This is essentially the same as the girl’s story that Ken tells on page 10. What once was life turns into—literally—the walking dead (this is a *real* zombie story).

It is perhaps somewhat ironic that blessings (things that bring us life) can be turned into curses (things that take life *from* us) when they become requirements. Moving from grace to legalism actually reverses the flow of life. What once brought life *to* us begins to suck the very life *out* of us, until there’s nothing left but empty legalism, or as Jesus put it, white-washed tombs (Matt. 23:27).

Discuss:

1. Have you had a similar experience, where something you once enjoyed became drudgery, where joy turned into dread?
2. What was it that caused the change?
3. For those raised in the church, it's possible to grow up always seeing Christianity as a collection of things we have to do. What can the church to do change this?

2. Chapter 1—Dear Galatians ... (pp 11-18)

As mentioned in the book, Paul's letter to the Galatians was an *ad hoc* letter; that is, it was a letter written in response to a specific, current situation. This makes the letter very interesting, as Paul wasn't simply covering a lot of theological ground or bringing some general encouragement; he was writing because he *had* to. There is a sense of urgency here. We get the feeling that if he could have popped over to see these churches in person, he would have. But, travel (or writing, for that matter) wasn't easy in Paul's day.

Background on Galatia

Because Paul addressed his letter only to "the churches in Galatia," we are not sure specifically the churches to which Paul was writing. Originally it was thought to refer to a northern area in Asia Minor, however in recent years most scholars believe Paul was writing to the area which became the Roman province of Galatia. Assuming the "southern theory" is correct, Galatians would have been the earliest of Paul's letters, perhaps written in 47-49 AD.

The "southern" Galatians lived in an area which is now central Turkey. *Galatia* essentially means

“Gaul of the east.” Gaul (located in what is now France and Belgium) and Galatia were settlements of the Gauls, a light-skinned Celtic people who in the earlier days practiced Druidism, including human sacrifice and head-hunting. They were defeated by the Romans a couple of centuries BC and by the time Paul visited Galatia, it had been a Roman territory, practicing a form of Roman polytheism. However, they had retained much of the Celtic language and culture.

Paul presumably visited this area and established these churches on his first missionary trip with Barnabas. This letter was possibly written while on his 2nd missionary trip, possibly from Corinth, some time before the meeting in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15.

Discuss:

1. Try to imagine yourself as one of the Galatian people, where your entire church community had been Christians for possibly no more than 2-5 years. You have no radio or TV, no internet, *and no New Testament*. What was your culture like? How would that impact your receptivity to “important” teachers from Jerusalem?

2. Why do you think Paul expected the Galatians to be able to fend off this false teaching?
3. It is the books' contention that the contemporary evangelical church is in danger of losing the Gospel. Do you agree? If something *can* be added to the simple Gospel message that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus alone, what do you think *could* be added?

3. Chapter 2 – The Trouble with the Galatians

Luther published two commentaries on Galatians: one in 1519, taken from his 1516-1517 lectures, and the later 1535 edition which is based on lectures given in 1531. The fully translated version of the latter edition is something like 1500 pages long. This 2nd Commentary is interesting because Luther teaches Galatians as it relates to Luther's present day situation.

Chapter 1 quotes from Martin Luther's introduction to his 1535 Commentary on Galatians:

...we have to fear, as the greatest and nearest danger, that Satan take from us the pure doctrine of faith and bring into the Church again the doctrine of works and men's traditions.

This is the issue we will be dealing with, the "pure doctrine of faith" versus "the doctrine of works and men's traditions." To Paul, and to Luther, the difference was life and death, and that is not just being dramatic. Regarding verse 7 of Galatians chapter 1, he writes,

To paraphrase this sentence: "These false apostles do not merely trouble you, they abolish Christ's Gospel. They act as if they were the only true Gospel-preachers. For all that they muddle Law and Gospel. As a result they pervert the Gospel. Either Christ must live and the Law perish, or the Law remains and Christ must perish; Christ and the Law cannot dwell side by side in the conscience. It is either grace or law. To muddle the two is to eliminate the Gospel of Christ entirely."

It is important as we deal with the content of Paul's letter that we catch his sense of urgency. Paul is convinced that his message is literally a matter of life and death; adopting practices such as circumcision or eating kosher—if they're taught as requirements for Christianity—kills the Gospel. We get the feeling that salvation itself is at stake; why else would Paul suggest that castration or even eternal damnation was a fitting punishment for those "apostles" leading the Galatians astray?

Discuss:

1. What are some things that are taught today as being essential to be a Christian (or be a “good” Christian)?
2. In our current “age of tolerance,” we might be inclined to let many questionable teachings and practices slide. Do you think we should be as upset as Paul was about teachings being added to the simple Gospel message of faith in Jesus alone?
3. Paul insists that adding anything to the simple “Jesus plus nothing” Gospel creates a different gospel entirely. Can you identify any “other gospels” that you have heard?

4. Chapter 3—The Gospel: Jesus Plus Nothing

We are all, I'm sure, familiar with basic math. We know, for example, that $4+0=4$. Now, if I were to try to add something to improve on this equation, it may look like this: $4+1=4$. Did I somehow improve the number "4" by adding to it? No, of course not. By adding even the small number 1 to the first part of the equation, I now have a different answer. 5 is not an improvement over 4, it's a different number:

- 5, for example, is no longer evenly divisible by 2.
- Its square root isn't 2.
- 5 is not $\frac{1}{2}$ of 8.

I think you get my drift.

The equation "Jesus+0=The Gospel" is pretty straightforward. As with my example, adding even one little thing doesn't improve on the Gospel, it creates a whole new gospel, with different properties. For one thing, this new gospel can't save you. It can't give you life. It has no power whatsoever to make you a more Christ-like person. It may make you *look* like a Christian; it might even make you look better than some Christians. But in

the end, you had the wrong answer, the wrong gospel.

Man's (or Satan's) religions all have one thing in common—they lay out certain expectations you have to fulfill in order to achieve whatever goal is promised, whether it is a new planet, 72 virgins, a higher caste next time around, heaven, or simply nothingness. The Christian Gospel stands alone in that salvation is offered to you as a gift—you can't find it in stores or on amazon.com—it must be given to you. And not only is it a gift, if you try to work for it, you lose it.

Discuss:

1. Try to write out the Gospel message without adding anything to it. What do you think of it? Does it differ from what you have been taught in the past?
2. If you're with a partner or in a group, exchange your "gospels" and discuss. Are they essentially the same?
3. Why is it that people would choose to follow a *religion*—that is, doing something to earn God's favor—rather than simply believe that we have God's favor simply by believing?

5. Chapter 4—Reasons we abandon the Gospel

(pp 43-48)

Most of us have at least heard of the TV game show, “Let’s Make A Deal.” On the show, audience members are seemingly chosen by how little self-respect they have (they dress in costume to attract the host’s attention) to be offered chances to trade a prize they can see for one that is hidden, either in a box, behind a curtain, or behind doors one, two or three. Suppose for a moment that the contestant, perhaps dressed as a large chicken, is shown a top-of-the-line food processor. It’s cool, but not that exciting. We can understand, then, when our very excitable chicken screams, “I’ll take door number two!” Whether they end up with a year’s supply of frozen chicken dinners or a new car, they’ve made a reasonable decision.

Now imagine that the next contestant, this one dressed as bunny rabbit, complete with fluffy tail, is given the Crown Jewels of England. He or she is then shown what’s under the box: It’s a jewelry-making kit, complete with a life-time supply of plastic “jewels” and settings. After a moment of apparent confusion and intense stress, our contestant turns away from the Crown Jewels and proudly points to the fake jewelry kit.

Okay, perhaps this is far-fetched. After all, no one—except perhaps someone who doesn't understand the value of real rubies and diamonds—would make such a choice. Would they?

As incredulous as this seems, however, this is the situation that we have with the Galatian churches, as well as with many others who chose various religious systems over the Gospel. I've been in many of these churches, and have known many of these people myself. And, they are reasonably intelligent, educated people! Why would anyone choose a false gospel of works and religion after seeing the glory of the One True Gospel?

Discuss:

1. Any of us who are leaders or parents will understand the first reason for abandoning grace: It is incredibly risky. If people have freedom, they can—and will—make mistakes. Think, for a moment, from the perspective of a pastor or leader: How can we dare teach people the truth about grace and freedom?
2. At what point do we “cross the line” into legalism?

3. How do we as Christians distinguish between the performance principle in life, and the truth that salvation and the Christian life are to be lived by grace?

6. Chapter 4—Reasons we abandon the Gospel (pp 48-56)

The parable we know as the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) is probably the most well-known of Jesus' parables. Many people don't realize, however, that the elder brother, who is only heard from in the last moments of the story, is really a central character. It was, in fact, the "elder brothers"—that is, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law— to whom Jesus was directing his parable.

The elder brothers are masters when it comes to performance, and love to tell the prodigals that they are failures. As long as the prodigals believe they're failures, the elder brothers are happy. They are, then, in control. But one thing elder brothers will never admit is that they, too, are failures. However, they can feel superior as long as there are prodigals around to compare themselves to.

But when God starts throwing parties for the prodigals, their game ends, and the elder sons are left with their hidden shame and failures. They can either humble themselves and join the party, or they can do more or try harder in an attempt to successfully perform to their own or someone else's standards.

There is no way to perform well enough; both the elder and the prodigal are failures in that respect. And, neither son gains the father's approval based on their performance; he simply loves them for who they are. The main difference between the two sons is that one parties, the other doesn't. Could the moral of the story be that Prodigal Sons have more fun (after they've come home, that is)?

The true moral becomes clear when we realize that "prodigal" doesn't mean wayward; it means "extravagant." We simply can't spend too much of the Father's resources; there's no end to God's grace.

Discuss:

1. Which of the five reasons for choosing trash over treasure (thinking back to the last section of the study guide) could you identify with (Risky, Performance, Shame, Affirmation, Too good to be true)?
2. Consider the Prodigal Son story; can you find each of the 5 reasons somewhere in the story?
3. Can you think of any other reasons?

4. The issue of “shame” is probably the hardest of the five to deal with, simply because of the nature of shame. If this is an issue for you, does placing yourself in the story of the Prodigal Son help in any way? (Note: It may be necessary to seek out a trusted friend or pastor for counseling and prayer.)

7. Chapter 5—The True Source of Authority

In our post-60's, post-modern society, the concept of authority presents different issues than it would have 60 or more years ago. Without doing a full analysis of how views of and responses to authority have changed over the years, I think it is safe to say that today we are less likely to accept authority today than our grandparents were. I also think that many times, contemporary books and movies read our contemporary views of authority into historical events. We must be cautious, then, as we look at the issue of authority in the Church. There is a fine line between reformation and rebellion.

The task before us is not to decide whether or not to submit to authority, but rather to discover where real authority lies. Many Christians have unfortunately elevated man's reason to a place of supreme importance; this is modernism at its core (as well as post-modernism). Scripture, then, along with the traditional teachings of the Church, are up for grabs. Meanwhile, other religious authorities have discovered that we actually *need* authority, and so convince followers to abandon reason altogether in favor of strange, manipulative authority structures.

Paul makes it clear that there is, indeed, an authority; however, rather than in structures or systems, spiritual authority lies in the Gospel message. Regarding himself, he stated that it didn't matter that Jesus had personally called him; if he diverted from the Gospel, he should be run out of town. Apostles carry no personal authority, and neither do prophets, priests, or angels. Leaders are to be treated like anyone else—and hopefully, that means respectfully and out of love.

Discuss:

1. How can we distinguish between organizational authority—that is, the necessary authority carried by people such as police, bosses, and parents—and the authority we are speaking of here?
2. What should be our attitude and behavior toward those who claim improper spiritual authority? (Back up your answers with scripture, if possible.)
3. Consider that since Pentecost, all believers have the Holy Spirit (that is, are “anointed”), not just a few as in the Old Testament. How does that change how we treat leaders and each other?

4. In preparation for Chapter 6, how can we know that the gospel that Paul preached to the Galatians was the correct, and authoritative, Gospel?

8. Chapter 6—The One True Gospel?

If you've ever served on a jury or watched an entire trial (or worse yet, had to be a party to a trial), you will understand what I'm about to explain. It's a very interesting phenomenon (if you aren't personally involved). In a civil trial, the plaintiff will present their side of the story, building a case for why they should prevail. If the plaintiff attorneys have done a halfway reasonable job, you should be convinced that they must be right—sometimes even if you're on the defense side! The trial is all but over, all is lost.

However, as soon as the defense starts to present their side, again, presuming they are competent, a completely different story will emerge. Suddenly, you aren't sure. Who is telling the truth? Is anyone telling the truth? Both sides seem so reasonable, by themselves. The most important thing about such a trial is the evidence; the support each side brings in that supports why they are correct.

Paul understood this. He was an educated guy, and skilled at arguing his points. However, he doesn't want the Galatians to believe him on his word alone; instead, he provides the Galatians with three specific reasons to show why his Gospel—that salvation as well as the Christian life is by

grace alone—is the only true Gospel. He wants the Galatians—and us—to be able to be certain of the Gospel.

His reasons are not carefully constructed theological arguments, nor are they simply authoritative declarations. In fact, he credits the source of his Gospel to divine revelation (how often have we heard that?). But then, he looks to the only Church authority at the time, the original Apostles, and again specifically with Peter. On one hand, divine revelation; on the other, church authority, subjecting themselves to *the* authority, the Gospel.

Discuss:

1. Divine revelation is certainly impressive. But considering everything from Joseph Smith's golden tablets to visions of a 900-foot Jesus, what makes Paul's Damascus Road experience (Acts 9) unique? Would we accept such a revelation today as truth?
2. Is there any other proof that you can think of that could be used to differentiate between the true Gospel and imposters?

3. Given today's disregard of both subjective experience and human authority structures, how do you think Paul's argument stands up today?

9. Chapter 7—Peter and Paul: Confrontation (pp 89-93)

If you're like many people, you unconsciously cringed when you read the word "confrontation." Confrontation and the related concept of conflict generally have negative connotations. It's my opinion that the reason for this is that confrontation demands far more of us than simply getting along. Getting along may be easier at the moment, but in the long run, it can be far more costly, especially if we are only agreeable on the surface. What we tend to do is *internalize* the conflict, to bottle it up inside rather than deal with it on the outside where it belongs, between two or more people. Confrontation requires that we care about *something*, and about *someone*.

The word *confront* literally means "to stand forehead to forehead." Going "face to face" with someone places you at equal terms with the other person, as well as placing you in a vulnerable position. It can also be a sign of respect, especially in today's world where radio, TV, print and the internet allows us to be critical of others from a safe distance. Conceivably, Paul could have done this with Peter by sending a messenger. However, Paul met personally with Peter to speak face to

face about this important issue. The result is that the Gospel was reaffirmed to Paul, to Peter, to Antioch, to the Galatian churches, and now finally to us.

Discuss:

1. When Paul heard that Peter had placed himself back under the Jewish dietary laws, and causing others to follow him, what would have been some of Paul's options?
2. What could have been the cost of non-confrontation in this situation?
3. Confrontation about every minor issue has the effect of crying "wolf;" it won't take long before people start avoiding you. How do you know when you should confront someone?

10. Chapter 7—Peter and Paul: Reasons Why (pp 93-104)

Without being specifically told, it is impossible for us to know all of the reasons why people do the things they do; this is what makes history so subjective. It's one thing to report the fact of what happened (even that is sometimes difficult); it's another to claim to know *why* something happened. Here, we suggest various reasons why Peter abandoned the freedom he had received in a vision ("Do not call unclean what I have called clean" —Acts 10:15) when visited by "the circumcision group." Paul does tell us that Peter acted out of fear; but why? What made the *de facto* leader of the Apostles become intimidated by these men who Paul tells us "came from James?" James (almost certainly not the Apostle, but the brother of Jesus), was not even one of the twelve!

We know from this section, as well as Acts chapter 15, that it took some time for the church to agree that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised; this issue is understandable, considering that the Apostles (with the exception of Paul) and leaders were Jewish, and did not necessarily see Christianity as a total break with Judaism. However, Acts 15 records that at that point, the church was

in agreement that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised (and presumably would not have to follow the rest of the Jewish laws).

It is not clear whether the incident between Paul and Peter came before or after this decision, but it would seem to have been before, considering Paul's comment about James, who apparently was a part of this group who initially believed that all Gentiles should be circumcised. At the very least, it shows us how many issues had to be worked out by the early Church, and a bit how the process worked.

Besides the fact that Peter calls Paul "dear brother" in 2 Peter 3:15, it is interesting to note that Church tradition has it that Paul and Peter later taught together in Rome, and were martyred at the same time (per Eusebius' *Church History*, written in the 4th century). Conflict doesn't have to lead to division, but can actually give rise to unity.

Discuss:

1. From what you know of church history, what are some ways in which the Church has dealt with disagreements — both good and bad?

2. Have the results been good, or bad, or both?
3. Do you think teachers and pastors today are more likely, or less likely to teach errors? Why?

11. Chapter 8—Justification by Grace

Justification is one of those big, theological terms which most people never take the time to understand. The Greek word which is commonly translated justified is *dikaionw*, which means “to be made or declared righteous.” Some Bible translations simply say “made righteous” instead of “justified.”

As a doctrine, justification was perhaps taken for granted for many hundreds of years, until the Reformation, when justification by grace became a key concept in recovering the Gospel. It has, therefore, become central to the evangelical church, and something which many of us have once again taken for granted. Reminding ourselves that we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone will keep us from slipping into various styles of works-based justification (such as “If I don’t tithe, perhaps God won’t answer my prayers” or “What if I don’t believe good enough?”).

But, not all Christians believe in justification by grace, and I’m not talking about Roman Catholics (many of whom do indeed believe in salvation by

grace, through faith). There are some church traditions which prefer to believe that salvation is dependent upon works, regardless of what Paul taught. I read an article this week claiming that obeying the Sermon on the Mount was essential for salvation. There are even some Christians who teach that one must adhere to the Torah (the Jewish Law) as a Christian to be saved. It really makes me wonder if these people have ever read Galatians, or Romans, or Hebrews, or...

And, there are some—such as the Eastern Orthodox churches—for whom justification by grace has never been an issue. Although they do not argue with what Paul taught, they use different language and concepts.

Then there are those who will say that we are saved solely through faith in Christ, but yet add in various works without calling them works (such as having to believe in certain “side” doctrines). It all comes down to this issue: Either we are saved by grace alone, or we are not. I think Paul lays out his argument for the Gospel fairly well.

Discuss:

1. Is the doctrine of Justification important? Why or why not?
2. According to Romans 5:16-20, God's grace justifies us from Adam's sin, as well as all of our individual sins; therefore grace greatly exceeds the effects of sin. What does this mean for you individually, for the Church as a whole, and for all mankind?
3. Watch and discuss the scene from "A Knight's Tale" that is mentioned in the book. Does it adequately represent the good news of being made righteous (justification)?

12. Chapter 9—Justification, continued

Once a man told Ken that he couldn't accept the "Jesus plus nothing" Gospel, that he believed that some human effort was required for us to be saved. I thought Ken's response was truly profound: "Go through the New Testament, and make a list of everything that Christ has done for you. If you can find anything that he hasn't already done, feel free to go do that."

Some people feel that even though they believe they have been justified by grace, they somehow must do something to pay Jesus back, that they now owe Jesus some kind of "life debt." However, Revelation 22:17 says, "Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life." If you owe for something, it's not a free gift.

Suppose the Queen of England decides to give away the Crown Jewels, and for whatever reason chooses you. You are shocked and flabbergasted, and know that you have no right to this fortune. So, you say to Her Majesty, "Thank you; please let me give you \$10 in payment."

How ridiculous is this? Now, by comparison, salvation—justification, forgiveness, eternal life—is

worth much more than the Crown Jewels. And, you deserve it less. So, exactly what do you think you can do to earn any of this? Seriously? Do you really think any “good works” that you can come up with can impress God in any way? Remember, Paul says in Ephesians 2:10 that God created us to do good works “which He has prepared in advance for us to do.”

Even our good works have been given to us.

Discuss:

1. The image of fire in Ken’s story on page 119 is perhaps one of the best depictions of justification that I have seen (I, too, was raised on a farm in northern Minnesota and have experienced these fires). Can you imagine yourself in Christ—in that place where fire has already burned? What are the practical implications of seeing your life this way?
2. Why do we often feel like we need to become “more holy?”
3. Looking forward, how should we live, then, knowing we are already justified, forgiven and holy?

13. Chapter 10—The Key to the Christian Life

Notice that with this attention-grabbing title, we're not promising you "10 Steps to a Better Christian Life" or even five steps. In fact, there are no steps at all. The key to the Christian life, it turns out, isn't even a secret. It's been there in plain sight the whole time. Now, we're really terrible marketers, because if you've started reading the chapter, you will see that we give it away in the first paragraph.

The key is simply grace.

That's it. Just grace. It may not sound that exciting to some people, because there's nothing for you to do. Any good advertising person will tell you that for marketing to work, you have to give people a way to respond. However, we can't honestly give people some way to respond and still remain true to the Gospel. The Christian life is simply about grace.

Perhaps we could try a cool slogan, like "Grace. It's not just for salvation anymore." This is a pretty cool slogan, and it's true. We often hear about salvation by grace, but often not a lot about *life* by grace. Many churches depend upon giving people "action items" like Bible study attendance, giving, or serving in some capacity. There's nothing wrong

with any of these things, but you can't make these *requirements*, because the Christian life is simply about grace.

Think of it this way—why do you think we still *need* grace, if it's merely about “getting saved?” We all know that although we have been justified and made holy, we are far from perfect. We also know that we are destined to be remade into the image of Christ, and so we are faced with a gap between what we see we are, and what we know we are to become. That's why we need grace: Grace—the powerful presence of God at work in our lives—fills the gap. It not only causes a transformation, it fills the gap so that there is nothing left for us to do except live out our lives in freedom.

Discuss:

1. In this chapter, we discuss Paul's anger, and the role of anger in both Paul and Jesus. Anger, understandably, tends to make people uncomfortable. What do you think should be the role of anger in Christians?
2. When I was in Bible College many years ago, a professor made the statement, “Grace is not a blue-eyed blonde.” Clever, but not very helpful. Look up various verses using the word “grace.” What definition

given on page 135 seems to fit the best to you?

3. The subjective aspects of grace and justification are discussed in this chapter. If you've been a Christian for any length of time, what subjective realities of grace can you see in your own life?

14. Chapter 11—The Place and Purpose of the Law

Have you ever stopped to consider the dual purpose of speed limit signs? Perhaps not; many people don't seem to consider them at all. However, speed signs do serve a couple of purposes.

First, they serve as guidelines to what is the maximum safe speed for a given stretch of road, in perfect driving conditions. The speed limits therefore have a purpose, and so are good. The second purpose for speed laws is to serve as a basis for punishment, should you exceed the posted limits. Depending on where you live, getting caught exceeding the speed limit could result in a several hundred dollar fine, besides an increase in your auto insurance rates (and in a construction zone, fines double).

Paul explains to us that (continuing with this imperfect analogy) prior to speed limits being set and posted, we were not aware that we were driving too fast. However, neither could we be fined for driving recklessly. Once the speed limits were established, city and state revenues increased tremendously due to the number of fines being paid.

However, now Christ has come, like a highway patrolman. He has turned on his flashing lights and sirens, and directs us to follow him, regardless of all traffic signs. As long as we follow Christ, the law has no effect on us—we are justified in driving whatever speed we are going. However, should we decide to follow the speed limits instead, there goes our justification out the window, and we remain liable for our respective fines (we have all sped and have been found guilty).

Laws (at least *some* laws) are good, and serve a good purpose. However, no matter how good laws are, as long as we are subject to laws, we are not truly free. The Jewish people were *subject* to the Mosaic Law. However, as Paul says in Colossians 2, Christ *anceled* the law and nailed it to the cross, therefore setting us free. As long as we are in Christ, there is no religious law to which we must comply. However, if we choose to believe that the Law still applies, then we believe that Christ's death had no effect (Gal. 2:21), and we're on our own. As the saying goes, "good luck with that."

Discuss:

1. What current purposes of the Law exist in the church today, that you know of?

2. What would be the purpose of the keeping the Law, if in fact the Law's purpose was never to save us? (That is, why did the Jews keep the Law?)
3. Assuming we are heirs to the Covenant with Abraham, rather than heirs of the Law, how does that impact how we should live?

15. Chapter 12—Life in Christ

Have you ever tried to do one of those “Learn to Draw” lessons? They show you a wonderful picture of what your finished drawing should look like and give you step-by-step instructions to follow. I don’t know about you, but mine never came close to looking like it was supposed to. The only thing these step-by-step lessons did was prove to me that I had no drawing talent whatsoever.

The Old Testament Law, like a step-by-step drawing lesson, presents for us a picture of what righteousness looks like. However, following the Law only shows us that there is simply no way we could ever look like the picture. *That* was what it was designed to do. To assume that it could actually produce righteousness is an error; it never promised us righteousness.

Righteous people, on the other hand—those justified and empowered by grace—begin to look like the picture that the Law paints for us. In reality, however, there is no correlation between the two; What God is doing within us is reality, the other is merely a picture.

There are no eternal or spiritual benefits from living according to the Law. While you might create

a community with other people based around keeping the Law, you can't create a relationship with God through the Law.

On the other hand, those who have been saved by grace are adopted into God's family, with all of the benefits of family—including a pretty awesome inheritance. And, as the book points out, family includes a whole lot of people, including Abraham and the whole Jewish family. We have been, as Paul put it in Romans 11, grafted into the family (vine) of Israel. We are adopted, but we're not 2nd class children—we are equal heirs to the family fortune.

Discuss:

1. If we are only God's children through faith in Jesus, what does that mean for those (including Jews who have rejected Christ) who don't believe in Jesus?
2. What is the difference between our relationships with those who are "neighbors" (Luke 10:29), and those who are brothers and sisters in Christ?

3. If we truly believe that we have already been declared righteous and made holy, and that the Holy Spirit was indeed conforming us into Christ's image, how should that impact how we live?

16. Chapter 13—What It Means To Be Free

When I was a child, I had the opportunity to see the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus featuring the famous Flying Wallendas, a family of high wire acrobats and daredevils who did amazing stunts without a safety net. In 1962, their 7-person chair pyramid collapsed, killing three of them. However, members of the family continued on performing without a net. They, or the Circus, could have instituted rules to prevent future catastrophes, but they didn't. They had the freedom to choose rules—a net—to protect them in the future, but they chose true freedom, even at the cost of future family members (I believe they've lost 3 additional members over the years, including Karl, the patriarch of the family).

What does it really mean to be free? It's one thing to talk about what it means to be free from sin—after all, this is where we all begin as Christians, being set free from sin. But this is where many of our paths diverge. For some, being set free from sin means being free to become enslaved by the Torah. For others, it means subjecting themselves to the rules of one church tradition or another. At times we look at various religious groups and think, "Boy, I never could live like that; that's asking way

too much!” However, in reality for many people, the hardest thing of all is living a life of freedom.

As the book mentions, people create all kinds of religious systems because being free—living life without a visible safety net—is way too scary. It’s easier to be able to say, “Well, I tithe and I don’t go to R-rated movies” than to trust in the Holy Spirit’s work in their lives. After all, people have fallen!

Dependence on religion—rules—can certainly keep people safe, and perhaps protect them from visible sin. Maybe. It can’t produce true internal holiness, and in fact leads to more sin, as breaking these man-made rules create sins where none were before. Relying on rules and systems can result in true enslavement, especially when others are forced to abide by them.

We are often tempted to resort to life “with a net,” if it weren’t for Paul’s insistence that “it is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”

Discuss:

1. What does being free mean for you?
2. What is the difference between acting holy to try to *become* holy, and acting holy because we know we *are* holy?

3. Is it ever possible to freely subject ourselves to something (such as a person, a group, or a system) and remain free?

17. Chapter 14—Understanding Internal Conflict

Some of you might remember one or two old cartoons where the main character was trying to decide between doing something good or something evil. An angelic version of the character would appear on one shoulder, and a demonic version on the other, both trying to influence the character's decision.

This is humorous, because we've all felt like this at times; the imagery connects in a humorous way with our experience. However, it's never humorous in the moment. We have our conscience telling us one thing, and our own desires pulling us in the other direction. We feel suddenly schizophrenic—we kind of want to do good, but realize that we don't, at the same time. Paul described this situation in Romans 7:19, "For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing."

What's worse is that the devil—the great accuser—always likes to point out when our desires and actions fall on the "evil" side. If we listen to these accusations, we can start to believe that holiness has not taken root in us at all, and that we are still totally sinful, unfit for the presence of God.

What we should focus on, however, is the good that we choose to do. The devil, of course, never bothers to point these things out to us. And unfortunately, many Christians seem to also delight in focusing on sin to the exclusion of what good the Holy Spirit is producing in us. What we need to know is:

- God knows better than we do how sinful we are/were, and still loves us.
- God has made us holy because we can't become holy on our own.
- Our sinful nature is dead and gone, having been crucified with Christ.

Therefore, Paul concludes his discussion of this good vs. evil struggle that goes on inside us with, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death." (Rom. 8:1,2).

Discuss:

1. Many of us have often heard people referring to the need to "crucify your sinful nature (or flesh)" so you can become holy. How can we crucify our

sinful natures, if Christ has already done this for us (Rom. 6:5)?

2. What keeps us from believing God's perspective about us?
3. On pp. 179-180 we list several truths about us, according to God's perspective. Spend some time meditating/discussing these verses.

18. Chapter 15—The Reciprocal Nature of the Church

I know a lot of people who have, for one reason or another, dropped out of the institutionalized church. They still consider themselves Christians, but feel no need to become involved in a church of any kind. Many of them have been burned in the past by church splits, a leader's infidelity, or abusive behavior. Many are just sick of the religious games that masquerade as "church growth" or discipleship.

I understand—I've seen and heard of nearly every kind of bizarre church behavior (except snake handling and actual chandelier-swinging) you can imagine. I know how hard it is to find a church that actually teaches and lives the Gospel.

But, I am convinced of this one thing: We were saved into a group of people, to whom we are eternally connected. Paul describes the Church as the Body of Christ—certainly nothing to be taken lightly or ignored. And, as a part of this body, we are incomplete on our own. In fact, I think it is nearly impossible to be a Christian on our own—a thumb, for example, has no life if cut off from the body (but of course, with God all things are possible).

Throughout the New Testament, it is the writers' assumption that Christians are connected to one another, sharing lives with each other. We can't live out the New Testament model of Christianity without other Christians.

Galatians lays out a good framework for how Christians are to relate to one another in grace, rather than legalism. The answer, quite simply, is to relate to each other in love, giving and receiving out of what we have (not just money or things). It doesn't matter whether you're a new Christian or the pastor—we all have needs, and we all have things to share. People have different gifts, but no one is above anyone else.

It sounds almost too good to be true... but then, that's grace for you.

Discuss:

1. Defining grace as “God’s powerful presence” has a significant impact for us as Paul tells us that grace is not just for salvation, but is the basis for us living out our lives with each other. How do you see this impacting you specifically?

2. Think about the church you attend. Are there structures, practices or expectations that place an unfair burden on your pastor, or any other specific person in the church?
3. What bearing does the concept of *reciprocity* have on your beliefs about giving to the church?

19. Chapter 16—What Goes Around Comes Around, or You Reap What You Sow

"You must pay for everything in this world one way and another. There is nothing free with the exception of God's grace. You cannot earn that or deserve it."

~ Charles Portis, "True Grit"

Many of us are familiar with the popularized concept of *karma*, where the good or bad that we do builds up some sort of cosmic energy that will eventually come back to us. Some of us—even Christians—tend to believe it, just a little. In fact, I suspect that a fair amount of Christian giving is done, not out of love or generosity, but out of fear that if we don't give, we won't get.

Others take the very American viewpoint of "you get what you pay for," as suggested by the quote from *True Grit*. In the natural world, this seems often to be the case; unfortunately, this thinking often spills over into our spirituality, resulting in a loss of the Gospel. Another concept has arisen in recent years among accountants, analysts and programmers: *GIGO*, or Garbage In, Garbage Out. It reflects the strict cause-and-effect nature of some systems, but I've heard this applied to church

involvement, as “you get out of church what you put into it.”

Paul, however, uses a more natural analogy, that of planting and harvesting. Simply put, if you plant a cherry tree, you should expect to reap some cherries. This is not unlike Jesus’ statement, “...he who draws the sword will die by the sword” (Matt. 26:52). These are not “laws” *per se*, but simply a common sense recognition of reality. If you spend your life causing trouble—sowing wild oats, as the saying goes—you can expect a fair amount of trouble.

But, as Portis points out in the above quote, then there’s grace. After Jesus’ discussion with the Rich Young Ruler (Matthew 19), he points out how hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. When the disciples asked the obvious question, “Who, then, can be saved,” Jesus answered, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Because we have grace—God’s powerful presence in our lives—we are called and empowered to sow grace; to do anything else is to mock that which we’ve been given. Both sin and legalism promotes bondage; acting out of love and grace promotes freedom.

And if we fail? We still get grace, which we cannot earn or deserve.

Discuss:

1. How can we encourage one another to good works without promoting a works-based spirituality?
2. Many Christians today still choose to circumcise their male children. Is this wrong?
3. What, in your opinion, is the goal of the Christian life?

20. Chapter 17—Back to the Beginning

Many people mistakenly believe that a belief in what we call “radical grace” means that we believe in an easy Christianity, in which we no longer care about sin, or serving others, or doing good works. However, nothing can be further from the truth.

When we read through the Gospels, we can see that Jesus took the Law—with its rules about not killing and not committing adultery—and replaced it with more impossible things, like not hating and not lusting. Was he laying down a new law, as some have supposed? No, he was showing that a life lived fully motivated by love and empowered by grace doesn’t hate or lust. These are not new requirements, but *promises* of what the Holy Spirit is working in us, as we are being formed in the Christ’s likeness.

The life of radical grace means that we are no longer obliged to follow a set of rules that only impacted our behavior but allowed our “hearts” to remain a sinful mess. Instead, we have been set free—not to sin, which is merely putting ourselves back into bondage—to serve one another out of love, with the help of God’s grace. We have been promised to be remade from the inside out. If we are motivated by love, we can, as Martin Luther

put it, “sin boldly,” but not forgetting the rest of his sentence, “but trust in Christ more boldly.” That is, we will still make mistakes—sometimes big mistakes—but we can rely on grace to see us through.

This is the call of the Gospel. If anything, it is a more difficult calling, the “narrow path.” It is a life of responsibility, for freedom and responsibility go hand-in-hand. We live free to serve one another out of love, for it is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

Discuss:

1. Think back to when you first started reading the book. How has your idea of grace changed?
2. How do you see the Gospel that Paul preached being challenged in today’s churches?
3. Will having read and thought about this book change the way you believe? Will it change the way you live your life?